

Free Will and Determinism II: Compatibilism and Incompatibilism

PHI1PPR: Philosophical Problems

Week 11 – May 21st

Lecture Plan

- Part One:
 - Compatibilism
- Part Two:
 - Incompatibilism

Part One

Compatibilism

Lecture Recap

- Last week we discussed one of the questions that make up the problem of free will:
 - Is determinism true?
 - Most agree that this is an empirical question
 - We looked at two positions that take different stances to this question:
 - *Hard Determinists* – Determinism is true
 - *Libertarians* – Determinism is false
 - » Drawbacks to both positions
 - Both, however, agreed on the other question that comprises the problem of free will:
 - Is determinism compatible with having free will?
 - » Both think it is not compatible

The Compatibilist Alternative

- To sum up, things don't look too good for free will!
- But, as I remarked before, both hard determinists and libertarians agree that free will is incompatible with determinism
 - So, if neither of these two positions seem satisfactory, then perhaps the way forward would be to deny that having free will is incompatible with determinism
 - Maybe then one can overcome the shortcomings of the other positions
 - This is the path taken by those who are called *compatibilists*
 - The truth of determinism is no threat to the existence of free will because the two are consistent with one another

The Apparent Advantages of Compatibilism

- On the face of it, compatibilism is an attractive position:
 - On the one hand, it meshes with our intuitive beliefs that we are capable of free action, and thus underlies our practice of ascribing moral responsibility to agents
 - On the other hand, it tries to incorporate itself into the scientific picture of the world where, even if determinism is strictly false, events are more or less determined by past events in conjunction with the laws of nature
 - These two factors are probably part of the reason why compatibilism is the most widely held view amongst contemporary philosophers
 - But, of course, popularity does not guarantee truth!

Preliminary Definitions

- As a way of setting the stage, let us use the following conceptions as our first attempt to define both freedom and determinism:
 - *Freedom* – To be free (to have free will) is to have the ability to do otherwise than how one acted
 - *Example:* Even though I chose to stay home over the weekend, I could have chosen to go out, thus making my choice to stay home a free one
 - *Determinism* – For an act or event to be determined is for the act or event to be entailed by past events acts or events plus the laws of nature
 - *Example:* The earth's destruction by the sun in approximately 6 billion years is determined by the past states of the universe and the laws of nature

The Apparent Conflict

- Given these two definitions, it's easy to see why some have thought there is a conflict between them
 - One way of thinking about freedom as having the ability to do otherwise is by thinking of the future as a garden of forking paths where each path represents a possible choice an agent could take
 - But if determinism is true, then one's future path is entailed by the past plus the laws of nature
 - So, instead of there being multiple paths an agent could take, the truth of determinism allows only one possible future path
 - Thus, determinism seems to undermine this conception of freedom

Freedom to do What one wants

- Let us first look at a classic compatibilist account of freedom that is weaker than our preliminary definition of freedom:
 - All that is required for an act to count as free is if it was carried out without external constraint and is the result of some desire
 - To be free is to do what one wants without external impediments
 - No need to mention having alternative possibilities
 - *Example:* John's act of going to the movies was free because John wanted to go to the movies and he was not forced to go, e.g., no one had a gun to his head
 - Is certainly compatible with determinism because even if John could have no other wants at any given time, which is a consequence of determinism, the fact that he does what he wants without constraint means that he is free

Doing what one wants and Compulsions

- As basic as this definition may be, it doesn't seem to account for contexts in which someone is doing what one wants but is clearly not free and would not be held morally responsible
 - Consider again John and his desire to go to the movies, but this time we find out that John suffers from an obsessive mental disorder that constantly compels him to attend movies, call it *cinophilia*
 - Would one want to claim that his going to the movies was a free decision, one that he should be held responsible for?
 - Most likely not
 - We often excuse those who suffer from mental disorders even though they may be doing exactly what they want to do without anyone forcing them to do it

Freedom and the ability to do otherwise

- What the previous definition of freedom seems to lack is the stipulation that a free act requires the ability to do otherwise
 - Though John was able to do what he wanted, he could not have done differently because of his mental disorder
 - Thus, his choice to go to the movies was not a free choice
- Therefore, one's conception of freedom seems forced to include the ability to have done otherwise clause that is the driver for the apparent conflict between free will and determinism
 - One way to respond to this problem is to clarify what it means to have the ability to do otherwise
 - If it turns out that what have this ability means is in no conflict with being determined, then the apparent dilemma dissolves

The Conditional Analysis of the Ability to do Otherwise

- One influential reformulation is due to R. E. Hobart:
 - If we accept that determinism is true, then future events including actions must occur given the actual state of the past plus the laws of nature
 - But the truth of the above statement is compatible with saying that *if the past had been different, then so would the future*
 - Thus, given the above analysis, what it means for someone to have the ability to have done otherwise is to say that *had* that someone wanted to do differently, *then* that someone would have done differently
 - In other words, having an ability to do *X* is just to say that I could do *X* if I wanted to, so having the ability to do otherwise is just to say that I could have done differently if I had wanted to

Problems for the Conditional Account

- The primary failure for this conception of people's abilities is that it sometimes claims that people have certain abilities that they do not in fact have
 - For John, he cannot not want to go to the movies
 - But the conditional analysis seems to give him the ability to refrain from going to the movies
 - John has the ability to not go to the movies is just to say that had he wanted to stay home, then he would have
 - This means that John has the ability to not go to the movies
 - But this is clearly false due to his psychological condition
 - » One cannot have and not have the same ability!

The Failure of the Conditional Analysis and the Fate of Compatibilism

- So, if this analysis of the ability to do otherwise results in both granting and withholding some ability, then there must be something wrong with the analysis
 - But if we reject Hobart's analysis of our ability to do otherwise, then this brings back the apparent conflict between free will and determinism
 - This is only meant to be a brief introduction to the ways in which philosophers have tried to make having free will compatible with determinism
 - Now let us see why others think that free will is *incompatible* with determinism

Part Two

Incompatibilism

Arguments for Incompatibilism

- What the incompatibilist needs to clarify is how determinism is supposed to rule out one's ability to do otherwise
 - Even if the conditional analysis of our ability to do otherwise fails, there are plenty of alternative analyses that compatibilists have put forward
 - So, the incompatibilist needs to present a more detailed argument why the apparent clash between determinism and free will is in fact a substantive inconsistency
 - The argument that we will look at is the influential *consequence argument*

The Basic Consequence Argument

- We will be looking at an influential version of the consequence argument presented by Peter van Inwagen
- In its most basic form, the consequence argument goes as follows:
 - “If determinism is true, then our acts are the consequences of the laws of nature and events in the remote past. But it is not up to us what went on before we were born, and neither is it up to us what the laws of nature are. Therefore, the consequences of these things (including our present acts) are not up to us.” (*An Essay on Free Will* p. 56)

The Laws of Nature

- The laws of nature are something metaphysical and do not depend on our knowledge about them for their existence, much like the existence of stars does not depend upon our astronomical knowledge
 - However, the laws of nature differ from stars because it may be physically possible in the distant future to somehow alter the nature of a star, say by keeping the sun from exhausting its fuel
 - But it is never possible to alter the laws of nature no matter how advanced one's technology becomes
 - The laws of nature impose limits on our abilities

The Consequence Argument

- Every action = the laws of nature + past events
- Free will = having the ability to do otherwise
- Having the ability to do otherwise = For any action, I could have done the opposite action
- To have done this other action = changing the laws of nature or past events
- I cannot change the laws of nature
- I cannot change past events
- Therefore, I could not have done the opposite action
- Not being able to do the opposite action = not having the ability to do otherwise
- Not having the ability to do otherwise = no free will

The Consequence Argument and the Ability to do Otherwise

- To put the argument in much simpler terms, since we cannot change the past and the laws of nature, then we cannot change the future because the future is entailed by the past and the laws of nature
 - We do not have the capacity to render false propositions about the future, but this is what we must be able to do if we are to have the ability to do otherwise
 - Thus, determinism seems to rule out certain abilities that are necessary for the existence of free will
 - So, if determinism is true, then free will does not exist
- If the consequence argument is sound, then it seems that free will and determinism are indeed incompatible