

The Only Way Is Compatibilism

by Robert Stone

The aim of this essay is (a) to show that the compatibilist view of free will and determinism, most famously expressed by Hume (68-69) is the purest common sense, and (b) to discuss various objections to it.

What is free will?

There is an obvious distinction to be made between those of our actions over which we have no choice and those which we do because we choose to do them. When I fall over in the street, I travel downwards towards the pavement rather than upwards towards the sky – regardless of any wish I might have to fall upwards. But when I take a biscuit from the plate, I do so because I choose to; had I not wanted to eat the biscuit (or to take it for some other reason), I would not have done so.

The crux of the ‘free will’ debate is this: is my decision to eat the biscuit rather than not to eat it (a) caused/determined by the history of the universe up to that point, (b) random, or (c) something else?

On (a) the deterministic view, the history of the universe includes such things as the development of my personality to that point, including my moral character, as well as my mood and the thoughts that happen to be in my mind at the time. Given all of that, my decision is caused by the whole range of relevant factors. Of course, the decision might have been different if at least one of the contributory causes had been different; I could have chosen differently in that ‘hypothetical’ sense. And it is true that I could/would have acted differently *if* I had chosen to. But, as van Inwagen demonstrates (704-6), the determinist thesis – that the state of the world at any moment, combined with the laws of physics, entails the state of the world at any other moment – entails that my choice *could not have been* different if *all* the circumstances had been the same – as is the case with everything that happens in the inanimate world too. So those who believe in a deterministic universe, and regard people as beings entirely subject to its physical laws, believe that all our decisions are determined, and, in the ‘categorical’ sense, could not have been otherwise. Stephen Hawking sums up the position from the point of view of a scientist (32): “So it seems that we are no more than biological machines and that free will is just an illusion.”

The case of (b) randomness has received a boost from Quantum Mechanics (QM) in the last hundred years. It seems, at least on one interpretation of QM, that there are events at the level of tiny particles that happen at random. It is not normally supposed that that randomness extends into the world above the level of particles,

but the walls of determinism have been seriously breached. It is now believed that there are areas of biology where QM may be of non-trivial significance. (As everything is composed of particles which are subject to QM, it follows that QM has significance for everything in that trivial sense.) The neurons in the brain are far too large to be subject to the randomness of QM, but there are aspects of brain activity where individual molecules are in play and QM may kick in. I have often heard people claiming that the randomness discovered by QM reinstates ‘free will’ as a respectable doctrine, though it is hard to see how randomness has any connexion with the idea of freedom. Peter Ulric Tse, a neuroscientist, recently argued that the passing of signals from one neuron to another can in some instances be a matter of chance; and it is the combination of cause and randomness that somehow constitutes a middle way between thoroughgoing determinism and randomness. He concludes rather curiously that, in at least some decisions, we may therefore have ‘free will’ (Tse: 28-29). Whether we plump for a thoroughgoing determinism (a), or allow for some random behaviour (b) even in the world of ordinary-sized objects (like our brains), we are left with the conclusion that our decisions are either determined by the previous history of the universe or arise from a mixture of that and randomness. Although these two possibilities seem perfectly plausible, many find it hard to accept either of them. This is why some people look for a ‘Third Way’ (c), in which our decisions are neither caused nor random nor a mixture of cause and randomness. Why do they do that?

There seem to me two main motives for rejecting the determinism-and-or-random view (henceforth D+R). (1) It seems not to accord with our actual experience of making decisions, even to reduce our dignity as decision-making persons; the appearance of free will is seen to be dismissed as an ‘illusion’. (2) It plays havoc with our attitude to morality, where people are considered responsible for their actions and deserving of blame and censure; how can they be, if all their decisions are either random or determined by previous events, rather than ‘under our control’?

An example

So let us look first at the decision-making process as seen from the inside, i.e. by the person consciously making the decision. Then we can judge if it seems to fit the D+R pattern. I like chocolate biscuits, and until recently I ate them with gay abandon. Then I had a routine medical check-up, which revealed that my cholesterol level is too high. Chocolate biscuits are regarded as something to be generally avoided, according to the British Heart Foundation’s cholesterol chart. Someone offers me a chocolate biscuit at tea. I then have a number of things going on, or forming a background, in my mind, of which these are a few: (a) I like the taste of chocolate biscuits, (b) my instinct is to accept any food offered, (c) I want to live a long, healthy life, (d) I believe that high cholesterol can lead to a heart attack or stroke which might make my life shorter and less healthy, (e) I believe that chocolate biscuits tend to increase cholesterol, (f) I doubt that one chocolate biscuit now would make a critical difference, (g) I believe that reducing cholesterol requires the kind of discipline that eschews chocolate biscuits entirely, and that making exceptions every time it’s inconvenient is a silly way to proceed, (h) I don’t want to seem impolite by

refusing what is offered, (i) I don't want to seem boring by making my health/diet an issue in conversation, (j) I do happen to feel rather hungry at the moment, (k) I may – if my hostess is patient – weigh up the respective merits of items a to j . . .

These things are a mixture of beliefs, feelings, general attitudes, character traits (selfish and moral, recent and inculcated, personal and cultural). If the dilemma were to arise, my decision would depend on which of those thoughts or feelings struck me at the time as most compelling; if I hadn't eaten for 24 hours, or if I had been dieting strictly and successfully for 3 months and so knew I had the discipline to continue, I might be swayed by the politeness/hunger factors rather than the health/discipline ones. I would make the decision that seemed 'right' in the circumstances, taking all the factors that occurred to me into consideration.

It may be that, in the case of some decisions (those more weighty than biscuit-taking), I think longer and harder about the arguments, weighing them up carefully, so that I don't forget anything relevant. But the outcome is still the same: I plump for whichever course of action strikes me as being right, the one which strikes me as being supported by the weight of arguments and/or most in accordance with my feelings. Some decisions are instant, depending more on feelings/instincts than reason, some are reached after long deliberation.

That, one might say, is 'free will'. Not only can I do whichever of the two options I choose (no one is force-feeding me), but my choice is free (unless I am clinically addicted to biscuits). I can quite easily take a biscuit, knowing full well that it is not healthy; or I can decline the biscuit, knowing full well that it would have satisfied my hunger and my hostess. But why do I make one choice rather than the other? I cannot see beyond the two possibilities stated earlier. Maybe the choice is random, though it doesn't seem so. More likely, either the pro-biscuit factors outweigh the anti-biscuit ones at that particular moment, and incline me to take the biscuit, or vice versa. In the latter case, my choice – freely made (no one is controlling me) – is determined by the balance of factors on one side over those on the other.

This analysis of a decision – with a multiplicity of factors competing, and the balance of power determining the final decision – seems to me entirely plausible, from the point of view of the conscious decider, me. I make the decision freely (there is no matrix-like 'illusion' involved), and the decision is determined by all those competing factors. To say that this makes us 'no more than biological machines', as Hawking claimed above, is just to express determinism in a pejorative way. So why do some people find determinism difficult to accept?

Problems

1. If a decision is *determined*, it is thought that, by definition, it cannot be *free*. But in that case what would a truly 'free' decision consist of? Perhaps there is a kind of super-me, or 'will', that presides over the decision and can decide to act regardless of the balance of power as it appears to me. If that is simply me reflecting on the pros and cons before making a decision, then it repeats what I said above. But if, for the sake of argument, we think that there really is

something *extra*, which can (a) see all the arguments and other factors acting on me, including my considered view that they persuade me to choose a particular action, but (b) decide to jump the other way, the question is simply pushed back one step: why, when surveying the issue from above, do I (super-me) make one decision rather than the other? Is it because of some other factor not included in the original list? If so, then that factor is as much a determining cause of the decision as any of the others. If, for example, I had an existentialist axe to grind, and wanted to prove that I had the power to decide one way even though the factors on the other side seemed to me at the time more powerful, that urge to choose the ‘wrong’ option would be heavily influenced by that existential axe; the latter would have become a factor in the decision and switched the balance of power to the opposite side. Is the super-decision perhaps not determined but random? Well, perhaps. But that merely confirms the notion that decisions are either determined or random. It is difficult to see any coherent definition of free will that would not make the ultimate decision either determined or random; no further element in the decision-making would make any sense.

2. Some might argue that, if our decision-making is determined, that leaves us on the same level as animals. My first reaction is to think, “So what?” It is not an argument against a view of the facts to say that it diminishes our dignity as persons. But let us take it seriously. Where animals differ from human beings, and indeed where we differ from each other and from ourselves at other times, is in the range of possible choices that occur to them and the ability, or time, to reflect on the pros and cons of those choices. Offer a biscuit to a dog, and it is highly unlikely that the possibility of declining it will occur to him; even more unlikely is he to have any relevant beliefs or to think of arguments for and against eating it. Offer me a biscuit, and – if I’m alert – not only will my instincts come into play (as with the dog) but various beliefs and wishes will occur to me (whether I like it or not), along with reflection on them, which will influence, or rather determine, the decision. Among these thoughts there may well be what Frankfurt calls ‘second-order’ desires, where I wish my desires or aims were different from what they are (Frankfurt 683). He doubts if animals have these. But however complex the desires, or desires about desires, that I have, they are either determined or random, and the choice that results from them must likewise be determined or random or a combination.
3. Then there is the moral issue. If our decisions to give money to the poor or to murder innocent citizens are determined, then it is hard (a) to treat people as ‘responsible’ for their decisions and actions, and (b) to praise or blame them. This view is stated baldly by Parfit in his discussion of Kant’s view of the matter: “(A) Our acts cannot be wrong unless we ought to have acted differently. (B) ‘Ought’ implies ‘can’. We ought to have acted differently only if we could have acted differently” (Parfit 258). Although this leads Kant, who accepts determinism in the phenomenal world, to locate our free decisions in the noumenal world outside space and time – thus releasing them (possibly) from determinism – my own reaction is, again, so what? A view about a matter of fact cannot stand or

fall according to whether it suits our moral purpose. But, again, let us take it seriously. Believing, as I do, that my decisions are determined by everything that went before, I am still perfectly happy to take responsibility for my actions and to be blamed for the bad ones. Is that irrational? If I take that chocolate biscuit under the misapprehension that it is an apple – because my hostess has drugged me into a hallucinatory state – I do not afterwards expect to be blamed for my action; but if I take the biscuit in normal circumstances, knowing what I do, I would take the doctor's censure on the chin.

Part of the background against which I make the decision is the whole moral framework into which I have been indoctrinated: that I am responsible for those actions which I take in full knowledge of the facts and that I can be blamed or censured for my choices. That framework, being part of the background, is part of the cause of my decision and so my responsibility/merit is one of the logical effects. We do in fact treat certain wrongdoers leniently if we regard them as not being sufficiently aware of the facts, or of possible alternatives, or of the conventional moral framework: sleepwalkers, those who have been unknowingly drugged, those with dementia. Their decisions are caused primarily *not by the knowledge and other mental conditions which constitute the person in his normal state*, but by extraneous factors – drugs, sleep, brain decay. We regard a person as responsible for his actions if the actions (and choices) are caused by the person himself, i.e. by the mental states that normally make up that person (along with the circumstances), and as not responsible if something has neutralised or replaced those mental states. When I, in my normal state of mind, take the biscuit, I am responsible for that action. And, if it is wrong, then I – the person whose constitutive mental states were the primary cause of the choice – am deemed guilty.

4. A fourth problem some find is that they do not regard 'reasons' as 'causes'. When I have *reasons* for declining the biscuit, that is a fundamentally different thing from something *causing* me to decline it, such as paralysis of the jaw. Well, it is true that the reasons which people have for doing things are of quite a different kind from the causes of inanimate events, such as the raindrops that make the road wet. But they are surely still causes, albeit of a unique kind. If I decline a biscuit for a reason, then the reason is at least part of the cause of my declining it. As Davidson puts it, in discussing this question (11), "If . . . causal explanations are 'wholly irrelevant to the understanding we seek' of human action, then we are without an analysis of the 'because' in 'He did it because . . .', where we go on to name a reason." The action would be uncaused.
5. Finally, it has been argued that mental events inhabit a different world from physical events; determinism may be a plausible theory as regards the physical world, but the mental world is separate and so not susceptible to determinism. Well, leaving aside the immense difficulty of conceiving of a world of mental events that are (a) quite separate from the physical world but (b) causing and being caused by physical events, and ignoring the evidence from neuroscience that there is at least a correlation between mental events and physical events in

the brain, the situation for mental events is really no different from the one I outlined. Any mental event, like my biscuit decision, is either determined by earlier mental events, or it is not, in which case it happens at random.

In conclusion, Hume is more or less spot on. Although he excludes the possibility of randomness from his world (69), his view that we make decisions that are both free and determined, and that there is no incompatibility between those two things, is not only coherent but also in full accordance with what seems to go on in our minds. ‘Free Will versus Determinism’ is not a problem. Let’s get over it!

Bibliography

Davidson, Donald (2001) *Essays on Actions and Events*, Oxford 2001

Frankfurt, Harry (1971) *Freedom of the will and the concept of the person* in *Metaphysics: a guide and anthology*, ed Crane and Farkas, Oxford 2004, pp 682-694

Hawking, Stephen (2010) *Grand Design* London 2010

Hume, David (1777): *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, ed P Millican, Oxford 2007

Parfit, Derek (2011) *On What Matters* (Vol 1) Oxford 2011

Tse, Peter Ulric (2013) *Free Will Unleashed* in *New Scientist* 8 June 2013, pp 28-29

van Inwagen, Peter (1975) *The incompatibility of free will and determinism* in *Metaphysics: a guide and anthology*, ed Crane and Farkas, Oxford 2004, pp 695-706

Word count (excluding bibliography): 2985