

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

“I am the master of my fate; I am the captain of my soul”, William Ernest Henley

“Whatever happens to you has been waiting to happen since the beginning of time. The twining strands of fate wove both of them together: your own existence and the things that happen to you.”, Marcus Aurelius

The discoveries of Charles Darwin two centuries ago rekindled the compatibility of free will and determinism debate. We now have evidence that the earth and its universe existed billions of years before man. The world then was entirely deterministic, its one possible future set by the laws of nature. Then, only 200,000 years ago, man appeared on the scene. These creatures came to believe that their actions were the result of decisions they made freely, that they the first cause of their actions, first movers unmoved. However if this were true, how does a “free-will” person exist in a deterministic world? Incompatibilists argue they can’t, free will cannot coexist with determinism, or with indeterminism.

Hard determinists argue that man only “believes” he has free will but in reality this is an illusion and his actions are determined. When Charles Darwin decided to take his famous voyage aboard the HMS Beagle, a hard determinist would claim he could have made no other choice. This decision was merely the result the past experience and external factors that led him to that point in time. Since the laws of nature were not up to him, his choice was not up to him. It was a causal chain of events that led him to board that ship. Van Inwagen argued that if this is true and your choices are causally determined by events that occurred before you were born, then any choice made now is logically implied by the laws of nature and prior events, this means events that existed before you were born are not up to you, and the laws of nature are not up to you, therefore any choice you make now is not up to you. If determinism is incompatible with free-will, it must also be incompatible with moral responsibility, since this requires the existence of a free-will. To have moral responsibility we must have the power to choose to do otherwise, which we do not have when choices we make now are not within our control. Robert Kane argued that we only have free will if we are the first cause of our choices. He called this having “ultimate responsibility”. If determinism is true then our choices are determined by our genes and environment, making us not the first cause of our choices. If, as the hard determinists claim, we are not the first cause of our choices, then we cannot claim to have moral responsibility, which many claim is absurd.

Libertarians also believe that free will and determinism are incompatible but instead insist that events and decisions up until that point had not been determined but simply are matters of chance. Darwin’s decision was entirely of his own free will and determinism played not part. Kant argued that morality and ethics presupposes free will. However, a free will requires us to be the causer and controller of our actions and have the ability to choose otherwise, both of which are impossible under determinism. Therefore, for moral

responsibility to exist we must have free will and as a result determinism cannot exist. The libertarian views the universe not as a deterministic chain of events but one of randomness and chance.

However if an event is undetermined, indeterminism would claim that acts and decisions are pure chance, the future is unpredictable and, unlike the case of determinism, alternative futures exist. Critics argue that indeterminism is also incompatible with free will. If acts and decisions occur unpredictably, by chance, then the agent cannot be said to have made them deliberately and thus freely. If the causal chain of events leading up to Darwin's decision to board the boat did not affect his decision then, the indeterminist claims, that is simply where the roulette wheel landed. Under this scenario, Darwin still is not the first causer of his choices since they are random and cannot claim to have free will.

For free will to exist we must be able to cause and control our actions and have the ability to choose otherwise, neither of which exists in a deterministic world. Therefore free will is incompatible with determinism and with indeterminism. The main challenge facing those that argue for the incompatibility of free will and determinism is the assumption that a free will is a requirement of moral responsibility. A world without free will is unimaginable for many people. William James claimed that this idea "...violates my sense of moral reality through and through". If Darwin lacked free will when he decided to board that ship then, if determinism were true, his discoveries were pointlessly inevitable and if indeterminism were true, they were a lucky role of the dice. If either of these cases were true, then perhaps we simply have created the belief of free will in order to exist in society and if this were the case I hope we never discover the truth.