

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

If freedom of the will means “the freedom to do as I want,” then it would appear that it is only incompatible with determinism. However I will try to show that it is equally incompatible with indeterminism.

I decide to have pasta for dinner of my own free will, by which I mean that I am not bullied, brainwashed or otherwise coerced into doing so. Does that mean that my choice is not “determined”? If my choice is actually not determined, then is it mere chance that makes me choose this particular meal. Do I have no say in the matter? If I have no say, then I appear to have as little freedom as if the matter had been predetermined and I had been (even subtly) pushed into deciding on this particular meal.

Freedom is a difficult word to define. It can be defined negatively e.g. nobody is forcing me to do something. I might experience this most strongly if I lived in a dictatorship. The word can also be used positively e.g. *I am* able to do something. It does not mean I am able to do ALL things, for instance, much to my regret I cannot sing bass, or fly like a bird as there are physical constraints on me, but within reason I am free to do (act/behave) as I would choose.

A determinist view of the world would state that everything we do has been caused, whether or not we recognise the cause, and that therefore true free will does not and cannot exist. This states the incompatibilist view according to which we are constrained by, amongst other things, our history, culture, bodies, hormones, neurones, upbringing and education, logic, God if we are religious and so on. If all our actions are caused (determined) then how can we really be free? Our free choices (or perhaps we could call them preferences) appear to be so made i.e. freely, but actually it could be possible to see how they have been arrived at given sufficient time. A different decision could have been made, but given identical (and only identical) prior conditions it would – to a determinist – be impossible for that other decision to be made.

For example, I could not have eaten pasta had I not been shopping for pasta earlier this week, had I not forgotten to buy vegetables, had I not decided to become a vegetarian, had I not had health reasons for doing so, and so on ad infinitum.

For that other decision to be taken, one of the prior causes would also have to be altered – for example in another possible world in which, for example, a world in which pasta had not been invented.

Indeterminism, on the other hand, denies that everything has a cause, not necessarily in the greater natural world of stars and planets, but specifically in the biological world and in particular the human world, where humans seem to be able to act against their ideals or dispositions. A hunting animal has no option other than to hunt to eat, a hunted animal to flee, but according to indeterminists, humans have at least the option of making free decisions

about some of their actions.

This, however, might be seen as introducing chance or a random element into the argument. Is it possible that chance has a place in the definition of “freedom”? A chance is a possibility, at best a probability, and mathematics does not recognise probability as being free. Also, the actual fact of making a decision appears to be part of the action. When I chose to eat pasta from all the ingredients in my cupboard, that choice is also part of the cause my eating that meal. A different outcome must presuppose a different set of conditions. It could also be argued that choosing to eat pasta and finding myself eating veal would be no freedom at all if that happened purely at random.

Perhaps there is also a distinction to be made between unplanned and pre-arranged. My meal may have not been planned, but the fact that I bought it means that the meal was in a sense pre-arranged.

I personally do not think that random behaviour means the same as true freedom. If my studying were not to result in being better educated and the knowledge I acquired merely random then that would be no freedom at all. If I could not learn anything then I would be reduced to someone incapable of reasoning and thus of having no free will, being at the mercy of the ideas of someone else.

True freedom may well be an illusion. The determinist would say that our freedom comes from the sense of doing what we choose and choosing what we desire but that these are not in our own control. The indeterminist would argue that freedom is an illusion at best, the choices we make being governed by the choices we make. It therefore follows that neither determinism nor indeterminism actually allows us to act with “freedom.”