

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

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Class 15 - Free Will III

I. Compatibilism and coercion

We have been looking mostly at compatibilist theories of free will. Frankfurt's examples attempted to make compatibilism intuitive by showing that there are situations in which one ascribes moral responsibility to agents who can not do other than what they do. Such ascriptions of responsibility depended on agents' identifications with the actions they commit. Woolfolk et al. showed that people do, in fact, ascribe more responsibility to agents when those agents identify with the actions they commit than when they do not. Indeed, subjects in the Woolfolk experiments even ascribed responsibility to agents when they were completely constrained in their actions, as long as they identified with such an action. That is, their results showed that some people did not completely excuse Bill even in cases of absolute constraint, especially in cases of high identification.

Unfortunately, subjects also ascribed responsibility to Bill in cases of low identification and absolute constraint.

We found such ascriptions (the floor in the results) puzzling, given our ordinary, intuitive belief that coercion excuses.

Either our ordinary intuition is wrong, or there is something wrong with the Woolfolk data.

In class, Jonathan wondered about the techniques used in their survey, and we spent some time discussing possible explanations for the odd floor in the responses.

Putting aside the problem of the low identification/absolute constraint responses, the rest of the Woolfolk data show pretty convincingly that the folk increase their ascriptions of moral responsibility in cases of high identification, even in cases of absolute coercion.

That result conflicts with the intuition, originally embraced by Frankfurt, that coercion excuses.

One possible response to this result is to give up the intuition that coercion excuses.

Giving up that intuition, ascribing moral responsibility even in cases of absolute constraint, seems very close to believing that we are responsible for the outcomes for which we wish, those with which we identify, even if we have no control over whether they are realized.

So, I might be held responsible for a Yankees' loss, because I wish for it.

(Woolfolk et al. do not argue that greater identification leads to greater responsibility, but if that were the case, I would be in real trouble with the Yankees.)

A theory of moral responsibility on which one's identification plays as the kind of role that one's causal influence on the action does seems counter-intuitive.

But, on a sincere reflective equilibrium, we are going to have to give up some entrenched intuitions.

It might be the case that a mature theory of moral responsibility will be best if it abandons the claim that coercion excuses.

We raised worries about whether any prescriptive conclusion could be drawn from these empirical results.

In addition, there is a prior worry about compatibilist theories, which Alysha mentioned, but which we have not yet pursued in depth.

II. Compatibilism and the definition of 'free will'

Hume, in his original defense of compatibilism, defined freedom of the will as the absence of external constraint.

An action is freely chosen, according to Hume, if it is done in accordance with our will.

An action is not freely chosen, according to Hume, when it is done under duress, as in Woolfolk's case of Bill's action under the influence of a compliance drug.

Hume does not engage the problem of whether our wills themselves are free.

More mature compatibilist theories, like Frankfurt's, do not engage the question of whether our wills are free, either.

It seems to the incompatibilist that the compatibilist begs the question of free will.

If our wills are constrained, then there is a deep sense in which we are not free, even if we are not under the influence of a compliance drug, even if we do not have a gun placed to our foreheads.

We excuse children from legal responsibility, because we think that they are not free to choose otherwise, even when they are not constrained by an external force.

Similarly, we excuse people with various mental illnesses, when we believe that the illness prevents a free choice, again even in the absence of external constraints.

We do not make such excuses for ordinary adults, who we suppose to be free.

But, the differences between adults, on the one hand, and children and people with dementia, on the other, may not be as significant as is ordinarily assumed.

As psychology progresses, we find an increasing number of phenomena considered to be mental illnesses.

Mental disorders are standardly listed by the American Psychiatric Association in the Diagnostics and Standards Manual, of DSM, the fifth edition of which is currently being prepared.

Since the original DSM was produced in 1952, the number of disorders listed has tripled, and the size of the manual has increased seven-fold.

Some characteristics, like homosexuality, have been removed from the DSM, but the overwhelming trend is toward greater diagnoses of disorders.

There is actually quite an interesting controversy over the methods being used to develop the DSM-V.]

See, for example: <http://www.slate.com/id/2223479/pagnum/all/>

As a result of increased diagnoses of mental disorders, more of our actions are seen as the result of mental predispositions than as the result of free choice.

Neuroscientific progress and advances in genetics have also increased the number of phenomena for which scientific theories can account in the absence of any role for free will.

Presumably, such scientific progress will include, eventually, substantial predictive power.

If psychological theories turn out not to be predictive, they will be abandoned by scientists.

Advances in fMRI technology have allowed machines to begin to read our thoughts by scanning our brains.

It would be difficult to maintain, as the compatibilist does, that we are free, if a computer could predict our behavior.

Scientific advances seem to provide a challenge to the compatibilist.

We reduce our ascriptions of moral responsibility when a subject's actions can be predicted.

The absence of free will implied by the predictability of our actions seems to excuse.

And, that is the essence of incompatibilism.

III. Is compatibilism or incompatibilism more intuitive?

If the above account of free will being incompatible with constraint is correct, it seems that we have entrenched incompatibilist intuitions.

We may not be willing to give them up.

In contrast, if Hume is right (as he often is), then there is something deviant about our incompatibilist intuitions.

This debate might seem merely semantic.

We have to agree on a set of terms in order to evaluate evidence.

Do we start reasoning about moral responsibility from a compatibilist position, or from an incompatibilist position?

Our ascriptions of moral responsibility might differ, depending on whether we start with one or the other.

The received view in philosophy is that incompatibilism is more intuitive, especially among the folk, than compatibilism.

Compatibilism, philosophers tend to assume, is the result of philosophical progress.

The folk don't begin as compatibilists.

But, we can all be shown that compatibilism is a solution to a problem.

That is, the burden of proof (between compatibilists and incompatibilists) is squarely on the shoulder of the compatibilist, since incompatibilism is the default view.

Another way to put the standard dialectic is this:

Incompatibilism is intuitive.

Compatibilism solves the problem of free will.

So, we have to decide whether to give up our incompatibilist intuitions, or to find a solution which, unlike compatibilism, doesn't require giving them up.

Nahmias et al. set out to show that the folk are actually naturally compatibilists.

Thus, compatibilism, rather than being the result of philosophical progress, is accepted by the folk.

If they are correct, the standard dialectic is misleading.

The burden of proof will be squarely shifted onto the incompatibilists, who would be presenting both a counter-intuitive view that leads to a problem, in contrast to the compatibilist, who would be offering an intuitive view that leads to no problem.

Further, Nahmias et al. argue that incompatibilism is more metaphysically demanding than compatibilism.

Specifically, the type of free will that is inconsistent with determinism is more tendentious.

These libertarian conceptions demand more of the world in order for free will to exist: at a minimum, indeterministic event-causal processes at the right place in the human agent, and often, additionally, agent causation (83).

We have not yet engaged the recent work on indeterminist conceptions of free will.

Indeterminists separate three different interpretations of freedom.

They might be worth a brief look, now.

IV. Three kinds of free will

There are three common interpretations of free will which are incompatible with determinism.

1. Non-causal
2. Event-causal
3. Agent-causal

On the non-causal account, the agent is the (noncausal) origin of an action.

There can be causal influences on the agent, reasons for her/him to act in one way or another, but there need not be.

An agent's free actions are uncaused.

Defenders of the non-causal account are liable to the criticism that uncaused events seem random, and thus not under our control.

On the event-causal account, the reasons that I have for acting are the causes of my action.

My choices are free, and might not have occurred in just the circumstances in which they did occur.

So, at any decision point, there are at least two possible worlds, one in which I acted in a particular way and one in which I did not.

The antecedent reasons cause my decision, but not in a deterministic way.

Defenders of event-causation are liable to a criticism that it is merely luck that determines whether I am in one or other possible world.

Lastly, some philosophers defend agent causation, as a distinct form of causal interaction.

We can not explain the agent's action in terms of antecedent causes; the agent him/herself is the cause.

The defender of agent causation agrees with the defender of event causation that there can be no uncaused events.

But, the defender of agent causation denies that my choice is merely a lucky one.

Instead, it is a volition.

Traditional defenders of free will, like Thomas Reid, defend agent-causation.

It seems to require the action of an anomalous kind of agent, outside of the ordinary causal realm.

We need not spent a lot of time dissecting the different versions of free will at issue.

The point we need to take is that each one of the interpretations of the incompatibilist's 'free will' lead to metaphysically questionable assertions: of exceptions to an otherwise causal story of the world

Nahmias et al. argue that all such versions seem metaphysically contentious when compared with the simple version of free will presented by the compatibilist.

The incompatibilist should thus shoulder the burden of proof.

If incompatibilism is not the intuitive view, or if no premises that support incompatibilist conclusions are particularly intuitive, then there seems to be little motivation for advancing an incompatibilist theory of free will (84).

V. The compatibilist folk

To judge whether the folk are incompatibilists or not, Nahmias et al. consider a prediction that would hold if they are.

- (P) When presented with a deterministic scenario, most people will judge that agents in such a scenario do not act of their own free will and are not morally responsible for their actions (86).

Then, they proceed to test (P).

They present their subjects with three descriptions of deterministic worlds, and ask whether a person is morally responsible in each description.

The first description, concerning an agent Jeremy, involves a supercomputer which can calculate future events on the basis of perfect laws of nature and a complete description of initial conditions.

The second description, concerning Jill, refers to a universe created and re-created repeatedly, always with the same results.

The third description, concerning Fred Jerkson and Barney Kinderson, involves genetic programming.

In all three versions, a significant majority claim that the agents acted of their own free will.

Thus, Nahmias et al. conclude that compatibilism is the default intuition of the folk.

VI. Normativity, prescriptivity, and the burden of proof

The opinions of the folk, of course, need not be correct.

The Nahmias data provide descriptions of how we ascribe moral responsibility.

But, responsibility is a prescriptive notion.

It would seem like a fact/value error to conclude that incompatibilism could be refuted by such evidence.

Obviously, these results do not thereby falsify incompatibilism. But they certainly raise a significant challenge for the common claim that ordinary people start out with incompatibilist intuitions and that, hence, the burden is on compatibilists to defend theories purported to be significant revisions of ordinary beliefs and practices. Rather, given this preliminary data, we suggest the burden is on incompatibilists to motivate a theory of free will that appears to be more metaphysically demanding than ordinary intuitions demand (89).

Instead of arguing that their results show incompatibilism to be false, Nahmias et al. use them to demand that philosophers cease claiming intuitive primacy for incompatibilism.

Further, philosophers must consider such results if they intend to make any inferences about the folk's beliefs about moral responsibility.

VII. Incompatibilist responses

Nahmias et al. consider incompatibilist objections to their work in §4.

Perhaps there is other evidence that supports (P).

One might wonder whether the Nahmias experiment legitimately tests what they want it to test.

One interesting question is whether their results are influenced by the factors which gave Woolfolk et al.

their odd floor.

In Woolfolk, factors external to the content of the question appear to lead subjects to ascribe responsibility to individuals in cases in which such ascriptions are implausible.

Could such factors have been relevant in the Nahmias study?

Other responses that Nahmias et al. consider include the claim that there are more basic intuitions that underlie (P), accepted by the folk, even if (P) is not intuitive.

Such intuitions might involve our choices, and our control.

Nahmias et al. did not ask about choice and control, but about responsibility in a determined world.

They argue that incompatibilists can do their own experiments.

Lastly, perhaps the role of the claim that people are naturally incompatibilists plays no important role in incompatibilist's arguments.

This last response seems particularly salient, especially if one is pursuing a coherent theory of free will and moral responsibility.

There is no guarantee that the view of the folk are coherent.

Indeed, the case of free will seems to be paradigmatic of a philosophical problem that engenders incoherent views among the folk.

Nahmias et al. seem to want to pursue a contextualist theory of free will, one that avoids a unique solution to the problem, but which allows for conflicting views to coexist.

According to the contextualist,

...there are in fact a number of properties which, in different contexts, people mean when they use the concept of free will... When people use 'free will' in contexts and ways intimately tied up with practices of moral responsibility, sometimes it expresses one content, compatible with determinism, and other times - notably, in philosophical discussions when the criteria of applicability become more stringent - it expresses another content, incompatible with determinism (94-5).

The contextualist, perhaps led by the lack of a unifying folk theory of free will, gives up looking for a univocal theory.

Instead, the contextualist tries to find accounts of the different, incompatible notions, and various theories which apply in various contexts.

If the folk theory of free will is contextualist, then any univocal theory of free will is automatically counter-intuitive.

In contrast, whether our wills are free could not vary with context, unless we are varying the meaning of 'free will'.

At least insofar as we are interested in a metaphysical theory of free will, we must have a unique answer.

We can not be both free and not free, on pain of contradiction

We can be free, in some senses, and not free, in others.

In our next reading, the last one mainly on free will, from Nichols and Knobe, we will look at some evidence for contextualism.