

Philosophy 2²3³: Intuitions and Philosophy
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Tuesdays and Thursdays, 1pm - 2:15pm
Library 209

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Class 13 - Free Will I

I. The classic free will - determinism debate

The basic problem of free will and determinism comes in two versions, theistic and physical, each of which is quite easy to describe.

In both versions, we start with the basic intuition of free will.

It seems that I am free to decide, within the laws of physics, what I am going to do.

I am free to continue writing this sentence, or to dance a jig outside in the cold rain.

Indeed, this freedom seems to be essential to our senses of who we are.

We identify ourselves, to a large degree, with the free choices we make.

From the inside, we are free.

In contrast, there are two ways in which my apparently free choices appear, from the outside, to be determined.

In the theistic version, we imagine that there is an omniscient, omnipresent being.

Such a being, let's call her Alice, knows what I am going to do at all times, including future times.

So, Alice knows that I will continue typing this sentence.

Alice knows what my next job will be.

Alice knows every choice I will make in the future, even now.

So, my choice is already determined, which conflicts with the intuition I have that I am free to choose.

In the physical, or Laplacian, version of determinism, we imagine that our world is completely governed by deterministic physical laws.

Most physical laws seem deterministic, in that they yield specific and determinable results, given a complete description of initial conditions.

The future appears to be fixed, beyond our control.

One response to the determinist is to show that the future is not fixed.

We might do that by appealing, say, to the indeterminacy of quantum physics.

But, quantum indeterminacy does not seem to rise to the macro level.

Moreover, the deterministic-seeming laws of physics do not suffer from random indeterminacies.

Indeed, if they did, not only would they seem undetermined; they would seem chaotic.

Our freedom does not seem to consist of random moments inconsistent with the laws.

Our freedom is rooted in our ability to choose among various options.

On the physical version of determinism, any appearance of free will can be attributed to a lack of understanding of the laws and the initial conditions.

If my mind, for example, is just my brain, and my brain works according to strict physical laws, then my thoughts, as well as my overt behavior, are determined.

Determinism, especially physical determinism, seems troubling for a variety of reasons.

First, there is just the unpleasant thought that I don't have the freedom I appear to have.

Less phenomenally, determinism seems to undermine our ordinary notions of moral responsibility.

Ordinarily, we think that we are morally responsible only for behavior that we could have avoided; we

are not responsible when we have no ability to do otherwise.

So, I am not personally responsible for, say, ending the ethnic cleansing in Sudan, since I could not personally have ended it.

I am certainly not responsible for, say, tidying up the surface of Jupiter, or for preventing the great Chicago fire of 1871, since the laws of physics prevent me from having any effect.

On the other hand, since I could have contributed, in some way, to the relief of suffering and misery in the Sudan, say by contributing to a charity that provided food and water to refugees, I may be responsible for doing so.

But, if determinism is true, and if it entails that I can never do otherwise than what I do, it seems that I can never be morally responsible for any of my actions.

Intuitively, we do think people are morally responsible for some of their actions.

So, determinism clashes with these intuitions.

This is a puzzle.

II. Compatibilism

A standard way of trying to resolve the puzzle is to adopt a compatibilist notion of free will.

Compatibilism, which Hume defended, is the view that determinism is not opposed to free will.

According to Hume, an act is free if it is done in accordance with our will.

If I do something only because I could not have done otherwise, I do not do it freely.

I do not return to the ground when I jump in the air of my free will; I could not have done otherwise.

More importantly, if I pay my taxes because I am afraid of being fined or imprisoned, or if I refrain from cheating only out of fear of punishment, or if I am forced by threat to do any action I do not wish to perform, I do not act freely.

On the other hand, if I want to pay taxes, since I approve of their uses in building and maintaining roads, schools and armed forces; or if I refrain from cheating because I do not wish to cheat, then I am acting in accordance with my will, freely.

Consequently, we can hold people morally responsible for those acts they perform freely, in Hume's sense, and not for those they perform under constraint.

There does seem to be a use for Hume's notion of free will.

It allows us an account of moral responsibility which aligns with our belief that we are responsible only for that which we choose.

Hume's definition is consistent with the doctrine that ought implies can, that our moral responsibilities do not exceed our powers.

But, the determinist is unsatisfied with Hume's definition, because it fails to take into account any constraints on our will.

The determinist pursues the question of whether we are free or determined, by asking whether we are free to choose what we choose, or whether we are constrained.

If our thoughts are themselves the products of physical processes, mainly brain processes along with their inputs (from perception), then the same problem of determinism recurs with regard to our will.

Our actions may be in accord with our will, but we are prevented from willing freely.

The determinist who digs-in his/her heels against the compatibilist is called an incompatibilist: free will and moral responsibility are incompatible with determinism.

III. Incompatibilism

The most influential argument for incompatibilism is called the consequence argument. Here is a version of the consequence argument from Peter van Inwagen:

If determinism is true, then our acts are the consequence of laws of nature and events in the remote past. But it's not up to us what went on before we were born, and neither is it up to us what the laws of nature are. Therefore, the consequences of these things (including our present acts) are not up to us. ("An Essay on Free Will," p 56)

Here is another version, from David Lewis.

Suppose that determinism is true, and that I just put my hand down on my desk. As a compatibilist, I claim that this is a free but determined act. I was able to act otherwise, for instance to raise my hand. But there is a true historical proposition H about the intrinsic state of the world long ago, and a true proposition L specifying the laws of nature, such that H and L jointly determine what I did, and jointly contradict the proposition that I raised my hand. If I had raised my hand, then at least one of three things would have been true: contradictions would have been true, H would not have been true, or L would not have been true. So if I claim that I am able to raise my hand, I am committed to the claim that I have one of three incredible abilities: the ability to make contradictions true, the ability to change the past, or the ability to break (or change) the laws. It's absurd to suppose that I have any of these abilities. Therefore, by reductio, I could not have raised my hand (paraphrased from "Are We Free To Break the Laws" by Kadri Vihvelin, in <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/incompatibilism-arguments/>).

The central claim of the incompatibilist returns us to the Laplacian puzzle. We can not choose among the consequences of our actions. Thus, we can not be morally responsible for them.

IV. Frankfurt and the Principle of Alternative Possibilities

We see a contemporary version of compatibilism in the Frankfurt article. Frankfurt argues against incompatibilism, as represented in the consequence argument. He argues that free will, and specifically moral responsibility, is compatible with Laplacian determinism.

Frankfurt begins by noting that we are inclined to endorse the following principle of alternate possibilities (PAP):

A person's act is free if and only if that person could have done otherwise (829).

On PAP, if determinism is true and incompatible with free will, no one ever could have done otherwise. No one ever acts freely.

And, thus, no one can be morally responsible in a deterministic universe.

Frankfurt argues that one can be morally responsible even if one could not have done otherwise.

One can act freely even if one could not have done otherwise.

Frankfurt presents the example of Jones₄, which seems to provide a counterexample to PAP.

Suppose someone — Black, let us say — wants Jones₄ to perform a certain action. Black is prepared to go to considerable lengths to get his way, but he prefers to avoid showing his hand unnecessarily. So he waits until Jones₄ is about to make up his mind what to do, and does nothing unless it is clear to him (Black is an excellent judge of such things) that Jones₄ is going to decide to do something other than what he wants him to do. If it does become clear that Jones₄ is going to decide to do something else, Black takes effective steps to ensure that Jones₄ decides to do, and that he does do, what he wants him to do... Now suppose that Black never has to show his hand because Jones₄, for reasons of his own, decides to perform and does perform the very action Black wants him to perform. In that case, it seems clear, Jones₄ will bear precisely the same moral responsibility for what he does as he would have borne if Black had not been ready to take steps to ensure that he do it. It would be quite unreasonable to excuse Jones₄ for his action...on the basis of the fact that he could not have done otherwise. This fact played no role at all in leading him to act as he did... Indeed, everything happened just as it would have happened without Black's presence in the situation and without his readiness to intrude into it (835-6).

So, Jones₄ could not have done otherwise, since Black was prepared to force him to act, but Jones₄ still bears moral responsibility.

Note that Black, in this example, is a stand-in for the laws of physics.

He is what ensures that Jones₄ could not do otherwise.

While Black was not impelling Jones₄ to act, he was ensuring that Jones₄ could not have done otherwise.

Yet, Jones₄ was responsible for his action.

Thus, PAP seems false.

V. Moral responsibility and coercion

Frankfurt has shown PAP to be false without impugning the more plausible claim that, "Moral responsibility is excluded by coercion" (831).

If we are truly coerced, as Jones₂ was, we are not morally culpable for our actions.

But, there are cases, like that of Jones₄, in which we can not do otherwise, and yet we are morally responsible.

Frankfurt suggests a revision of PAP:

A person is not morally responsible for what he has done if he did it *only* because he could not have done otherwise (838, italics added).

This new principle is consistent with the claim that we are not responsible when coerced.

Further, it leaves moral responsibility compatible with determinism.

We might act in a particular way and have no other options, as the determinist says.

In such a case, we act *only* because we could not have done otherwise.

Still, we are not necessarily off the hook, morally, if we wanted to act as we did.

The following may all be true: there were circumstances that made it impossible for a person to avoid doing something; these circumstances actually played a role in bringing it about that he did it, so that it is correct to say that he did it because he could not have done otherwise; the person

really wanted to do what he did; he did it because it was what he really wanted to do, so that it is not correct to say that he did what he did only because he could not have done otherwise. Under these conditions, the person may well be morally responsible for what he has done (839).

One question for Frankfurt, it seems, is whether the case of Jones₄ can be extended to a general defense of compatibilism.

Is it merely an obscure counter-example?

Or, does it demonstrate a general fault with the incompatibilist's position?

Another question, and this one is bugging me: Is Frankfurt's compatibilism any improvement on the old-fashioned Humean version?

That is, does it take seriously the metaphysical problem that our wills also seem determined?