

Examine the claims that freedom of the will is incompatible with determinism, and also incompatible with indeterminism.

In this short essay I will illustrate some arguments which show that free will is incompatible with both determinism and indeterminism. This is often referred to as the pessimistic position as it categorically denies the existence of a free will.

Determinism means that given the past and the laws of nature there can be only one unique future. We can illustrate this idea with a billiard table. If we had complete information about the position and velocity of the balls, then we could, by applying the physical laws, predict precisely where the balls would be at any time. By introducing the concept of causation we could also say that the future is caused by the past and the laws of nature.

The will can be thought of as a human faculty, similar to the faculties of breathing or speaking. The faculty of the will is thus the ability to will something. While there is little dispute that humans possess a will, the question we are trying to address is under what circumstances we can say that this will is free.

For the will to be free it needs to meet two conditions. First, the will is only free if we have choices for our actions, i.e. if we could have acted differently. Second, the will is free only if we are the first cause of our actions, i.e. our actions are not caused by any prior event.

Now we will analyse if free will as defined above can exist in a deterministic world.

The first argument shows that we would not have choices for our actions if determinism were true:

1. if determinism were true, then there is only one unique future (definition)
2. to have choices for our actions there must be more than one possible future
3. therefore if determinism were true we would have only one possible choice
4. if we have only one possible choice we have no free will (definition)

The next argument shows that we would not be the first cause of our actions if determinism were true:

1. if determinism were true the future – including our willing and actions – would be caused by the past and the laws of nature (definition)
2. if our future willing and actions are caused by the past they are not a first cause
3. if our willing is not the first cause we have no free will (definition)

To summarize, the arguments show that free will is not compatible with determinism.

For example, imagine how Alice is browsing the menu in a restaurant trying to decide between salad and steak for lunch. Say, she eventually decides to order salad. How did she come to that willing? Her brain is subject to the physical laws and thus by combining the sensory information about the choice at hand with the stored information (memories about previous lunches, desires about losing weight etc) only one unique decision can follow. Although it seems there are two choices, steak or salad, the particular physical condition of her brain leaves her with only one choice. One could object

that, although the choice was inevitable given her specific memories and beliefs, exactly these memories and beliefs constitute who Alice is; and thus we could say it was Alice's free choice. However, considering that all the information stored in her brain has been caused by prior events, Alice is not the first cause of her choice. Thus free will does not exist here.

Now we will examine whether a free will can exist if indeterminism were true.

Indeterminism is the opposite of determinism, i.e. a priori there is more than one possible future. Hence we need a mechanism to choose one of the many futures to become the past. This could be accomplished by a random choice.

First we will examine if we have choices for our actions in such a world.

1. if indeterminism were true, which future (i.e. action) will occur depends on chance
2. having a choice means that we could have acted otherwise
3. if our action is a result of chance, we could have acted otherwise
4. hence we have choices for our actions in an indeterministic world

But are we the first cause of our actions?

1. if indeterminism were true, which future (i.e. action) will occur depends on chance
2. hence the cause of our action is the outcome of the random event
3. if an action is not ultimately caused by us, we have no free will

In the previous example, Alice's brain had to come to a certain decision based on the memories, beliefs and the deterministic mechanism of the brain. To introduce indeterminism we could assume that when the brain combines the sensory input, memories and beliefs to a decision a chance element is added. For example it may randomly exclude or distort certain information. So she may ultimately opt for either salad or steak. She is not locked in to one choice by her beliefs; however whatever action she eventually takes, she does not ultimately cause it.

It appears that there is a glimmer of free will in the fact that before the random event occurs our action is not determined. However, since the ultimate decision has now been shifted to a random mechanism we can't be held responsible and thus free will does not exist in an indeterministic world either.