

*A Reflection on our Freedom*¹ (forthcoming in *Philosophia*)

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I

I saw something curious while hiking across a desert landscape: two ravens collided in midair, falling to the ground between two large rocks. As I approached, I caught sight of another person — no, my reflection. I then realized what I was looking at: an enormous, oddly clean mirror. The raven must have flown directly into it (as if in an unwinnable aerial game of chicken). I reached out to touch the mirror, and was surprised to find that it was not cold. Indeed, it did not feel to be any particular temperature — or rather, it felt as though it was my temperature. Drawing back my hand, I noticed no mark. I tried fogging it with my breath, scratching it with a rock, breaking it with a sturdy club, and finally shooting it with my gun. Nothing happened: not the slightest sign of damage. No sign of friction, even. What sort of mirror was this?

An answer dawned on me: this was no mirror at all; this was merely a plane of symmetry! My image was no reflection, but an atom-for-atom duplicate of *me* — mirror reversed. But if this *was* merely a plane of symmetry, surely quantum-indeterministic effects must eventually take over and break the tie. So I waited and tested, attempting to encourage the assumed indeterminism to propagate — for I wanted to shake the hand of my reflection. But the symmetry remained. Push, and my doppelganger pushed back with exactly the same force, molecule for molecule, atom for atom.

A disturbing thought occurred to me. My doppelganger blanched. Perhaps the world — enthusiastic advertisements to the contrary aside — *is* deterministic. Would it not *have* to be for this “reflection” phenomenon to have persisted so long? Perhaps not, but no doubt it was vanishingly *unlikely* that such an uncanny phenomenon would persist in an indeterministic world. But if the world *was* in fact deterministic,

¹ The basic premise of this story occurred to me about seven years ago, before reading John Leslie’s “Ensuring Two Bird Deaths With One Throw” (*Mind* vol. 100: 73–86) which employs the symmetrical deterministic universe to achieve quite different ends. Achille Varzi borrowed the basic premise for “Room 88” in his and Casati’s *Insurmountable Simplicities*. I thank Andrea Borghini, Chris Haufe, Achille Varzi, Neil Williams, an anonymous referee for *Philosophia*, and particularly Roy Sorensen and David Wolfe (who, in a close possible world, is a co-author of a no-doubt-better version of this essay) for discussion.

would not that not mean that I had no choice in what I did — indeed, even in my having these very thoughts? I reflected with growing panic on arguments for Incompatibilism which I had before rejected as committing one or another modal fallacies. I reflected on my reflection's predicament. I decided to raise my hand — two hands went up. It seemed for all the world that I was in control — that if this *wasn't* a mirror, my doppelganger was a sort of extension of my will. No doubt he thought the same of me.

Before, my conviction that a compatibilist freedom made sense stemmed in part from my feeling with Strawson that no obscure thesis of determinism could possibly shake me of the reactive attitudes so tightly bound up with my sense of freedom. Forced as I was to take the “participant” rather than the “objective” attitudes (Strawson 1962, 48–52) toward myself and others, I refused to take free will skepticism seriously. But how unavoidable *was* the participant attitude? What reason did I have to regard giving up those reactive attitudes as “practically inconceivable” (68)?

Reasons, reasons. . . . I tried marshaling some praise or blame for my reflection. Taking a long draw on my cigar, I blew a luxurious smoke ring. He blew an exactly similar one which curled away in identical wisps. I tried admiring his trivial talent. Nothing. I shot a bird — against my better nature — and tried blaming him for doing the same. All I felt was revulsion at what *I* had done, noting that if I hadn't, he wouldn't have either. Why had I done such a thing merely to test my philosophical conscience?! My disapprobation felt appropriately reflected back on me. More experiments only heightened my sense of control over my reflection, diminishing my ability to take the participant attitude toward my doppelganger. It seemed ironic that I was unable to empathize with someone who was as close to being *me* as anyone was. In one sense I could, of course. It seemed that I knew his most intimate thoughts, knew what he would do next, but none of this encouraged me to treat him as a *person*. Perplexed and exhausted, we walked back to our respective tents for some fitful sleep.

But while I couldn't convince myself that I was free, I also had trouble relinquishing the feeling of freedom. Perhaps Strawson was correct that the reactive attitudes simply form the background against which reason takes place. Perhaps "we have an original non-rational commitment which sets the bounds within which, or the stage upon which, reason can effectively operate, and within which the question of the rationality or irrationality, justification or lack of justification, of this or that particular judgment or belief can come up" (1985, 39). This seemed reminiscent of Wittgenstein's remark that we do not hold our "picture of the world" for specific reason. Rather, "it is the inherited background against which [we] distinguish between true and false" (1969, §94).

Only now did I recall how characteristically circumspect were Wittgenstein's remarks. My reflection and I recited from memory:

95. The propositions describing this world-picture might be part of a kind of mythology. And their role is like that of rules of a game; and the game can be learned purely practically, without learning any explicit rules.

96. It might be imagined that some propositions . . . were hardened and functioned as channels for such empirical propositions as were not hardened but fluid; and that this relation altered with time, in that fluid propositions hardened, and hard ones became fluid.

This, then, was the problem I kept coming up against. Even these original commitments seemed like they ought to be responsive to revisions in our picture of the world. Strawson's claims aside, I just couldn't engage in the "participant attitudes" with my doppelganger. Not just because I cannot shake his hand; not just because he keeps talking over me. For I found it impossible not to regard myself as in *control* over the both of us — as if I controlled a man-sized puppet. While the attitudes Strawson identified might have been recalcitrant, they are hardly untouchable. Even the most resilient norms — those which I previously took as constituting the background against which I judged true and false, right and wrong — were, apparently revisable. I felt compelled to take the "objective" stance to my doppelganger, treating him as a deterministic outcome of processes initiated long before his birth. Unfortunately, the symmetry of our situation was all too apparent. Either we both were free or neither of us were. Taking the "objective" attitude toward my doppelganger seemed to force it back onto myself.

III

Compatibilists — in whose company I wished now more than ever to count myself — often say that it is not whether I could have done otherwise that matters for my freedom, but whether I am in some sense the “owner” of my choices. Perhaps I can be only so wrong about this. Granted: I am evidently not the ultimate source of my choices; but is there not still some sense in which they are *mine*?

Or should I say ‘*ours*’? The feeling of loosing control in the face of my doppelganger deemed to devolve from my feeling of ownership of *his* actions and appreciation of our symmetrical predicament. But why should my feeling of ownership — even if it was in some sense *genuine* — detract from *his* ownership (and vice versa)? We could be regarded as “co-owners” of our respective actions and intentions. Radical views of personhood flitted through our brains. Perhaps “we” should be regarded as a single, spatially scattered person. Who knows: perhaps two duplicate thoughts have been tokened in my different brain hemispheres before. The implications of this thought were baffling. Should the symmetry be somehow broken, one thing might (impossibly!) become two. I decided to table this gambit until I could read some more Parfit and Lewis.

One final psychological conflict seems relevant to you, Dear Reader — it’s why I bother relating my confusion. Ruining the walk which brought me upon the edges of this side of the universe, I realized that the symmetry had absolutely no bearing on whether I *was* free. The feeling of control we felt over one another was illusory — my failure to shake it was simply that: *my failure*. After all, control implies causation.² My intention to scratch my head didn’t *cause* my doppelganger’s hand to move — so I didn’t control it. The illusion of control emerged from the high level of *predictability* our unique situation provided. Insofar as I knew what *I* was going to do, I knew what *he* was going to do. In the ordinary course of things, I reflected, such predictability is not hindrance to our freedom. When my friend and I went to Panda House, he knew

² For an alternative view, see Ginet (1990).

quite well what I would order. But my monotonous menu choices were still my own, not his. Somehow this felt like cold comfort. My worry didn't stem from a feeling of *control*, but rather an obtuse feeling that *neither* of us were in control. We were two effects of a common cause — or anyway, effects of common, identical *causes*. Predictability and the illusion of control were red herrings. My doppelganger's mocking symmetry merely revealed the complete extent to which we were each embedded in the causal nexus. Neither of us could even step past one another, despite the absence of obstacles in any normal sense.

Now, you may regard yourself lucky — as I once did — that if your world (appearances to the contrary) *is* deterministic, it's not symmetrical. Or you may deride me as an obscure alarmist — that such a strange situation couldn't get *you* to lose a grip on such fundamental attitudes. Easy for you to say. Really try to imagine what it would be like. And then reflect on the fact that the symmetry of my world is incidental to what is ultimately my problem. It's your problem too.

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