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***Catholic Physics - Reflections of a
Catholic Scientist - Part 39
Free Will and God's Providence - Part II:
The Moral Responsibility of Evil-Doers***



- ♦ 1200's
- ♦ Authority on physics, geography, astronomy, mineralogy, chemistry, zoology, and physiology
- ♦ "The aim of natural science is not simply to accept the statements of others, but to investigate the causes that are at work in nature"
- ♦ He understood that the Church is not opposed to study of nature
- ♦ Patron Saint of Scientists

Free Will and God's Providence - Part II: The Moral Responsibility of Evil-Doers

British woman who joined ISIS calls for beheading of Christians
Headline, Christian Today, September 1st, 2014

New York man charged with hate crimes for seven 'knockout' assaults -
Headline, CNN Justice, January 6, 2014

Homegrown jihadist shoots N.J. teen 8 times, calling it a 'just kill':
report Headline, Washington Times, September 18th, 2014

Scandal of the 1,400 lost girls in Rotherham - Headline, Times of
London, August 27th 2014

Fort Hood shooter sentenced to death for 2009 killings - Headline,
Reuters Edition

"God created things which had free will. That means creatures which can go wrong or right. Some people think they can imagine a creature which was free but had no possibility of going wrong, but I can't. If a thing is free to be good it's also free to be bad. And free will is what has made evil possible. Why, then, did God give them free will? Because free will, though it makes evil possible, is also the only thing that makes possible any love or goodness or joy worth having." C.S. Lewis, The Case for Christianity

Those are disturbing headlines (and meant to be)! Why does God allow such evil? The answer is given by C.S. Lewis above, and with his quote I might end this post. But there are those who object "there is no such thing as free will" and consequently, moral responsibility for one's deeds is a non-issue. So we should answer their attempt to reject God's troublesome gift, freedom of choice.

NOTE (added later): a recent study at St. Mary's College, University of London has shown that terrorists are more likely to be well-off and educated.

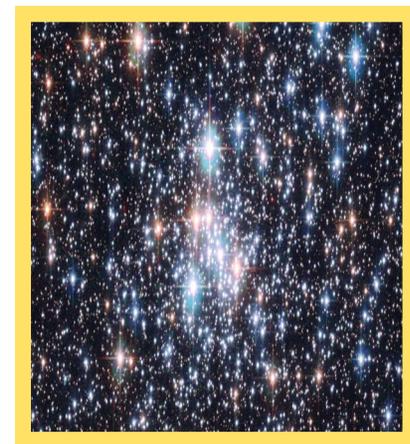
FREE WILL OBJECTION 4: GOD'S GRACE DETERMINES OUR ACTIONS

In his arguments against the Pelagian Heresy, On Grace and Free Will, St. Augustine said:

"There are some persons who suppose that the freedom of the will is denied whenever God's grace is maintained, and who on their side defend their liberty of will so peremptorily as to deny the grace of God. This grace, as they assert, is bestowed according to our own merits. It is in consequence of their opinions that I wrote the book entitled On Grace and Free Will."

Whether God's arbitrary (?) bestowal of Grace negates Free Will will be dealt with at length in the next post (Part 40) on this topic, as will how we should deal with forgiveness, given that free will and moral responsibility exists.

From a series of articles written by: Bob Kurland - a Catholic Scientist



brain is, like the jet fighter in Sternberg's analogy, a necessary vehicle for something else--the soul, the will, conscience--that which is endowed in each person by the Holy Spirit at conception. How this matures as the human matures, how it acts for each of us is still and may remain a mystery.

FREE WILL OBJECTION 3: "IT'S OUR BRINGING-UP THAT GETS US OUT OF HAND"

The best (and most entertaining) case for nurture as the prime element determining moral behavior is the "Gee Officer Krupke" routine in West Side story. It encompasses all the factors--parental neglect, economic deprivation, bad moral influences--that sociologists claim as causal for criminality.

However, there are two objections to nurture as the sole determinant. First, there are many examples of people who have escaped poor economic circumstances, racial prejudice, bad parenting to become models of moral behavior. Second, there are many examples of people in good economic circumstances, with good parents who do evil deeds. Thus economic circumstances and parental care are neither necessary nor sufficient conditions for evil behavior. If we look at the headlines above, many of those involved--the rap singer who converted to Islam, the Fort Hood shooter, the 9/11 terrorists--were comfortably situated economically or even well-to-do. For every "knock-out" criminal who comes from a single-parent environment, there is another that gets to be a judge or politician.

Again, the influence of a poor environment--economic or parental--can not be overlooked. But it is not the only or the sole factor in moral behavior. There is that small, still voice within us that tells us what is right or wrong, implanted at birth, the "ius naturale est quo natura omnia animalia docuit", the natural law which underlies the behavior of a rational being.

FREE WILL OBJECTION 1: THERE IS ONLY ONE FUTURE FOR THE UNIVERSE

I'll repeat what I said in the first post: "If the universe is deterministic, plays out according to set physical laws, there can be only one future and there can be no free choices. If, as special relativity suggests, there is a particular past, present and future for each particular reference frame, so that all is encompassed in a block universe, then everything is laid out before us, independent of our actions."

Or, as the philosopher Michael Lockwood would have it:

"To take the space-time view seriously is indeed to regard everything that ever exists, or ever happens, at any time or place, as being just as real as the contents of the here and now. And this rules out any conception of free will that pictures human agents, through their choices, as selectively conferring actuality on what are initially only potentialities." Michael Lockwood, *The Labyrinth of Time*

The scientific arguments against Lockwood's claim will be given at greater length in another post, but there is one common-sense refutation--if I were to believe it, why should I write this post? To put it another way:

"People may sincerely think they believe in determinism, but they act otherwise, and must act otherwise, every time they deliberate. The great American philosopher Charles Pierce argued that a belief that cannot be consistently acted on cannot be true. If he's right about this -- and I believe he is -- then determinism must be false." Greg Boyd, *Three Arguments against Determinism*.

FREE WILL OBJECTION 2: MY NEURONS (GENES) MADE ME DO IT

If then universe is determined, as in objection 1, it would follow that whatever we did and thought was purely a function of our brain states, and since these brain states are physically set, there is no way to make free moral choices, no such thing as an immaterial soul to oversee our actions. On the other hand, even in an indeterministic universe the claim of most cognitive scientists would be that the assembly of neurons, the concatenation of biochemical and electrical events in the brain, determined our acts. Neuroscientists cite much research, ranging from the 19th century case of Phineas Gage, whose character changed radically after a railroad spike was driven through his frontal lobe, to that of the neuroscientist Michael Gazzaniga, who argues that split brain phenomena show free will does not exist.

Neuro-materialistic arguments against free will can be summarized thus:

Material damage to the brain causes change in behavior and moral attitudes.

Psychoactive drugs change behavior and moral attitudes.

Therefore behavior is determined only by the physical nature of the brain and the biochemical/electrical events occurring therein, and there is no such thing as free will.

In his book, *My Brain Made Me Do It*, Eliezer Sternberg has argued by analogy against this neuro-materialistic proposition. Consider a jet fighter; it can crash because of damage to the wings, the jet engines, faulty fuel, etc. But even when it is fully functional, it needs a pilot to fly it. Similarly the brain can crash due to damage or harm to its parts or to bad biochemistry, but there is still something else--which I choose to call a soul--a pilot, needed to make it function.

There is another, stronger argument against neuro-materialism. Consider identical twins (same DNA). If moral behavior is determined only by the physical and chemical natures of the brain, one would expect these genetically identical twins to behave alike--if one is a criminal, so would the other be, with 100% concordance. However, a Danish study has shown only a 52% rate for concordance between identical twins (compared to 22% for fraternal twins). Moreover, this study has been criticized as neglecting linked environmental behavioral factors by Carey: "The results suggest that the genetic influence on registered criminality may be more modest than previously thought."

Nevertheless, neuroscientists conclude that free will is an illusion, on the basis of experiments involving simple, inconsequential choices. The most cited of these is the Libet experiment, which shows a brain potential exists before a subject is consciously aware of making a choice. On the other hand Timothy Bayne and Eliezer Sternberg say that the Libet experiments do not justify free will skepticism. The most significant objection, which Sternberg supports by several detailed examples of moral/ethical decision problems, is that the Libet experiment (and others) involve inconsequential choices, choices which do not require reflection, consideration of an unlimited set of moral and situational factors. Sternberg classifies these kinds of decisions as "boundless", that is to say decisions that cannot be determined algorithmically, as might be done in a computer, unlike those processes that proceed almost without conscious deliberation (like riding a bicycle). Since ethical decision making is "boundless", it cannot proceed solely from algorithmic brain processes, but requires another agency.

I am not foolish enough to argue that ethical behavior does not involve physical and chemical characteristics of the brain, or that heredity might not have some influence on the capacity for making good moral choices. I suggest that the