

Free Will and Determinism I: Hard Determinism and Libertarianism

PHI1PPR: Philosophical Problems

Week 10 – May 16th

Lecture Plan

- Part One:
 - The Problem of Free Will
- Part Two:
 - Hard Determinism
- Part Three:
 - Libertarianism

Part One

The Problem of Free Will

The Appearance of Freedom

- As with the mind, one could argue that people have an intimate connection to the experience of making choices
 - It is something we do everyday, from the mundane to the momentous, from the immediate to the protracted
 - All have the experience of weighing reasons and making decisions
 - Moreover, most would admit that they could have chosen differently
 - There is nothing that forced me to wear one outfit over another, or have this food for breakfast rather than something else
- Thus, one could say that we directly and intuitively feel that we act freely
 - Like the obviousness of having a mind, being free is equally apparent

The Rise of the Scientific Understanding of the World

- In addition, most would concede that the advances in the natural sciences have profoundly transformed the understanding of ourselves and our place in nature
 - It is commonplace to consider ourselves another part of nature, evolved like all the other life on earth, and composed of the same physical stuff that is found throughout the universe
 - This means that we are not excluded from being subject to the laws of nature
 - And if the laws of nature determine the actions of the other parts of the universe, then it does so for humans as well
- So, although we may learn about the scientific nature of the world and ourselves differently than we do about our own capacities to act, it is still plausible to say that it is equally apparent that we are just another aspect of the natural world

The Emergence of the Conflict

- Therefore, we are presented with two plausible and compelling beliefs:
 - *Belief in human freedom* – For many of the acts in which people engage, they are freely pursued by those agents
 - *Belief in the natural conception of humans* – The human being is a natural organism that is subject to the same physical pressures as any other naturally occurring entity or thing
- Nevertheless, as plausible as these two beliefs are, they appear to be in conflict with one another
 - Being able to act freely seemingly requires being able to be the originator of acts, that is, it requires being in control of certain aspects of oneself
 - On the other hand, being subject to the laws of nature appears to preclude being in control since the laws are what does the directing and not the subject

The Problem of Free Will and Determinism

- This conflict between these two reasonable beliefs is the central core of the problem of free will and determinism
 - We want to accept both, but this seems to lead to inconsistency
- The problem is composed of two separate questions:
 - 1) Is causal determinism true?
 - 2) Is determinism compatible with free will?
 - Most consider question 1 to be an empirical question that will be answered by the sciences
 - Question 2 is thought to be the more properly philosophical question, as it doesn't seem to be responsive to empirical evidence either way
 - Also, attempts to answer question 2 can be carried out independently of attempts to answer question 1
 - » Thus, all answers take a hypothetical form: “If determinism is true, then...”

Possible Positions regarding the conflict

- Within the free will and determinism debate, there have been three standard positions that are the outcome of answering the two questions in a particular way:

	Free will and determinism are incompatible	Free will and determinism are compatible
Determinism is true	Hard determinism	Soft determinism
Determinism is false	Libertarianism	???

Is Determinism True?

- This week, we are going to be discussing two *incompatibilist* positions, i.e., positions that think determinism is incompatible with free will
 - Since they agree on question 2, their disagreement lies with question 1, whether determinism is true
 - Those who think determinism is true are called *hard determinists*
 - Those who think determinism is false are called *libertarians*
 - Not to be confused with *political* libertarians

Part Two

Hard Determinism

What is Hard Determinism?

- The position of hard determinism is made up of two claims:
 - 1) Determinism is true
 - 2) Determinism is incompatible with free will
- Therefore, one must conclude, as a hard determinist, that free will does not exist
- If one further believes that the kind of free will that determinism rules out is also required for moral responsibility, then the hard determinist must also deny that anyone is morally responsible
 - The severity of this view has caused it to remain unpopular amongst philosophers, but this doesn't mean that it's false!

The Nature of Determinism

- But what exactly is the hard determinist claiming to be true in his/her acceptance of determinism?
 - The first idea behind determinism is that every event has a cause
 - The second idea behind determinism is that every causal relation follows the laws of nature
 - *Determinism* – For any state of the world at some time (T1) and some other state of the world at some other time (T2), the conjunction of the state of the world at T1 plus the laws of nature necessitates the state of the world at T2
 - A more intuitive way to put this is to say that determinism states that how the world will be is fixed by past events and the laws of nature
 - Is not the same thing as predictability and fatalism

Arguments in Favor of Hard Determinism

- With the preceding conception of determinism, why think that hard determinism is correct?
- For present purposes, let us assume that free will is incompatible with determinism
 - Thus, the question becomes, why think that determinism is true?
 - Overwhelmingly, the primary evidence in favor of determinism for the hard determinist is the modern scientific worldview and its materialist metaphysics

Determined Beings

- For our hard determinist representative, Baron D'Holbach, the modern (the 18th century for him) scientific conception of the world is thoroughly materialist
- This means that humans are no exceptions
- Furthermore, the material world follows deterministic laws as described in Newtonian mechanics
- Therefore, human beings are determined material entities just like any other physical system



The Illusion of Free Will

- For D'Holbach, despite being determined, our belief in our free agency persists:
 - “Man’s life is a line that nature commands him to describe upon the surface of the earth, without his ever being able to swerve from it, even for an instant. He is born without his own consent; his organization does in nowise depend upon himself; his ideas come to him involuntarily; his habits are in the power of those who cause him to contract them; he is unceasingly modified by causes, whether visible or concealed, over which he has no control, which necessarily regulate his mode of existence, give the hue to his way of thinking, and determine his manner of acting. He is good or bad, happy or miserable, wise or foolish, reasonable or irrational, without his will being for any thing in these various states. Nevertheless, in despite of the shackles by which he is bound, it is pretended he is a free agent, or that independent of the causes by which he is moved, he determines his own will, and regulates his own condition.” (*System of Nature*)
 - Free will does not exist yet we continue to believe that it is real, which means that belief in free will is an illusion

Hard Determinism and moral Responsibility

- One difficulty in believing hard determinism is the consequence it would have for morality
 - Since moral responsibility is incompatible with being determined, then the hard determinists must accept that no one is morally responsible (as long as one does not redefine moral responsibility)
 - But can we really live our lives without making moral judgements and holding people morally responsible?
 - Some hard determinists or hard determinist sympathizers try to find parts of morality, however minimal, that are compatible with the rejection of free will
- The difficulties that face anyone who accepts hard determinism does not mean that it is a false theory, but it does compel us to try and find an alternative

Determinism and Contemporary Science

- By far the biggest obstacle to the *truth* of hard determinism is the contemporary skepticism about determinism that seems to be the consequence of certain theories in physics
 - It was much easier to be a hard determinist in the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries when Newtonian mechanics was the dominant scientific paradigm and all physical laws were deterministic
 - With the advent of quantum mechanics in the 20th century, many are not so sure that determinism is true
 - Because of the uncertainty surrounding the issue of determinism many philosophers focus solely on the issue of compatibilism
 - However, there are some who think that *indeterminism* is true, and this is what allows us to have free will

Part Three

Libertarianism

Denying Determinism

- If it is true that having free will is incompatible with determinism, and determinism turns out to be true, as hard determinists argue, then one would have to admit that free will does not exist
- However, there are those who agree with incompatibilism yet think we have free will
 - They do this by denying the truth of determinism in favor of some kind of indeterminism
- This position is known as *libertarianism*

Chisholm's Agent-Causal Theory

- We will focus on Roderick Chisholm's agent-causal theory
 - He agrees that free will is incompatible with determinism
 - But he also believes that free will is incompatible with certain types of indeterminism
 - A chance occurrence is just as much beyond one's control as a past event that entails my current action

What Free Will is Not

- As with all incompatibilists, Chisholm agrees that if some external event causes my action, then that action is not truly free
 - If some person forces you to pull a trigger on a gun that wounds another person, one cannot say that you freely committed that act and therefore should be held responsible
- For Chisholm, an action is just as determined if it is caused by desires and beliefs
 - If a person's strong desire to shoot another person makes it impossible for that person to refrain from acting on those desires, then the person is determined and lacks free will
- “It makes no difference whether the cause of the deed was internal or external; if the cause was some state or event for which the man himself was not responsible, then he was not responsible for what we have been mistakenly calling his act.” (‘Human Freedom and the Self’)

Two Types of Causation

- Genuine free will requires the ability to have done otherwise, whether it be contrary to external pressures or internal ones
 - No event-causal chain can entail an action
- But Chisholm also believes that event indeterminacy is not sufficient for free will, and, in fact, diminishes control
- His solution to this problem is the introduction of two types of causation:
 - *Transeunt Causation* – The kind of causation one finds between events, such as a rock breaking a window
 - *Immanent Causation* – The kind of causation that only agents have, which causes an event but it itself is uncaused, such as with any initiating of a novel act

The Agent as Prime-Mover

- One way of understanding Chisholm's notion of agent-causation is by drawing an analogy with Aristotle's notion of a prime-mover
 - For Aristotle, a prime-mover is something that sets the world on its path but is itself unmoved
 - Was his way of getting around the problem of an infinite regress of causes
 - In other words, it is an uncaused cause
 - This was his way of making sense of the notion of a deity
- So, according to Chisholm, each agent is like, in at least one respect, a God!

The Mystery of Immanent Causation

- Does this analogy really help us understand immanent causation?
 - Since no event brings about an agent's action, one could say that the action *just happens*
 - It spontaneously comes into existence, rather than saying an agent *caused* the action
 - Chisholm's theory would then be an example of the kind of indeterminism that he thinks is not sufficient for free will
- Chisholm responds by noting that if this mystery is a problem for immanent causation, then it is equally a problem for transeunt causation
 - Causation in general is mysterious so there is no reason to single agent-causation out as being controversial and in need of further explication
 - Moreover, there is a plausible story that says that our notion of event-causation depends upon our familiarity with agent-causation
 - "If we did not understand the concept of immanent causation, we would not understand that of transeunt causation." ('Human Freedom and the Self')

Agent-Causation and Dualism

- Even if we could make sense of the notion of immanent causation, there is the further worry that its metaphysical cost would be too high
 - Agent-causation seems to require a kind of mental dualism
 - The agent can cause physical states but cannot be itself caused by physical states
 - The agent must be above the normal physical causal chain so that it can act freely
 - Same old dualistic problems!
- So, there may be no evidence for the existence of such an agent and decisive negative arguments against its likely reality

Image Credits

- Slide 14:

<http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/b/bf/>

[Paul Heinrich Dietrich Baron d
%27Holbach Roslin.jpg](#)