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Part 1

Free Will as Revolution Against the Laws of Nature

In this essay I will be comparing Steven Hales' chapter on "Freedom" with his chapter on "Self". In both chapters, Hales considers the forces that govern our lives, and suggests willpower as an adversary to a determined universe. The twin concepts of determinism and bundle theory reveal the world as we know it to be a thin veil, separating us from true reality. Our fragile sense of freedom and self may be shattered by philosophy, but reconstructed through willpower, intelligence, and intention.

In "Freedom", Hales suggests multiple versions of what free will is, and if it exists or not. His personal opinion reflects what "18th-century British wit Samuel Johnson once remarked, [that] 'all theory is against the freedom of will; all experience is for it'" (114). As a basic definition, Hales offers *libertarian free will*, which states that "your will is free just in case you can choose to perform one action instead of another" (113). Free will is as simple as being able to choose your own actions and direct your life accordingly. There exist no barriers to your freedom, besides some sticky ones such as the **laws of the natural universe**. Hales details this in the third argument against free will, *determinism*.

Determinism is presented as such: “Given the laws of nature and a set of initial conditions, there is exactly one physically possible future” (125). As physical creatures, made of physical parts, living in a physical world where physical elements have laws and regulations, our lives are as predictable as the sun setting in the evening. Hales writes, “The feeling that you could have done otherwise [is] no more than an illusion, self-deception of some kind” (126). In describing the physical laws of the universe as an illusion, Hales reflects what has been known in eastern philosophies for thousands of years. This world is Maya, or illusion, and it is by the veil of ignorance that we think of ourselves as beings with free will. However, we all feel experientially that we have free will. So we are presented with a paradox, which Hales further details in the chapter on “Self.”

In the chapter on “Self” Hales explores the philosophical issue of what makes us who we think we are. What are we? What is consciousness, and how is it connected to our bodies, and what happens when we die? To answer this question, it is necessary to solve both the physicalist criterion and the psychological criterion. The physicalist criterion states that we are no more than physical, material objects. So, as we grow up and our bodies change, our sense of self stays the same because it is tied to the “closest physical continuer” of our previous versions, like being a baby, child, teenager, adult, elderly, etc. (157). The psychological criterion, which traces its roots back to John Locke in the 17th-century, places its importance on consciousness, wherever you may deem it “located”. Thus, psychological continuity is determined by remembering preceding moments where you had the same consciousness, a kind of “closest psychological continuer” (164).

To satisfy both criteria, Hales lands on David Hume’s bundle theory, which is a theory that suggests *there is no definitive self*. Hales says, “There is no you. There never was. The

mistake all along was to think you are anything more than a loosely uniformed confederation of interests, motivations, beliefs, sensations, and emotions” (175). To expound on this point, he introduces the Buddha’s analogy of a chariot, “made out of parts that are in a sense more real than the chariot, which is just a convention, a name we give to a certain assemblage of those parts” (176). According to the bundle theory, who you are is merely a collection of parts, interchangeable, and determined. All we have to define ourselves is a “kind of pragmatic identification... persistence over time is a myth; there is no genuine continuity, no true personal identity” (178).

Again, Hales brings us to the idea of a myth, a falsehood, or illusion relative to his ambiguous conclusion on the given topic. According to Buddha, our sense of self is Maya, an illusion, and it is by the veil of ignorance that we think of ourselves as beings that are separate from the whole “bundle”, to use Hume's theory. This is a nearly identical conclusion to the philosophical problems described in “freedom”. Along with our sense of self, this *whole world* is Maya, or illusion, and it is by the veil of ignorance that we think of ourselves, and the world as anything at all.

But let’s not fall into the common spiritual pitfall of nihilism. We must consider the next step: reconstructing our sense of identity and the world, with the knowledge that it’s all pretend anyways. Who are we beyond our personal, historical, and cultural assemblage? Hales hints at a part of ourselves that is “nonphysical, incorporeal, eternal, unchanging” (151), a part of ourselves that isn’t physical, isn’t the mind, or personality, something immortal and incorruptible.

Hales stops here, making up his mind that without due evidence and proper philosophical arguments, the concept of a soul is not one he or his audience should accept. But it is up to us to

persevere in the quest of knowledge, to go one step further. Casting off our sense of identity and determination that we understand the world is necessary to progressing closer to the truth of existence. This is the idea of willpower as an adversary to a determined universe. The twin concepts of determinism and bundle theory reveal the world as we know it to be a thin veil, but a veil that, if we persevere, untethered by the weights of mortal existence, can be torn apart by our questing minds, thirsty for true reality.

Part II

The idea in this class that has been the biggest takeaway for me is not just one idea, but the mechanics of all the ideas that have been presented. The theories that Hales has presented all demonstrate the existence of numerous contradictions, primarily with the ideas previously described, such as the sense of self or determinism vs. free will. These contradictions do not indicate that one theory exists in exclusion of the other; Instead, a paradox is revealed. Grappling with this paradox can be the push our consciousness needs to overcome pre existing notions of reality, which imprison us in a condition of unknowing, usually described as natural to humans. This “natural” misunderstanding, or, the “human condition” can only be reversed with the realization that we are imprisoned in our “human-ness”. Freedom awaits those brave enough to leave everything behind. As the Tao says, “Truth waits for eyes unclouded by longing”

Works Cited

Hales, Steven. *This is Philosophy: An Introduction*. 2nd Edition. Wiley Blackwell, 2021.

Tzu, Lao. *Tao Te Ching*. Translated by Arthur Waley, Wordsworth Editions, 1996