

Freedom & determinism

Freedom and determinism

-> Many believe that when we humans **act**, we often (though not always) act **freely** and that when we **decide**, we often decide **freely**.

-> On the other hand, it appears that what happens at a moment or time has been **determined** by causes that existed at earlier times.

-> In other words, it appears that our world is **deterministic**.

-For example, one may claim that the way I think and react has been determined by my **character** and that my character was determined by the **features I had from birth and by the environment** in which I was brought up.

-> But if our world is **deterministic**, then how can it be that we **decide and act freely**?

Freedom and determinism

-**traditional** question: do we decide and act freely?

-usual question during the **20th century**: is **freedom of action** and **of the will** logically **compatible** with **determinism**?

-This turn is due to **two reasons**:

-> For most recent philosophers, whether our world is deterministic, is a matter for **empirical sciences**, and not philosophy

-so, to the extent that the question whether we are free depends on that matter, it **cannot be answered by philosophy**

-> Many philosophers argued that the **incompatibility** between freedom and determinism is only **apparent**.

Freedom and determinism

-Those who believe that freedom is compatible with determinism are called **compatibilists**.

-Those who hold the opposite view are called **incompatibilists**.

incompatibilism : hard determinism / libertarianism / agent causation

The problem is complicated by the fact that not all philosophers mean the term 'determinism' in the same way.

-> **basic idea**: what takes place at some time has been determined by what took place in earlier ages.

-**Two assumptions** made by most 20th century philosophers who dealt with the issue

-> when someone acts freely, **they could have acted otherwise**.

(If someone **could not have done anything other** than what they finally do, then their **action is not free**)

-> we are **morally responsible** for one of our actions iff **we acted freely**.

(No one bears responsibility for acts that were not free)

Freedom and determinism

-> Various British philosophers from the 17th up to the 19th century (T. Hobbes, D. Hume, J. S. Mill):

-> freedom of action consists in **acting as one wants**: doing what one wants to do and not doing what one does not want.

According to Hobbes, “liberty is the absence of external impediments”.

According to Hume, whoever is not in prison or bound by chains is free.

-Of course, those philosophers believed that freedom of action is **compatible** with determinism.

Freedom and determinism

-**Kant** judged such a view (i.e. the previous one) to be an easy solution to the problem of freedom and determinism.

-> if an action was brought about by a cause **in accordance with a natural law**, then the action was **not free**, even if the cause was something that existed in the **inner world of the agent**.

-Irrespective of whether Kant was right, it is certainly naive to consider that an action is free iff it realises a **desire** of the subject and was **caused by that desire**.

-> If someone **hypnotises** me and engenders within me a strong tendency to gambol around, I shall not act freely when I realise my desire.

-The action is not free, since the **tendency** that caused it **was not formed freely**.

Freedom and determinism

-> Generally, when an **action** is due to a **decision**, the decision must have been **taken freely** in order for the action to be **free**, and when no decision preceded, but the action is simply due to a **complex of desires and beliefs**, these desires and beliefs must have been **formed freely**.

-**Most English-speaking 20th century philosophers**, even if they disagree with Hobbes's and Hume's particular approach, still **agreed with them** on the conclusion that freedom of action is **compatible** with determinism.

Ayer's argument

One of the most prominent representatives of compatibilism in the 20th century: **A. J. Ayer**.

-**'determinism'**: each human action, and more generally each event, was caused by something.

(His conception of causation leaves no room for probabilistic causation)

-> Ayer argues that **moral responsibility presupposes determinism**.

-Let's say that a person acts in some way; Ayer is trying to show that **either that person has no moral responsibility for their action or determinism is true of the particular action**.

Ayer's argument

-> Ayer's argument is as follows:

-If it was a matter of **pure chance** that the person in question acted in that specific way, then they are **not responsible for their action**. Whoever acts entirely **unpredictably** is not a moral subject; they are insane.

-If, on the other hand, it **wasn't a matter of chance**, then there is a **causal explanation** of their action, so perhaps we end up with **determinism**.

Ayer's argument

-Of course, one will object that we **do not** end up with determinism so easily; it may be that the person in our example did not act in that specific way by chance and their action was the result of a **choice**, in which case we do not seem to have determinism.

-Ayer, however, replies that **we can apply the same dilemma to any choice that led to the action.**

-If it was **merely a matter of chance** that the person made that **choice**, they are not morally responsible for either the choice or the corresponding action.

-If it **wasn't a matter of chance**, then there is a **causal explanation** of the choice, so now we end up with **determinism** both about the choice and about the action.

Ayer's argument

-Perhaps, one will again object that the choice may not have been a matter of chance; it may be that it was due to the **person's character** and they **formed their character themselves**, in which case we do not seem to have determinism.

-But Ayer replies that we can again apply the **same dilemma** to the formation of the character.

-Moreover, he emphasises that we consider people **especially responsible**, from a moral point of view, for those of their actions which are **due to their character**, that is, for actions that are **predictable**; it seems clear that determinism is true of those actions.

Ayer's argument

-Subsequently, Ayer infers from **three premisses** to the conclusion that freedom of action is **compatible** with determinism.

The three premisses are:

(a) we are **morally responsible** for at least some of our actions;

(b) it isn't possible to be morally responsible for an action **without having acted freely**;

(c) **moral responsibility presupposes determinism.**

Ayer's argument

-Ayer takes it for granted that if a choice was not accidental, **then something caused it.**

-But one may consider that at least some of our choices and decisions **have no causes** (so they falsify the general principle that each event was caused by something) but are **not accidental** either.

-> They are based on **reasons.**

-The problem with that answer to Ayer is that it presupposes a **controversial** view:

-> that the **reasons** on which one bases a choice (or decision) **are not always causes of their choice.**

-Many philosophers (like Davidson) consider that when a person has some reasons in favour of a choice and, relying on those reasons, proceeds to the choice, then **the reasons are the complex of thoughts and desires which are causes of the choice.**

Ayer's argument

-Ayer ends up in another way, too, with the conclusion that freedom of action is compatible with determinism.

-He holds that the **opposite of freedom** is not causality, but **constraint**.

-> When am I constrained to do something? Ayer distinguishes **two kinds of case**.

-We have the one kind when I am **constrained by another person**. That person may have **hypnotised** me or otherwise made it physically impossible for me to react.

-Alternatively, they may have made it clear that if I don't carry out what they want, there will be very **unpleasant consequences** for me.

Ayer's argument

-We have the **other kind of constraint** when I am so **addicted** to an activity that, even if I think about the issue and choose to act differently, my thoughts and choices will play no causal role in my behaviour.

-Such is the case of the **kleptomaniac**.

-Ayer argues that, since it is **possible to perform an action without constraint** while there are **causes** that brought it about, it is **possible to perform an action freely** while there are **causes** that brought it about.

-Here one may object that if any **causes** brought about an action of mine, **then there was constraint** and hence I did not act freely.

-Ayer answers that objection invoking his views about causation. He emphasises that if something, some event x , brings about an action (or another event) y , this simply means that, *according to a natural law, when there occurs an event of the same type as x , there also occurs, in a certain temporal or spatiotemporal relation to that event, one of the same type as y .* **There subsists no constraint, except metaphorically.**

Incompatibilism

R. Chisholm: a decision is **free** iff its cause is **not some event**, but the **subject** who takes the decision.

-> This causal relation, which is called '**agent causation**', does **not follow any natural law**.

-When the decision is free, the subject takes that decision, **but could have taken a different one instead**.

-In a version of that view, the subject who takes the decision is the **human being**. In another version, the subject is an **internal being**, an ego or something like that.

Incompatibilism

-> According to that view, freedom of the will and action is **incompatible** with determinism.

-For if there are decisions of the type just described, then **what is the case at some time does not determine what will be the case in later ages**, since it does not determine what decisions of that type will take place in between.

-Main problem with the view: **agent causation** seems to be a kind of causality that **we don't find in our study of the natural world**, not even in our biological study of living organisms.

-> So their view does not fit in smoothly with what we know from investigating other aspects of reality.

-For the version in which the subject is an internal being, there is another problem. It accepts the existence of **a very doubtful entity**, something like a person within the person that is the human being.

Determinism

determinism:

for each time t_1 and each time t_2 after t_1 , the combination of the laws of nature with the total state, s_1 , of the universe at t_1 implies, of logical necessity, the total state, s_2 , of the universe at t_2 .

-> Let's say that t_1 is some moment before I was born, and that at some time t_2 I act in a certain way. Many people find it obvious that if determinism, as we defined it, is true, **then I couldn't have acted otherwise.**

The ability to act otherwise

-Supporters of the **compatibility** between freedom of action and determinism sometimes **concede** that if determinism is true, then in some sense I couldn't have acted otherwise:

-> it is not logically possible that the same laws of nature should apply as actually apply, the universe should evolve until before t_2 as it actually evolved, but at t_2 I should act otherwise.

('I couldn't have acted otherwise': it was not *historically possible* for me to act otherwise.)

But they consider that it is in a different sense that if I couldn't have acted otherwise, then my action was not free: **what is needed for freedom is to be able, to have the power, to act otherwise.**

The ability to act otherwise

This is a **general concept of ability**; what I am able to do depends on my physical **powers**, my mental powers, my social and professional position, my location in space, etc.

-> Supporters of the compatibility between freedom of action and determinism believe that, from the fact that it was not **historically possible** for me to act otherwise, it doesn't follow that I was **not able to act otherwise**. (Here things have become complicated)

Van Inwagen's argument

-P. Van Inwagen's argument that freedom of action is **incompatible** with determinism:

-In a distant land, a judge who has sentenced someone to death has the right to raise his arm at a certain moment and in this way pardon the defendant.

-The judge, J, thinks about the case, decides not to grant a pardon and so does not raise it.

-> Could he have acted otherwise if determinism is true?

Van Inwagen's argument

-Let's say that **t2** is the crucial moment, at which his arm remains down, and **t1** is some moment before he was born.

-Moreover, let's say that **s1** is the **total state of the universe** at the time t1, and **s2** is the total state of the universe at t2.

-Let **P1** be the statement 'The universe is in state s1 at time t1' and P2 be the statement 'The universe is in state s2 at time t2'.

-Finally, **N** will be the conjunction, in one statement, of all the laws of nature (both those we know and those we do not know).

In the argument that follows, statements (1), (2), (5), (6), (8) and (9) are premisses; (10) is the conclusion; (3), (4) and (7) are intermediate conclusions.

Van Inwagen explains that, throughout the argument, phrases of the type 'X could have done so-and-so...' mean 'X **had the power or ability** to do so-and-so'.

Van Inwagen's argument

(1) If determinism is true, then the conjunction of P1 and N implies P2 of logical necessity.

'The conjunction of P1 and N implies P2 of logical necessity' means that it is logically impossible that the conjunction of P1 and N should be true but P2 should not be true. (1) follows from the definition we gave for determinism.

(2) If J had raised his arm at time t2, P2 would be false.

For if J had raised his arm at t2, he would have contributed to the universe being at t2 in a state slightly different from s2, and as a consequence statement P2 would be false.

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-> (3) **If J could have raised his arm at t2, J could have rendered P2 false.**

(3) follows from (2); if J could have raised his arm at t2, he could have done something which would have the consequence that P2 was false.

Van Inwagen's argument

-> (4) **If determinism is true, and J could have raised his arm at t2, then the conjunction of P1 and N implies P2 of logical necessity, and J could have rendered P2 false.**

(4) follows from (1) and (3).

Van Inwagen's argument

(5) If the conjunction of P1 and N implies P2 of logical necessity, and J could have rendered P2 false, then J could have rendered the conjunction of P1 and N false.

For if it is logically impossible that P2 should be false, but the conjunction of P1 and N should be true, the falsity of P2 is a condition that is sufficient in order for the conjunction of P1 and N to be false; so, by rendering P2 false, J would also have rendered the conjunction of P1 and N false.

(6) If J could have rendered the conjunction of P1 and N false, then either J could have rendered P1 false or J could have rendered N false (or both).

-For the only way to render a conjunction false is to render a conjunct false.

Van Inwagen's argument

(5) If the conjunction of P1 and N implies P2 of logical necessity, and J could have rendered P2 false, then J could have rendered the conjunction of P1 and N false.

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-> (7) If determinism is true, and J could have raised his arm at t2, then either J could have rendered P1 false or J could have rendered N false.

(7) follows from (4), (5) and (6).

Van Inwagen's argument

(8) J could not have rendered P1 false.

-For we cannot change the past.

(9) J could not have rendered N false.

-For we cannot change the laws of nature.

CONCLUSION (10) If determinism is true, then J could not have raised his arm at the time t_2 .

(10) follows from (7), (8) and (9).

Van Inwagen's argument

(of the conditionals that occur in sentences (1)–(10), only the one in (2) comes under the syntactic and semantic category of **counterfactual** conditionals).

-Now, since the argument does not depend on the **particular features** of the story with the judge, we are entitled to **generalise the conclusion**:

-> if determinism is true, then **whenever an agent doesn't do something, they could not have done it.**

-> analogically, if determinism is true, then **whenever an agent does something, they could not have failed to do it.**

It is difficult to detect weak points in Van Inwagen's argument.

-Perhaps a weak point is in **premiss (5)**, it seems to be stronger than what we are entitled to presuppose.

Van Inwagen's argument

What we are entitled to presuppose is that if the conjunction of P1 and N implies P2 of logical necessity, and J could have rendered P2 false, **then it is possible for the conjunction of P1 and N to be false.**

-Here is an analogous example.

-Let's take some man M.

-The statement 'M is lying asleep' implies the statement 'M is not running' of logical necessity.

-Let's also say that M can (has the power or ability) to run 100 metres in 11", but cannot act so as to stop his sleep or get up from bed while sleeping; he cannot make himself wake up.

-If he ran 100 metres in 11" (or, also, if he ran another distance in another time) he would render the statement 'M is not running' false.

-So M can render that statement false. And, of course, if he ran and rendered that statement false, the statement 'M is lying asleep' would also be false.

-Nevertheless, he cannot render the statement 'M is lying asleep' false.

Frankfurt's argument

-It seems to be a **necessary condition** for being **morally responsible** for an action that **one could have acted otherwise**.

-Yet H. Frankfurt showed, in a famous thought experiment, that it **isn't a necessary condition**.

-The thought experiment presents a **logically possible** situation in which someone is morally responsible for their actions although they could not have acted otherwise. (Or, at least, this is intuitively a very plausible account of the situation.)

Frankfurt's argument

- Let's imagine that some scientists have gained control of a man's brain.
- To be precise, when that man is about to perform an action, the scientists see, with various instruments, what he is going to do.
- Moreover, they can induce thoughts and desires in him so that he can act just as they want.
- Thus the man, who has no idea about the scientists, begins taking decisions and acting analogously. His decisions are the result of careful thought, without any constraint.
- The scientists do not intervene at all, as each time what he is going to do (and which they see with their instruments) happens to coincide with what they want him to do.
- But if they ever found out that he was going to do anything different, they would intervene and he wouldn't do it.
- > Intuitively, that man is morally responsible for his actions. However, he could never have acted otherwise, since the scientists wouldn't let him.

- mental causation
- supervenience
- causal completeness
- overdetermination
- epiphenomenalism
- Kim
- Sapolsky