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Critical Notices

Metaphilosophy and Free Will. RICHARD DOUBLE. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996. Pp. xi, 176.

Metaphilosophy and Free Will is a brisk, provocative, and stimulating book. It argues for contentious and iconoclastic conclusions. Despite the seemingly implausible conclusions, the arguments are by and large careful and rigorous. It is written in an uncluttered and clear way. I am not inclined to agree with many of Double's conclusions, but I nevertheless found the book highly engaging. It will be challenging and stimulating to anyone working on the cluster of issues pertaining to free will and moral responsibility. With its focus on the interaction between "metaphilosophy" and various positions on the free will debate, it is frequently both intriguing and highly original.

No one who has thought about free will and moral responsibility can fail to notice that the debates appear to be intractable. Double's basic thesis in this book is that these debates are indeed in principle unsolvable because opposing theorists hold different meta-level views which both are essential to the support of the various "first-order" theories and are not capable of being decisively defended. These meta-level views include "metaphilosophies" and "intermediate-level philosophical principles." As Double puts it:

Certain combinations of metaphilosophical views and supporting intermediate principles make plausible some accounts of free will, and other combinations make plausible opposing accounts. Thus, any argument for or against a specific free will position—such as compatibilism, incompatibilism, or subjectivism—will be persuasive only if we hold an appropriate metaphilosophy and set of intermediate philosophical principles. Because our free will theories depend on these non-objective, psychologically driven views, it turns out that no free will theory can be shown to be more reasonable than its competitors. (p. 4)

Double lays out four metaphilosophies: philosophy as conversation, philosophy as praxis, philosophy as providing underpinnings for common sense, religion, the law, natural science, or special sciences, and philosophy as worldview construction. Philosophy as conversation (following Richard Rorty) conceives of philosophy as an activity that contributes to our intellectual lives without pronouncing on the character of ultimate reality. Philosophy as praxis claims that philosophy should be instrumental in making us better persons, where "better" can be interpreted as "morally better" or simply as "happier." Philosophy as providing underpinnings sees philosophy's proper role as supporting certain other areas of interest. Key here is that what is being supported—religion, science, or common sense—although subject to criticism at its borders, is not open to wholesale criticism by philosophy. Finally, philosophy as worldview construction takes the goal of philosophy to be similar to the scientific realist's view of the aim of science: an attempt to characterize reality as accurately as we can.

Double's preferred metaphilosophy is a form of philosophy as worldview construction: philosophy as continuous with science. This view involves strong epistemic scruples, a realist interpretation of theories, a parsimonious ontology based on inference to the best explanation, and the fact/value distinction. (p. 30)

Double distinguishes this view from an alternative version of philosophy as worldview construction: philosophy as non-continuous with science.

Double claims that our metaphilosophies come from our beliefs about what philosophy is, our beliefs about what philosophy can accomplish, and our desires for philosophy (*i.e.*, our desires about what philosophy should seek to accomplish). He argues for the “relativity” of metaphilosophy based on two considerations. First, Double claims that there is no objective basis to desires, and second, it is unreasonable to hope that we can resolve long-standing disputes about the nature of philosophy (and its proper role). (pp. 35–36)

Double goes on to discuss five pairs of intermediate philosophical principles associated with the various metaphilosophies: skeptical versus non-skeptical epistemic standards, realist versus instrumentalist interpretations of theories, ontological conservatism versus ontological liberality, strict versus liberal requirements on explanations, and Hume’s principle (articulating the gap between fact and value). He argues that there is an interplay between metaphilosophies and intermediate principles, and, in turn, between these meta-level views and one’s first-order theories about free will and moral responsibility. Since the meta-level views are unprovable, so are the first-order theories.

One of the most suggestive and useful parts of the book is a set of examples in which Double claims that there are in principle intractable philosophical disputes about free will and moral responsibility that stem from differences in meta-level views. The reader can learn considerably from Double’s discussions of these dialectical contexts.

Perhaps the most provocative aspects of the book are developed in the second half, in which Double applies his metaphilosophy, philosophy as continuous with science. He argues that terms such as “free will” and “moral responsibility” fail to denote anything “objective”; when we contend that someone has free will or is morally responsible, this serves to express certain attitudes we possess, but not to describe features of reality (apart from our subjective attitudes).

In a brief review, I cannot undertake to address the many intriguing and challenging arguments in this (deceptively) brief book. I find it plausible that some apparently intractable disputes within the domain of free will and moral responsibility are genuinely intractable and that this intractability is the result of differences in meta-level views. But I certainly do not think that all apparently intractable disputes can be usefully analyzed in this fashion, and I disagree with various of Double’s analyses. As just one example, I turn to Double’s analysis of the famous (and in some quarters infamous) “Frankfurt-type cases.” (pp. 86–90)

The Frankfurt-type cases are allegedly cases in which an agent can legitimately be held morally responsible for what he does, despite the fact that he “could not have chosen or done otherwise” (and thus lacked alternative possibilities). Here is Double’s presentation of such an example:

... Black, a powerful manipulator, is able to cause Jones to act as Black wishes *if* Jones begins to choose differently than Black wishes. Therefore, in the case where Jones chooses as Black wishes (and Black does not intervene), Black’s potential for controlling Jones’s choice guarantees that Jones could not have done otherwise than he did. But surely, Frankfurt believes, the mere fact that Jones could not have done otherwise because of Black’s potential agency casts no doubt on Jones’s moral responsibility in those cases where Black does not intervene. (p. 86)

Double makes a rather strong statement about the interest such examples have generated, saying, "I think that those philosophers who have been greatly impressed by Frankfurt-examples have been enamored by a clever metaphilosophical maneuver." (p. 87) Double contends that somehow Frankfurt gets us to think about free will and moral responsibility from an "everyday" perspective (from which we assume that persons are free and responsible unless some special, unusual circumstance obtains), whereas the incompatibilist is calling this perspective into question. Double says:

Although the incompatibilist can admit that the non-intervening Black is no *additional* problem for Jones's responsibility, the incompatibilist insists that the question remains whether Jones is responsible in the first place (that is, whether he lacks alternative possibilities due to determinism *per se*). Frankfurt's example has no resources to address that question. Frankfurt simply gets us to view the case from a perspective that *assumes* that determinism is not a problem. ... The incompatibilist might respond to Frankfurt's reversal this way: 'Given that we do not know whether Jones can be responsible if determinism is true, how can we say whether Jones is responsible in the case where determinism is true and Black fails to intervene?' (p. 88)

But whereas Double would analyze these cases in terms of a distinction between perspectives, I would employ a distinction between kinds of freedom. I believe that there are two kinds of freedom. One involves alternative possibilities, whereas the other kind of freedom is an "actual-sequence" notion. The first might be dubbed "freedom to choose or do otherwise," and the second (following Frankfurt) might be called "acting freely." It seems to me that the Frankfurt examples show that the alternative-possibilities sort of freedom is not required for moral responsibility. The Frankfurt examples seem to show that the actual-sequence freedom—acting freely—is the ground of moral responsibility. This would then entail that if determinism rules out moral responsibility, it does not do so in virtue of ruling out alternative possibilities. This is a considerable insight, insofar as many philosophers have believed that the reason determinism threatens moral responsibility is that it appears to obliterate alternative possibilities.

Now of course it would be a mistake to leap from the above moral of the Frankfurt-type cases to the conclusion that causal determinism does not indeed rule out moral responsibility—all we know is that it does not rule out moral responsibility in virtue of expunging alternative possibilities. Distinguishing between alternative-possibilities freedom and acting freely, we can now ask whether causal determinism in itself (and apart from threatening alternative possibilities) rules out acting freely. Granted, the Frankfurt examples do not have the resources to answer *this* question, but I do not think that the proponents of the examples need to suppose that they do.

In my view, the proper approach here involves both the distinction between the two kinds of freedom and *two steps in the analysis*. The first step is to say that Frankfurt-type examples render it plausible that alternative-sequence freedom is not required for moral responsibility (and thus that determinism does not threaten moral responsibility in virtue of ruling out such freedom). The second step involves a careful consideration of various reasons why causal determination in the actual sequence might be thought to rule out acting freely. (Here, of course, the Frankfurt-type examples will not be directly relevant.) If one decides that causal determination in the actual sequence need not rule out acting freely, one can conclude that causal determinism is not incompatible with moral responsibility.

Whereas Double adverts to meta-level ideas in seeking to understand the disputes about Frankfurt-type examples, I think it is more fruitful to employ a finer-grained, more “patient” first-order analysis (which involves the distinction between two kinds of freedom and two steps in the argument for compatibilism). Whereas Frankfurt-type examples are useful in the first step, they cannot in themselves provide *all* the resources necessary for a successful argument for compatibilism (and they certainly should not be construed as purporting to do so). A subtler, more refined first-order analysis is more penetrating than recourse to meta-level reflections.

In his concluding remarks, Double says:

With notable exceptions, most of the published work designed to contribute to philosophers’ understanding of the free will problem tends to be narrow, highly focused, and technical ... Although this type of free will writing pays dividends in terms of precision, it has disadvantages. First, we may lose sight of the philosophical forest for the technical trees. Second, and following from the first, we may collect psychological consolation at the expense of candor. By submerging ourselves in the nuances of theories, we may avert our attention from the big, scary questions.... Meticulous precision can enable us to remain happy and engaged at the expense of averting our eyes from the disturbing big picture. (p. 158)

I certainly agree with Double’s reservations and caveats about the employment of technical apparatus in philosophy. But in my view the philosophers to whom Double refers have not been avoiding the large issues; surely they are addressing the questions of the nature of freedom and responsibility, and their relationships with causal determinism, indeterminism, and God’s omniscience. They are addressing these questions with no less candor than those who paint in broader brush-strokes. Rather, they are perhaps facing these “scary” questions *in a different way*. And sometimes precision and nuanced analysis is the most fruitful way to disentangle what might appear to be intractable dialectical stalemates.

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Philosophical Foundations of the Social Sciences: Analyzing Controversies in Social Research. HAROLD KINCAID. Cambridge, New York, and Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1996. Pp. xvi, 283.

I

In this book Kincaid tries to give philosophical foundations for the social sciences in a way accessible not only to philosophers but also to social scientists. Broadly speaking, he defends naturalism and holism, trying to eschew purely *a priori* and purely conceptual arguments. Although there are some recent books concerned with roughly the same issues, the field surely is not overcrowded. There is much of interest in the book and, on the whole, the level of discussion and argumentation is good. There are, however, some slips—as in almost any book—and some poor arguments. These shortcomings do not, however, prevent the use of the book as a textbook.

This review consists of a brief description of the contents of the book (Section I) and a critical discussion of some of Kincaid’s points and arguments (Section II). Chapter 1, *Issues and arguments*, gives an overview of some of the