

### **How might free will be compatible with determinism?**

Free will is the power or ability to make choices for which one can be held morally responsible. Determinism is the thesis that at any one time the universe has exactly one physically possible future. Compatibilism is the thesis that we can have free will in a deterministic world.

Moral responsibility is what makes an agent a person – someone who is worthy of praise or blame for their actions. But if the person is part of the natural, causally closed world, the causal chain of their actions stretches back in time to before they were born. How then can those actions be considered sufficiently free to make the agent morally responsible.

This matter is still unresolved amongst philosophers, but this essay will argue that, though a freedom of choice that is ultimately uncaused cannot be had by an agent in a deterministic world, a lesser freedom, that still allows moral responsibility, but is consistent with determinism, is possible.

#### Determinism

Whether or not the world is actually determined is not known with certainty. It is an empirical matter upon which scientific opinion has varied over time. After the time of Newton, it was held that determinism did hold and that, with sufficient computing power and knowing the present state of every particle in the universe, by applying Newton's laws, their precise position and momentum for all past and future times could be calculated. With the advent of quantum theory, physicists came to believe that at the microscopic level determinism broke down and particles behaved acausally, thus introducing a degree of randomness into the world. Though this is still held by most physicists, some believe that it will not be the final position and search for hidden variables that would reintroduce complete determinism. The compatibilist seeks to show that free will would still be possible even in a world that the best science deemed determined, and, indeed, claim further that determinism in fact gives a better account of free will than one that relies on indeterminacy and chance.

#### Free Will

Free will is a contested term and is difficult to define precisely, because its definition is part of the debate as to whether or not we have it. Very loosely, it concerns choosing, though not all philosophers regard choice as relevant to it. But the reason for its importance, is that it confers an agent with moral responsibility. Animals and small children are agents that have desires, but we don't hold them responsible in the way we do mature persons. We may be unhappy that a small child or a clumsy cat has smashed a valuable vase; we might even, in the case of the child, try to correct her behaviour; but we would not feel resentment or indignation in the way we would towards a careless adult. Yet it seems to be the fact that we regard a person as responsible that makes them valuable in our eyes. It is that we can meaningfully regard them with what Strawson calls 'reactive attitudes' - gratitude, love, respect, resentment, indignation and forgiveness (Griffith p.34) - that gives them a special status; one that makes them deeply different from non-human animals. It's for this reason that the free will debate is so important. The way in which we regard persons and the way we want to be regarded by persons is enormously important to us - something we regard as the glue that holds societies together and as essential to our essence as humans. Were we to become convinced that it was an illusion, we fear we would have lost something of importance.

But how are we to reconcile a world - which at any one time has only one possible future; where the past together with the laws of nature completely determine the future; and of which we, as biological creatures, are a totally integral and causally determined part – with the idea that we are nonetheless persons with sufficient freedom to be considered morally responsible. More specifically, what is the kind of freedom that we need to have.

### Compatibilism

Classically, compatibilists (such as Hobbes and Hume) have defined free will as the unhindered ability to do what we want, whilst conceding that it remains the case that we are determined to want that that we want. It can be argued though, that more than this is required, and that we are not free unless we are able to choose between alternatives. But a counter argument to this is that, so long as ‘I could have done otherwise’ means ‘I would have done otherwise, had I so wished’, then it was my own choice that prevented me from doing otherwise, and what I did was of my own free will.

The classical compatibilist’s position is undermined by consideration of psychological factors, such as delusions, mental illnesses, psychological traumas etc, as we intuit that these render the agent unfree, even though he is physically unhindered from doing what he wants.

This has led to the notion of mesh theories (Griffin p.53), which hold that freedom consists in an appropriate mesh between various elements of an action and an agent’s inner states – how our choices and actions relate to our inner states. If we are able to act on our own desires and reasons – to be whom and what we want to be - we have all the freedom we care about – the kind needed for moral responsibility.

Frankfurt argued that what is distinctive about persons is their ability to reflect upon their desires – and to decide whether or not they want to have them. This implies second-order desires – desires for desires. The will, according to Frankfurt, is a certain kind of desire, and desires about one’s will are second-order volitions. If we do what we want, and the want is something we identify with and take ownership of, then we have the relevant kind of freedom (Griffith p.56).

A problem with this position is that it can lead to a regression into third and fourth order volitions. Furthermore, and more importantly, it can be undermined by considerations of manipulation, such as brain-washing, hypnosis and the futuristic notion of controlling brain implants.

A sophisticated theory of compatibilism, known as semi-compatibilism, has been proposed by Fischer & Ravizza, and claims that causal determinism is compatible with moral responsibility, regardless of whether or not it rules out the sort of freedom that involves alternative possibilities (Fischer&Ravizza). It insists that the mechanism of choice be sensitive to reasons and that it be owned by the agent, and it makes a distinction between what it calls *guidance control* and *regulative control*. The insight for the distinction came from the scenario Frankfurt contrived (known as Frankfurt-style cases) to show that free will does not require there to be alternative possibilities (Griffith p.43). In this we’re asked to imagine, say, that John wants to kill Bill and Joe wants John to kill Bill, and that he, Joe, has the power to know whether John will go through with the killing, and to manipulate him into doing so, should he falter. John kills Bill of his own volition and without any intervention from Joe, and is therefore responsible for the deed. Yet it was always certain that he would kill Bill in one way or another. He was therefore responsible, despite there being no alternative possibility. In the Fischer & Ravizza argument we’re asked to

consider, say, that a learner driver, with an instructor who can manipulate dual controls, approaches a right turn and executes the turn. But had she considered turning left, the instructor would have over-ridden her action and caused the car to turn right. She therefore turned the car right, but the car would have turned right anyway – there was no alternative possibility. In this case she exercised *guidance control* (she actually guided the car to the right), but lacked *regulative control* (turning to the left was not possible). Fischer & Ravizza argue that to be morally responsible an agent requires only *guidance control* for *responding to reasons*, provided he also takes responsibility for the response mechanism, by which they mean he must ‘accept that (he is an) apt candidate for the reactive attitudes’ (Fischer&Ravizza, p.6). By *reason responsiveness* they mean that the agent must be regularly responsive to reasons and at least weakly reactive to them.

Semi-compatibilism is a sophisticated theory and, by requiring that the agent own the mechanism of his reason responsiveness in a way that is consistent with determinism, avoids the manipulation criticism (brain-washing, hypnosis etc.) that undermines other theories. It is a compelling argument for moral responsibility being compatible with determinism.

### Conclusion

Free will is often understood to be a power, such that, at the moment of choosing, an agent is able to opt between alternatives, irrespective of his past, his motivations, desires and other causal factors. Such a power, in a determined world, is not possible. Nevertheless, a form of volition – semi-compatibilism – that is compatible with determinism and yet preserves moral responsibility, remains possible.

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