

Incompatibilism

This handout follows the handout on 'Determinism'. You should read that handout first.

HARD DETERMINISM AND LIBERTARIANISM

Many people's first impression is that if determinism is true, we have no free will. This position is 'incompatibilism'. It has two options, 'hard' determinism and 'libertarianism':

'Hard' determinism:

If determinism is true, we have no free will.

Determinism is true.

Therefore, we have no free will

Libertarianism:

1. If determinism is true, we have no free will.
- 2a. We have free will.
- 3a. Therefore, determinism is false.

Libertarianism can be challenged by hard determinism (which rejects Premise 2a) or by 'compatibilism' (which rejects Premise 1). There is a separate handout on 'Compatibilism'. In this handout, we will only look at the debate between libertarianism and hard determinism.

Libertarianism standardly claims that when we choose to act, we cause certain events (e.g. movements of our body) to happen, but nothing causes us to cause these events. Our power to choose – the will – is not caused to decide one way or another. Of course, our choices could be influenced, but to be influenced is not to be caused.

We can understand these influences in two ways. First, our desires: these can sometimes feel like 'forces', pushing us to do something, e.g. hunger. If we could not stand back from our desires and reflect on them, then what we did would be caused. And this is perhaps how it is for animals. For human beings, though, we are able to refrain from acting on our desires (within limits, anyway). So our desires become influences, but not determining causes. When we act, we can give reasons for why we chose what we did. These reasons are also influences, but not causes. For example, 'I gave him the money because he needed it'. His need is my reason, but I chose freely to give him the money. A free will responds to reasons, but is not caused to choose by either reasons or desires.

As well as this argument about the nature of will, that we feel free is very important. We feel we could choose this or that, we could act or not act. Nothing forces us to choose one way or another.

OBJECTIONS

The experience of free will as an illusion

The hard determinist will argue that feeling free is not good evidence for free will.

Suppose someone had brain tumour which repeatedly caused them to drink, but also

caused them to feel this was a free choice. If we ask the person, they say they are choosing whenever they have a drink; yet when we remove the brain tumour, they stop drinking so much. It is possible, then, that our choices are caused yet they feel free.

Hard determinism accepts that we think we have free will because we have certain experiences of deliberating and choosing that feel or seem 'free'. When making a choice, it does not feel as if we have to do just one thing. It feels as if we could do any of several actions. But if we don't have free will, then this experience is an illusion. It may even be an unavoidable illusion. For example, believing that hard determinism is true does not remove the experience of making a choice.

How can this be? Could we be subject to an unavoidable illusion, or can we use our experience of free will to argue that determinism is wrong? Determinists can point out that there are many illusions that we suffer from, and that some of them are unavoidable. For example, there are unavoidable perceptual illusions, such as the Müller-Lyer lines. There are also 'cognitive illusions', such as the gambler's fallacy – if you roll a die repeatedly and don't get a '6', you can think that the chances of a 6 on the next throw are increased – 'it's got to come up'. But the chances haven't changed. The illusion that we have free will is like perceptual illusions, just a result of how our psychology works.

Randomness

A second objection is that if our choices are uncaused, then they must be random. Free will means being able to control what we choose. If our choices are random, then we don't have free will. We need our choices to be caused, because causation is what makes events ordered and regular.

Thomas Reid responded that our choices are caused, but that

'The cause of the volition is the man that willed it'. ('Letter to James Gregory' in *Philosophical Works*, p. 88)

All events have causes. And making a decision is indeed an event. But libertarianism claims that we cause our choices. Because I am the cause of my choice, and nothing causes me to cause it, it is free.

A second response rejects the claim that uncaused choices must be random. Causation is not the only account of order and regularity. Our choices are ordered and regular because they respond to reasons.

We could, however, argue that reasons influence choices by causing them. However, we could then argue that this kind of causation is not deterministic, and is not subject to the laws of nature. So our choices are free, not determined.

But to this we can object that we have no concept of causation without causal necessity. Hume says that if someone manages to define a cause without any necessary connexion to its effect, he will grant that libertarianism could be true (*Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, p. 159).

Science

But there is a further objection we can bring against libertarianism. There is no scientific evidence that when we make a choice, something happens that has no physical cause.

For example, if I voluntarily raise my arm, neurones in my brain fire to contract my arm muscles. What causes the neurones to fire? According to libertarianism, I (not some physical event) am the cause of my choices, and so of the neurones firing. Yet nothing different appears to happen in the brain from the usual sequence of physical events.

We can respond that the evidence is not yet very good. We know very little about the brain and may not be able to tell when something different is happening. But this is still open to the objection that to say there is no (physical) cause is to fly in the face of the project of science, which is to discover physical causes.

HUMAN DECISION MAKING AS OCCUPYING A SPECIAL PLACE OUTSIDE OF THE NATURAL ORDER

One way to defend libertarianism is in terms of dualism. Dualism claims the mind is separate from the body or brain. It is not a physical thing, but completely different. The view that persons are souls is a form of dualism. We have free will because we are not completely physical, but have a non-physical mind. Making a choice is not a physical process. Because our will does not fall under the laws of nature, it can be free (if psychological determinism is false). Science only applies to physical causation, and free will is not a physical phenomenon.

According to dualism, then, making a choice is a non-physical cause which can have physical effects (such as events in the brain or movements of the body). First, this still challenges science, which aims to explain all physical events in terms of physical causes. Second, how can something non-physical cause something physical? To move your muscles, certain neurones in your brain need to 'fire' (send a signal). To do this, chemicals called neurotransmitters must move between neurones. To make anything physical move takes energy. Since your will is not physical, it does not have the physical energy needed to move neurotransmitters. Furthermore, if your neurotransmitters move without a physical cause, this breaks the Law of the Conservation of Energy, which says that the total quantity of matter/energy in the universe always remains the same. If your will causes your neurones to fire, this doesn't use up physical energy, but it does create movement, which is energy. So this creates new energy!

FREE WILL REQUIRES A GAP IN UNIVERSAL CAUSALITY

We can say that free will requires that, given the state of the universe (past and present) and the laws of nature, there is more than one way the future may be in terms of what I do or choose next. Looking back on a decision, without anything being different in the entire history of the universe, I could have chosen differently and changed the direction of the future. But determinism says that the past state of the universe + the laws of nature determines a unique future state of the universe. So to have free will, I must either break the laws of nature or change the past. Since I can't do either, I don't have free will unless determinism is false.

Free will and quantum theory

One interpretation of quantum theory claims that the sub-atomic world is indeterminate. Some philosophers argue that this means that causation cannot be deterministic. There are no deterministic sub-atomic causal laws, and all causal laws rest ultimately on sub-atomic causal laws (all physical events involve sub-atomic events). Because causation is

not deterministic, then determinism is false. (This view doesn't say that free will depends on a gap in causation, but that causation is not deterministic.)

We can object, first, that this is not how scientists understand the relation between macro-level causal laws and sub-atomic indeterminacy. They are quite happy to say that causal laws at the macro-level (like burst pipes and wet floors) are deterministic.

Second, sub-atomic indeterminacy can't be enough for free will, since it applies to everything physical. What a billiard ball does next when struck is just as indeterminate as what we do. So we will need some further account of what is needed for free will.

Finally, if sub-atomic uncertainty affects the macro-level, this would undermine agency. Your action would be random, undetermined by anything – including your choice. But we do choose how to act. Whatever secures this reliability between choice and action undermines the view that sub-atomic uncertainty gives us free will. [Margin: Can quantum theory support the claim that we have free will?]

NIETZSCHE

In *Beyond the Evil* (§§ 21, 22, 36), Nietzsche argues that our understanding of both free will and determinism are mistaken. We should get rid of the ideas 'free will' and 'unfree will'. The only question is whether the will is strong or weak. First, the will is subject to causal forces and causal history. Those who argue for free will have a vain belief in their own powers. On the other hand, if someone thinks their will is causally constrained, this is just their inadequacy in imposing their will on the world and their inability to take responsibility for what they do. Neither position is honest or realistic.

Nietzsche then proposes a metaphysical theory that radically disagrees with science. First, he argues that there is no necessity in nature. There are no laws that physical things obey. This idea is no more than our interpretation of nature, the result of a desire for democracy and equality. Science is being driven by our moral values.

Second, the entirety of nature, all physical events, can be understood as expressions of will. Not our personal will, of course. Our sense of will is the will that underlies everything seen from the 'inside'. If there could be an inside sense to physical events, it would be the same, a sense of 'imposing' one's will, making something happen.

We can object that Nietzsche hasn't given us an argument for thinking his metaphysics is correct. But even if it is, he does not defend free will in any traditional form. There is no distinction in kind between me and a billiard ball, although my will might be more developed in some sense. This is as close to determinism as it is to free will, which is probably the position Nietzsche intended to defend.