

Assignment 4

Philosophy



What two conditions must be satisfied, according to Campbell, in order for a choice to be an exercise of free will (in the morally significant sense)? How do these two conditions relate to determinism? In the final part of your answer, provide a reasoned evaluation of Campbell's defense of free will.

At the outset, there is no consensus among philosophers as to the definition of free will. The definitions have ranged between the most banal to the most intellectually rigorous. Since Campbell believes that a well-defined problem facilitates its solution, free will is identified with two attendant features – moral responsibility and consequences. In other words, free will is said to be operant whenever an action is seen to be morally responsible or lack thereof. In the same vein, free will is applied to those actions which lead to significant consequences. The second condition is important, for there is no utility in dissecting the intentions of an individual when they do not spring from a will to act. Having said this, sometimes people make the right choices for the wrong reasons. To prevent such pitfalls, Campbell says that 'inner acts' is what needs to be considered, as opposed to 'overt acts'.

Campbell goes on to further refine the scope for free will. An individual cannot be held accountable for decisions and actions that are beyond his realm of control. To this extent, only those acts are accounted for, for which the instigator is the sole actor. As Campbell readily admits, his endeavour toward a sound definition of free will is only partially successful. Not only are there too many conditions, but there are also extraneous factors such as heredity and environment which have a bearing on the exercise of free will. Considering all the loopholes and external factors, Campbell adopts a simplified guideline, whereby, an individual can be blamed or praised for his acts, only if he could have acted otherwise.

There is some merit to the view that heredity and circumstance can considerably limit human volition. But this premise only sets the scope within which free will can be evaluated. It does not follow that determinism is the overarching explanation for human action. The other major problem with determinism is that it disburdens people from moral responsibility.

While Campbell's success in defining free will could be debated, his essay has a definite utility. It helps the reader understand the various truisms, assumptions, variables, factors and pitfalls that the project entails. Yet, by the end of the essay, a good measure of clarity is to be gained by the reader. While Campbell titles the essay in an open-ended fashion, toward the end of it, the authorial viewpoint is clear. Campbell endorses the inclusion of free will in discussing human nature and behaviour. I strongly agree with Campbell and cannot imagine how a philosophic discourse on morality could be conducted by eschewing the role of free will. I would go further and claim that free will is a fundamental characteristic of our species. Even in neurobiological terms, ours is the only species who can exercise control over their instincts and impulses. There is no meaning to culture and civilization without recognition of free will. Even in practical affairs such as legal arbitration is based on the acceptance of free will.

Reference:

C. A. Campbell, Has the Self ' Free Will'?