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Review of Rationality + Consciousness = Free Will by David Hodgson

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Review of "Rationality + Consciousness = Free Will"

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Book Review | *Rationality + Consciousness = Free Will*

William Simkulet

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***Rationality + Consciousness = Free Will*. David Hodgson. Oxford University Press, 2012, 267 pg. (preface 2 pg.; references 5; index 7 pg.). \$65.00 (hardback). ISBN 9780199845309.**

Introduction

In *Rationality + Consciousness = Free Will*, David Hodgson sets out on an ambitious metaphysical project that purports to explain the existence of free will and moral responsibility as arising out of consciousness and human rationality. Hodgson describes his view as a libertarian, incompatibilist theory of free will, in which there are multiple possible futures and moral agents are undetermined, yet rational.

Contents

Hodgson's book is divided into twelve chapters. Throughout each chapter, he clearly lays out a series of core assertions, which are collected in a list at the end of each chapter. This feature is remarkably reader friendly, although these assertions vary wildly in importance and complexity. Still, readers are never more than a few pages from a core assertion with which to orient them to Hodgson's overall project.

The first chapter consists of a Cartesian-style skeptical inquiry, in which he concludes that his most foundational belief is that "Conscious experiences occur." (12) In the second chapter, Hodgson lays out a realist theory of truth, in which true sentences are said to accurately describe reality. Chapters three through six outline Hodgson's theory of rationality, in which he argues that rational decision making is not determined by computational laws, or laws of nature. In chapters seven and eight Hodgson argues that his theory is consistent with contemporary science. Chapters nine through eleven consist of

Hodgson's account of free will and moral responsibility, and their role in the legal system. In the final chapter, Hodgson reflects upon the implications his metaphysical theory has for how we view the world.

Review

In *Rationality + Consciousness = Free Will*, Hodgson purports to solve the enduring free will problem; which is best understood in terms of competing views of free will and moral responsibility. Compatibilists contend that free will and moral responsibility are consistent with universal causal determinism, the theory that the actual past, coupled with the laws of nature, determine a single possible future. In contrast, incompatibilists contend that free will and moral responsibility require indeterminism, the theory that given the actual past and laws of nature, there are multiple possible futures. Furthermore, most incompatibilists believe that it wouldn't make sense to hold people morally accountable for their choices if they are arbitrarily determined by chance. The challenge for the incompatibilist is to show how agents could act for reasons, without either being determined to act because of those reasons, or choosing between them arbitrarily. At first glance, Hodgson's account promises to do just this; but upon closer inspection Hodgson's view is actually a compatibilist view, although a fairly bizarre one.

A persistent problem in this work is that Hodgson fails to distinguish between two distinct concepts of "indeterminism" he uses. The first sense of "indeterminism" concerns how consciousnesses are not rules governed, while the second is the more traditional indeterminism, where given the actual state of affairs, there are multiple possible futures. (81, 121) The next two paragraphs offer a more complete picture of these competing conceptions of indeterminism.

For Hodgson, reality is divided into two categories; conscious experience and the physical world, where the physical world is objective and governed by natural or computational laws, while conscious experience is subjective (by this, Hodgson means only that our consciousness is a subject that experiences; not that our conscious experiences are arbitrary or unrepresentative of the external world). Hodgson argues that our consciousness is not governed by laws because laws can only link a limited number of features, while a conscious mind is capable of experiencing multiple features "all-at-once," and react to this "gestalt" as a whole. (81) As such, our consciousness cannot be reduced to physical states; but our choices are made when our consciousness acts with our subconscious physical brain to form a decision. This decision, he contends, is not causally determined, because the consciousness is not governed by natural laws, and is in this sense "indeterministic." This account of indeterminism differs radically from the kind incompatibilists require; and is

consistent with compatibilist theories. The best way to understand this is to approach Hodgson's model in a Skinnerian behaviorist manner: On Hodgson's view, two distinct individuals with identical physical states subjected to the same piece of music would react in the same manner. Hodgson contends that this manner is indeterministic because it is partially brought about by each agent's conscious experience of the music *as a whole* and laws are incapable of addressing the many facets of such an experience; however what he calls consciousness is consistent with a fixed, single future where different consciousnesses react to distinct, but qualitatively similar experiential gestalts in the same manner.

Hodgson is committed to the position that there are multiple possible futures, but this commitment is the result of his faith in science, in particular quantum mechanics, rather than in human cognition. This indeterminism does not contribute to an agent's decision-making process, either in terms of physical brain-states or our consciousness. In this regard, although Hodgson believes that our choices are undetermined (by causal laws) and there are multiple possible futures, our choices are not means by which we access different possible futures.

One of the more interesting concepts Hodgson introduces in this book is what he calls "plausible reasoning." (37) Hodgson defines rationality as encompassing any number of features that human beings use in their deliberative process. (26) In most cases, he contends, the laws of reason are insufficient to cause our choices. Our consciousness "fills in" these gaps in reason, allowing us to pick and choose which reasons we find persuasive and act on them. This is plausible reasoning. Although the process of choosing reasons in this manner is indeterministic (in the first sense) for Hodgson, it is deterministic in the sense relevant to compatibilists – the same input will always result in the same output. Even if this manner were indeterministic in the broader sense relevant to incompatibilists, it is no less arbitrary. Although plausible reasoning might be arbitrary in this sense, for Hodgson it counts as rational because it is a necessary part of our deliberative process.

Incompatibilists are often criticized for holding an incoherent account of moral agency; moral agents are said to require alternate possibilities; this is to say that they and must have the ability to act in an undetermined manner for non-arbitrarily selected reasons. At first glance, Hodgson's account seems to satisfy this traditional incompatibilist account; but does so by redefining success. For Hodgson, agents can be said to act rationally, and rationally select the reasons they act upon – but only because "rationality" has been redefined to describe any method human being actually reason in. Our deliberative process is indeterministic only insofar as it is not explicable in terms of Hodgsonian laws, but these laws seem bizarrely impotent and insufficient to govern a complex physical world of the kind we believe we live in. Finally, for Hodgson there are multiple possible futures; but this

is ultimately an empirical claim, not a prerequisite for moral responsibility. As such, Hodgson's account is best understood as a bizarre form of compatibilism. As a compatibilist theory, it is difficult to tell if Hodgson's account does anything more than muddle commonsense conceptions of determinism, indeterminism, and rationality that compatibilists are normally well suited to take at face value.