

METAPHYSICS AND EPISTEMOLOGY

Freedom and determinism

1. Many believe that when we humans act, we often (though not always) act freely and that when we decide, we often decide freely. On the other hand, it appears that what happens at a moment or time has been determined by causes that existed at earlier times. In other words, it appears that our world is deterministic. For example, one may claim that the way I think and react has been determined by my character and that my character was determined by the features I had from birth and by the environment in which I was brought up. But if our world is deterministic, then how can it be that we decide and act freely?

The traditional question in this area of philosophy was: do we decide and act freely? But the usual question during the 20th century was: is freedom of action and of the will logically compatible with determinism? This turn is due to two reasons. The one is that most recent philosophers considered it to be a matter for empirical sciences, and not philosophy, to find out if our world is deterministic; consequently, to the extent that the question whether we are free depends on that matter, it cannot be answered by philosophy. The other reason is that many philosophers argued that the incompatibility between freedom and determinism is only apparent. Those who believe that freedom is compatible with determinism are called *compatibilists*. Those who hold the opposite view are called *incompatibilists*.

The problem is complicated by the fact that not all philosophers mean the term 'determinism' in the same way. At any rate, the basic idea is that what takes place at some time has been determined by what took place in earlier ages.

There are two assumptions that were made by most 20th century philosophers who dealt with the issue. The first assumption was that when someone acts freely, they could have acted otherwise. If someone could not have done anything other than what they finally do, then their action is not free. The second assumption is that we are morally responsible for one of our actions iff we acted freely. No one bears responsibility for acts that were not free.

2. Various British philosophers from the 17th up to the 19th century (T. Hobbes, D. Hume, J. S. Mill) argued that freedom of action consists in acting as one wants: doing what one wants to do and not doing what one does not want. According to Hobbes, "liberty is the absence of external impediments". According to Hume, whoever is not in prison or bound by chains is free. Of course, those philosophers believed that freedom of action is compatible with determinism.

I. Kant had a low opinion of their approach. He judged it to be an easy solution to the problem of freedom and determinism. In his view, if an action was brought about by a cause in accordance with a natural law, then the action was not free, even if the cause was something that existed in the inner world of the agent.

Irrespective of whether Kant was right, it is certainly naive to consider that an action is free iff it realizes a desire of the subject and was caused by that desire. If someone hypnotizes me and engenders within me a strong tendency to gambol around, I shall not act freely when I realize my desire. The action is not free, since the tendency that caused it was not formed freely. Generally, when an action is due to a decision, the decision must have been taken freely in order for the action to be free, and when no decision preceded, but the action is simply due to a complex of desires and beliefs,

these desires and beliefs must have been formed freely.

Most English-speaking 20th century philosophers who dealt with the issue, although they often recognized Hobbes's and Hume's approach to be naive, still agreed with them on the conclusion that freedom of action is compatible with determinism.

3. One of the most prominent representatives in the 20th century of the view that freedom is compatible with determinism was A. J. Ayer. By the term 'determinism' he means the proposition that each human action, and more generally each event, was caused by something. His conception of causation leaves no room for probabilistic causation.

Ayer argues that moral responsibility presupposes determinism. Let's say that a person acts in some way; Ayer is trying to show that either that person has no moral responsibility for their action or determinism is true of the particular action. In more detail, Ayer's argument is as follows: If it was a matter of pure chance that the person in question acted in that specific way, then they are not responsible for their action. Whoever acts entirely unpredictably is not a moral subject; they are insane. If, on the other hand, it wasn't a matter of chance, then there is a causal explanation of their action, so perhaps we end up with determinism. Of course, one will object that we do not end up with determinism so easily; it may be that the person in our example did not act in that specific way by chance and their action was the result of a choice, in which case we do not seem to have determinism. Ayer, however, replies that we can apply the same dilemma to any choice that led to the action. If it was merely a matter of chance that the person made that choice, they are not morally responsible for either the choice or the corresponding action. If it wasn't a matter of chance, then there is a causal explanation of the choice, so now we end up with determinism both about the choice and about the action. Perhaps, one will again object that the choice may not have been a matter of chance; it may be that it was due to the person's character and they formed their character themselves, in which case we do not seem to have determinism. But Ayer replies that we can again apply the same dilemma to the formation of the character. Moreover, he emphasizes that we consider people especially responsible, from a moral point of view, for those of their actions which are due to their character, that is, for actions that are predictable; it seems clear that determinism is true of those actions.

Subsequently, Ayer infers from three premisses to the conclusion that freedom of action is compatible with determinism. The three premisses are: (a) we are morally responsible for at least some of our actions; (b) it isn't possible to be morally responsible for an action without having acted freely; and (c) moral responsibility presupposes determinism.

Ayer takes it for granted that if a choice was not accidental, then something caused it. But one may consider that at least some of our choices and decisions have no causes (so they falsify the general principle that each event was caused by something) but are not accidental either. They are based on reasons.

The problem with that answer to Ayer is that it presupposes a controversial view: that the reasons on which one bases a choice (or decision) are not always causes of their choice. Many philosophers (like Davidson) consider that when a person has some reasons in favour of a choice and, relying on those reasons, proceeds to the choice, then the reasons are the complex of thoughts and desires which are causes of the choice.

Ayer ends up in another way, too, with the conclusion that freedom of action is compatible with determinism. He holds that the opposite of freedom is not causality, but

constraint. When am I constrained to do something? Ayer distinguishes two kinds of case. We have the one kind when I am constrained by another person. That person may have hypnotized me or otherwise made it physically impossible for me to react. Alternatively, they may have made it clear that if I don't carry out what they want, there will be very unpleasant consequences for me. We have the other kind of constraint when I am so addicted to an activity that, even if I think about the issue and choose to act differently, my thoughts and choices will play no causal role in my behaviour. Such is the case of the kleptomaniac. Ayer argues that, since it is possible to perform an action without constraint while there are causes that brought it about, it is possible to perform an action freely while there are causes that brought it about.

Here one may object that if any causes brought about an action of mine, then there was constraint and hence I did not act freely. Ayer answers that objection invoking his views about causation. He emphasizes that if something, some event x , brings about an action (or another event) y , this simply means that, according to a natural law, when there occurs an event of the same type as x , there also occurs, in a certain temporal or spatiotemporal relation to that event, one of the same type as y . There subsists no constraint, except metaphorically.

4. Of the philosophers who hold that we often decide and act freely, some (like R. Chisholm) consider that a decision is free iff its cause is not some event, but the subject who takes the decision. This causal relation, which is called 'agent causation', does not follow any natural law. When the decision is free, the subject takes that decision, but could have taken a different one instead. In a version of that view, the subject who takes the decision is the human being. In another version, the subject is an internal being, an ego or something like that.

According to that view, freedom of the will and action is incompatible with determinism. For if there are decisions of the type just described, then what is the case at some time does not determine what will be the case in later ages, since it does not determine what decisions of that type will take place in between.

The main problem with the view of philosophers such as Chisholm is that, in the case of humans, they accept a kind of causality that we don't find in our study of the natural world, not even in our biological study of living organisms. So their view does not fit in smoothly with what we know from investigating other aspects of reality. For the version in which the subject is an internal being, there is another problem. It accepts the existence of a very doubtful entity, something like a person within the person that is the human being.

5. According to the most precise definition of the term 'determinism', determinism is the proposition that, for each time t_1 and each time t_2 after t_1 , the combination of the laws of nature with the total state, s_1 , of the universe at t_1 implies, of logical necessity, the total state, s_2 , of the universe at t_2 . Let's say that t_1 is some moment before I was born, and that at some time t_2 I act in a certain way. Many people find it obvious that if determinism, as we defined it, is true, then I couldn't have acted otherwise.

Supporters of the compatibility between freedom of action and determinism sometimes concede that if determinism is true, then in some sense I couldn't have acted otherwise: it is not logically possible that the same laws of nature should apply as actually apply, the universe should evolve until before t_2 as it actually evolved, but at t_2 I should act otherwise. In order to express that sense of 'I couldn't have acted otherwise' briefly, let's say that it was not *historically possible* for me to act otherwise. But they consider that it is in a different sense that if I couldn't have acted otherwise, then my

action was not free: what is needed for freedom is to be able, to have the power, to act otherwise. This is a general concept of ability; what I am able to do depends on my physical powers, my mental powers, my social and professional position, my location in space, etc. Supporters of the compatibility between freedom of action and determinism believe that, from the fact that it was not historically possible for me to act otherwise, it doesn't follow that I was not able to act otherwise. Here things have become complicated.

6. P. Van Inwagen put forward an important argument for the view that freedom of action is incompatible with determinism as we defined it in section 5. The argument is the following (I have made some changes in order to make the presentation easier):

In a distant land, a judge who has sentenced someone to death has the right to raise his arm at a certain moment and in this way pardon the defendant. The judge, J, thinks about the case, decides not to grant a pardon and so does not raise it. Could he have acted otherwise if determinism is true? Let's say that t_2 is the crucial moment, at which his arm remains down, and t_1 is some moment before he was born. Moreover, let's say that s_1 is the total state of the universe at the time t_1 , and s_2 is the total state of the universe at t_2 . Let P_1 be the statement 'The universe is in state s_1 at time t_1 ' and P_2 be the statement 'The universe is in state s_2 at time t_2 '. Finally, N will be the conjunction, in one statement, of all the laws of nature (both those we know and those we do not know).

In the argument that follows, statements (1), (2), (5), (6), (8) and (9) are premisses; (10) is the conclusion; (3), (4) and (7) are intermediate conclusions. Van Inwagen explains that, throughout the argument, phrases of the type 'X could have done so-and-so...' mean 'X had the power or ability to do so-and-so'.

(1) If determinism is true, then the conjunction of P_1 and N implies P_2 of logical necessity.

'The conjunction of P_1 and N implies P_2 of logical necessity' means that it is logically impossible that the conjunction of P_1 and N should be true but P_2 should not be true.

(1) follows from the definition we gave for determinism.

(2) If J had raised his arm at time t_2 , P_2 would be false.

For if J had raised his arm at t_2 , he would have contributed to the universe being at t_2 in a state slightly different from s_2 , and as a consequence statement P_2 would be false.

(3) If J could have raised his arm at t_2 , J could have rendered P_2 false.

(3) follows from (2); if J could have raised his arm at t_2 , he could have done something which would have the consequence that P_2 was false.

(4) If determinism is true, and J could have raised his arm at t_2 , then the conjunction of P_1 and N implies P_2 of logical necessity, and J could have rendered P_2 false.

(4) follows from (1) and (3).

(5) If the conjunction of P_1 and N implies P_2 of logical necessity, and J could have rendered P_2 false, then J could have rendered the conjunction of P_1 and N false.

For if it is logically impossible that P_2 should be false, but the conjunction of P_1 and N should be true, the falsity of P_2 is a condition that is sufficient in order for the conjunction of P_1 and N to be false; so, by rendering P_2 false, J would also have rendered the conjunction of P_1 and N false.

(6) If J could have rendered the conjunction of P_1 and N false, then either J could have rendered P_1 false or J could have rendered N false (or both).

For the only way to render a conjunction false is to render a conjunct false.

(7) If determinism is true, and J could have raised his arm at t_2 , then either J could have rendered P_1 false or J could have rendered N false.

(7) follows from (4), (5) and (6).

(8) J could not have rendered P_1 false.

For we cannot change the past.

(9) J could not have rendered N false.

For we cannot change the laws of nature.

(10) If determinism is true, then J could not have raised his arm at the time t_2 .

(10) follows from (7), (8) and (9). Let me note that, of the conditionals that occur in sentences (1)–(10), only the one in (2) comes under the syntactic and semantic category of counterfactual conditionals.

Now, since the argument does not depend on the particular features of the story with the judge, we are entitled to generalize the conclusion: if determinism is true, then whenever an agent doesn't do something, they could not have done it. And an analogous argument shows that if determinism is true, then whenever an agent does something, they could not have failed to do it.

It is difficult to detect weak points in Van Inwagen's argument. In my opinion, however, there is a weak point, and this is in premiss (5). I think that the premiss in question is stronger than what we are entitled to presuppose. What we are entitled to presuppose is that if the conjunction of P_1 and N implies P_2 of logical necessity, and J could have rendered P_2 false, then it is possible for the conjunction of P_1 and N to be false. Here is an analogous example. Let's take some man M. The statement 'M is lying asleep' implies the statement 'M is not running' of logical necessity. Let's also say that M can (has the power or ability) to run 100 metres in 11", but cannot act so as to stop his sleep or get up from bed while sleeping; he cannot make himself wake up. If he ran 100 metres in 11" (or, also, if he ran another distance in another time) he would render the statement 'M is not running' false. So M can render that statement false. And, of course, if he ran and rendered that statement false, the statement 'M is lying asleep' would also be false. Nevertheless, he cannot render the statement 'M is lying asleep' false.

7. It seems to be a necessary condition for being morally responsible for an action that one could have acted otherwise. Yet H. Frankfurt showed, in a famous thought experiment, that it isn't a necessary condition. The thought experiment presents a logically possible situation in which someone is morally responsible for their actions although they could not have acted otherwise. (Or, at least, this is intuitively a very plausible account of the situation.)

Let's imagine that some scientists have gained control of a man's brain. To be precise, when that man is about to perform an action, the scientists see, with various instruments, what he is going to do. Moreover, they can induce thoughts and desires in him so that he can act just as they want. Thus the man, who has no idea about the scientists, begins taking decisions and acting analogously. His decisions are the result of careful thought, without any constraint. The scientists do not intervene at all, as each time what he is going to do (and which they see with their instruments) happens to coincide with what they want him to do. But if they ever found out that he was going to do anything different, they would intervene and he wouldn't do it. Intuitively, that man is morally responsible for his actions. However, he could never have acted otherwise, since the scientists wouldn't let him.