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The Significance of Free Will, review

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Robert Kane, *The Significance of Free Will* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 268 pp., cloth \$45.00.

Donald Wayne Viney

No one has done more in this generation to rehabilitate free will than Robert Kane (Philosophy, University of Texas at Austin). Calling his position “free willist”—an expression borrowed from William James—Kane develops a nuanced theory of free will while engaging the best contemporary theorists in balanced argument. Throughout the book, but especially in the concluding chapter, Kane reflects on the implications of his theory for ethics, political philosophy, and cosmology.

Although the question of free will is ancient and takes many forms, Kane finds the key to contemporary debates in an exchange between John Bramhall and Thomas Hobbes in the 1650s. Bramhall claimed that free will and determinism are antithetical. Hobbes countered that these are “confused and empty” words. It is confused to identify free will with indeterminism; on the other hand, talk of the self determining itself is empty since it involves appeal to obscure forms of agency. For Hobbes, persons are self-determining when nothing prevents them from doing what they intend or desire to do. This sort of freedom, however, does not require that their intentions or desires be uncaused—hence, its name, compatibilist freedom. With some notable exceptions (e.g. Reid, Kant, Lequyer, Kierkegaard, James, Hartshorne, Sartre), philosophers have sided with Hobbes.

Kane agrees that free will is not the same as indeterminism. Although the Epicureans made room for free will by postulating a chance “swerve” in the atoms, it is a mistake to equate freedom with mere randomness. Kane also concedes that there are significant kinds of freedom—freedoms “worth wanting” in the words of Daniel Dennett—even in a deterministic world. Nevertheless, he takes Bramhall’s side insofar as he claims that there *is* a significant kind of freedom that is incompatible with determinism. Kane defines free will as “the power of agents to be the ultimate creators (or originators) and sustainers of their own ends or purposes” (4). He maintains that if this sort of freedom exists then some of our decisions are not made inevitable by antecedent causes.

Some of the clearest examples where free will may be exercised are situations in which one is torn between alternatives, each of which recommends itself, but for incommensurable sets of reasons. In these situations, Kane argues, one’s choice is undetermined because the effort involved in adjudicating the inner conflict is indeterminate. One’s prior character and motives

explain both the effort one makes *and* why it is an effort; but they do not completely explain the choice one makes. One's choice initiates a "value experiment" whose justification lies in the future (145). Kane marks this as "the essence of free will" (208). He defends the intelligibility of this picture by arguing that, whichever choice one makes, it is one's own, it is rational, and it is under one's control.

Kane advances beyond armchair theorizing while always remaining sensitive to the philosophical dimensions of the debate. This differentiates his discussion from so many other treatments of free will by philosophers and scientists. He adheres to what he calls "the free agency principle," a methodological rule that prevents one from postulating special kinds of entities or forms of causation that are not required for agency in general (116). In other words, incompatibilist and compatibilist theories of free will should be on the same ontological footing.

The implication of the free agency principle for Kane's theory is clear: if free choices are undetermined by antecedent causes, then the atoms must somewhere "swerve," and they must swerve in the places where it matters, i.e. in the brain (17). Kane proposes, as a working hypothesis, that "indeterminate efforts of will are complex chaotic processes in the brain, involving neural networks that are globally sensitive to quantum indeterminacies at the neuronal level" (130). If this is correct, then micro-indeterminacies in the brain are amplified to the macro-level. What an agent experiences within him/herself as an effort of will, an external observer, in examining the agent's brain, would find indeterminate processes.

Two welcome consequences of Kane's theory are that it sidesteps the simplistic dichotomy of nature vs. nurture and it avoids the extremes of unqualified determinism and radical freedom of the will. Free will, as Kane conceives it, is conditioned, hemmed about by circumstances, and subject to degrees (213). This opens up such questions as how much free will we have, how widespread it is, and at what developmental stages it begins to exist. These are some of the passages in the labyrinth of free will that Kane leaves unexplored (5). One may thank him nonetheless for laying the groundwork that makes such questions theoretically intelligible.