

Q3: Examine the claims that freedom of the will is incompatible with determinism and incompatible with indeterminism

Determinism is the doctrine that every event (including every human choice and action) is the upshot of antecedent causes. The state of the world at any time t is the result of its state immediately before, and evolves from that preceding state in accordance with unchanging laws of nature.

There is no agreement about whether determinism is true (or even whether it can be known true or false) or what the import for human agency would be in either case. But in this essay I will defend the claim that determinism and free will are incompatible – entailing that if determinism turned out to be true, it would also be true that we do not have and never had free will. First I will show why determinism and free will are logically inconsistent, before considering some objections to Incompatibilism (*i.e.* the argument that free will and determinism are incompatible). The great difficulty for Incompatibilists, however, is to explain how the negation of determinism (*i.e.* indeterminism) could establish our free agency. It seems that if determinism holds we lose freedom and responsibility, but if determinism does not hold then equally we lose freedom and responsibility. Such is the dilemma of determinism.

To see why determinism poses a threat to free will, consider that to have free will is to have what it takes to act freely. Our ordinary thinking seems to presuppose that we human beings have the ability to think and act freely, as rational and moral agents. When we view ourselves from a personal standpoint, we think we are capable of influencing the world in various ways. Open alternatives seem to lie before us; we deliberate among them and choose. We feel it is up to us what we choose and how we act, meaning that we could have chosen or acted otherwise; as Aristotle put it, “when acting is ‘up to us’ so is not acting (qtd. Kane 5). This “up to us” condition further suggests that the origin or source of free choices and actions lies in us, rather than in something else over which we have no control. Consider now that, if determinism is true, it is not up to us what we chose from an array of alternative possibilities, because determinism entails that what we do is the only thing we can do. To have a choice is to have genuine options or alternatives, for there to be different ways in which we can act. If determinism precludes our power (or ability) to do otherwise, then we never really have a choice about anything. It seems to follow that the origin or source of our choices and actions would not then ultimately lie in us, but in antecedent causes and laws over which we have no control.

People who accept this argument are called Incompatibilists, since they think that free will and determinism are incompatible. According to determinism, the history of the universe is fixed in such a way that nothing can happen otherwise than it does, because everything that happens is necessitated by what has already gone before. It follows that every aspect of a person's character, and everything they will ever do, was already inevitable before they were born. Incompatibilists insist that a person cannot be held to be truly free and finally morally responsible for their actions in this case.

Incompatibilists do grant what everyone must: there is a clear and important sense in which we can be free agents. We can be free when unconstrained or uncompelled, to choose and do what we want or think best given how we are. My character, personality preferences, and general motivational set may be entirely determined by events over which I have no control – such as my genetic inheritance, upbringing, and subsequent experiences – but I can still be free in a compatibilist sense. Compatibilists – as in, those who hold that freedom and determinism are compatible – define a free choice or action as a voluntary one (*id est* one in accordance with the agent's desires and true nature, not against them). Incompatibilists argue that this definition is patently inadequate, for they insist that a free choice or action is a voluntary *and* originated one – that is, not only one that the agent in his true nature really wants, but also one that is initiated by the faculty of the will (or the faculty of reason or suchlike). This is the requirement for free will that the ultimate source of our actions “lies in us”. It is also mind-body dualism – as in, the idea that behind or above the evolutions of brain and body, there is a Real Me receiving information and occasionally directing operations. I can take over and interfere with the way things would otherwise have gone, and this is where my freedom lies. The mistake here is that dualism tries to understand human freedom by introducing an extra element: the controlling Real Me. But determinism claims that the laws of nature are all-encompassing rather than limited in scope. Thus a Real Me would not escape the same problems that beset ordinary things, but would be part of the causal process whereby our bodies move and cause further effects in the world.

If dualism cannot liberate us from the facts of determinism, then perhaps to restore human freedom, we should deny determinism. We might have reason to be optimistic about doing this, because the best current science of nature (quantum physics) is standardly interpreted as postulating uncaused events. In the quantum world, there are microphysical events that just happen. One system can be in exactly the same state as another and yet in one system a quantum event occurs, and in the other it doesn't. Such microphysical events have no cause; they just happen or do not happen. Quantum physics gives them a probability but

cannot determine, from state of play at one moment, whether or not such an event will happen in the immediate future. It is not however clear that the falsity of determinism can help when it comes to establishing free agency. Indeterminism introduces an element of randomness into things, not an element of control or responsibility. Whether or not an underdetermined event actually occurs seems to be a matter of chance. Chance events are not under the control of anything, and hence are not under the control of agents.

Indeed, the manner in which indeterminism might be true – due to quantum indeterminacies, for example – poses as much a threat to the presumption of free will as determinism does. A group of Incompatibilists known as no-freedom theorists agree that the truth of determinism precludes human freedom, but deny that indeterminism can help make us (or anyone else) free. Accordingly, no-freedom theorists conclude that we are not genuinely free agents irrespective of whether determinism is true or false. If determinism holds, then we lose freedom. But if determinism does not hold, and some events “just happen”, then equally we lose freedom. Chance it seems is as relentless as necessity.

Suitably developed, such arguments against the existence of human freedom seem to be very strong. And yet, these philosophical arguments keep coming up against compelling psychological reasons why we continue to presuppose that human beings have the ability to think and act freely. For many humans, the experience of choice gives rise to a conviction of ultimate freedom: “Surely I can ‘just know’ that I am free. I sit here, able to raise my arm or not, just as I please. Suppose I do so – thus – then I have felt myself controlling the way events unfolded. In other words, my *consciousness* reveals my freedom to me”. However, as aforementioned, our own self-consciousness (or self-understanding) cannot liberate us from the facts of determinism. If determinism is true, I am determined to have whatever self-conscious thoughts I have, whatever their complexity. Take the following argument: following argument:

I am not conscious of the causal background needed for me to do *Y*.

I know I sometimes do *Y*.

Therefore, I am conscious that there is no causal background needed for me to do *Y*.

This argument is invalid, because being *unconscious* of something cannot be parlayed into being *conscious of its absence*. When I speak I am not conscious of the causal structures that make it possible for me to speak – the musculature, the coordination of muscle and breath control, the movement of the tongue and palate, the configuring of my jaw – but all these things are necessary, as I would quickly discover if just one of them went wrong.

As I have tried to show in this essay, the argument for Incompatibilism is not so easy to break...

Bibliography

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