

Free will and determinism

Last time we ended our discussion of the problem of evil by raising the problem of natural evil -- the problem of evil which is not directly caused by human free choices. At first glance, this sort of evil does not seem to be explicable by the free will defense, since this sort of evil does not seem to be explained simply by the good of our having free will.

However, many proponents of the free will defense think that even natural evil can be explained in terms of free will. Here are some of the ways in which this might work:

- Though earthquakes and the like are not the result of human free actions, they are the result of the free actions of nonhuman agents, like fallen angels. So the free will defense applies to these events just as directly as to events caused by human choices.
- Though earthquakes and the like are not caused by human free actions, our inability to avoid the harm caused by them is. In particular, the event of human beings removing themselves from the care of God - an event symbolized in the Judeo-Christian tradition by the story of the Garden of Eden - placed human beings in a world in which they were subject to natural forces which they were then unable to avoid.
- It is important that the world be governed by laws of nature; otherwise, it would be impossible to know the effects of our actions, and hence impossible to take responsibility for the outcomes of those actions, and free will would be without value. However, it is impossible to create a world governed by laws of nature which does not also include some natural events which cause suffering; so even an omnipotent being could not have created a law-governed world which was free of natural disasters.

It's also worth noting that the theist needn't adopt just one of these explanations; it might be that some apply to some instances of evil, and others to other instances. It might also be that much of the evil that we first think of as natural evil is really human-caused evil; though Hurricane Katrina was a natural disaster, its effects were certainly made worse through poor management of the relief effort and insufficient protection for the city; perhaps hurricanes are made more violent by human-caused climate change; etc.

Many regard the problem of natural evil to be the most difficult part of the problem of evil, and each of the responses sketched above faces further challenges. You should think about whether any of these are convincing, or whether some other approach might fare better.

Today we will not focus on the question of whether the free will defense can be expanded to explain the existence of natural evil. Instead, we'll be focusing on the nature of free will itself.

But it is worth returning briefly to one assumption we made in developing the free will defense. In response to Mackie's argument, we assumed that even if it is possible for every being with free will to always choose the good, it is *impossible* for God to *ensure* that this is the case.

That is, the following sort of scenario is impossible:

God determines, or ensures, that I freely do such-and-such.

This seems to involve saying that our having free will is inconsistent with our actions being *determined*. Without this assumption, it is hard to see how the free will defense could get off the ground.

However, this assumption about free will is one that Sider challenges in the reading we did for class today. To see this, we will need to get a bit clearer about what it means for an action to be determined.

Sider expresses the thesis of determinism as the claim that “every event has a cause.” But what does it mean for an event to have a cause? What the determinist means is something like this: take any event, E. E has a cause; so, there must be some set of conditions, C, which obtained prior to E, and made E happen. What *this* means is that this set of prior conditions C guarantees that E will obtain; it is impossible for C to obtain, and not be followed by E.

Let’s think about an example. Let E = the event of a match catching fire. What might C be? Well, part of C is certainly that the match was struck -- that a certain amount of friction was generated by moving the match in a certain way, which raises the temperature of the surface of the match, which contains some chemical, say yellow phosphorus. Suppose that this is all that we include in C. Does C guarantee that E will happen?

It seems not: it is possible, surely, that the laws of nature could have been different enough that the temperature generated was not sufficient to cause the combustion of yellow phosphorus. So we need to include in C not only some facts about events which preceded E, but also some general facts about the laws of nature in our world.

Determinism is the thesis that for **any** event E, we can find some combination C of prior events and laws of nature which make E happen, and guarantee that E will be the case.

Sider suggests that belief in determinism is made reasonable by reflection on scientific progress. Why does he think this?

What does determinism have to do with free will? As Sider says, “the threat to freedom comes when we realize that this march will eventually overtake *us*.” That is, the threat to freedom comes from the fact that the determinist thesis includes within its scope events such as my deciding to come to class today, which I take to be free actions of mine.

Let E be the event of my deciding to come to class today. If determinism is true, there is some set of conditions C1 prior to my deciding to come to class today which guaranteed that I would decide to come to class. Furthermore, this set of conditions must itself be determined by some prior set of conditions, C2. We can continue this line of reasoning until we reach a set of conditions C100, all of which occurred prior to my birth (plus some facts about the laws of nature).

But surely C100, being before my birth, is not something about which I have any choice. But if this is right, then we have the following plausible line of argument:

I do not have a free choice about whether C100 happened.

C100 guarantees that C99 will happen.

C99 guarantees that C98 will happen.

.....

C2 guarantees that C1 will happen.

C1 guarantees that E will happen.

I did not have a free choice about whether E would happen.

It seems that we can use a parallel argument to show that any supposedly free action is not, in fact, free. So it seems that if determinism is true, there can be no such thing as free will. (For parallel argument, see Sider’s discussion on pp. 115-6.)

Here's another way to generate the same sort of conflict between free will and determinism.

If determinism is true, then every event is guaranteed to happen by some combination of prior events + the laws of nature. But now consider all the events in the universe happening at some one time, T2 -- this whole collection of events must have been guaranteed to happen by some prior state of the universe -- the universe at T1 (+ the laws of nature). And the same goes for the state of the universe at T1; it was guaranteed to obtain by the state of the universe at some prior time, T0 (again, plus the laws of nature).

But if the state of the universe at T1 was guaranteed to occur by the state of the universe at T0, then we know that as soon as the universe comes to be in the state that it is in at T0, it **will** come to be in the state that it is in at T1. That is: the state of the universe at one time, plus the laws of nature, guarantees the state of the universe at some later time. Furthermore, since this is true of every state of the universe, then the state of the universe at any one time, plus the laws of nature, guarantees the state of the universe at **every** later time.

This gives rise to a kind of argument, which is sometimes called the 'consequence argument', which aims to show that free will and determinism are incompatible.

To state this argument, let 'DINOSAUR' stand for the state of the universe during some time when dinosaurs roamed the earth, and let 'DECISION' stand for my decision to not sing the Notre Dame fight song 10 minutes from now.

1. If determinism is true, then the state of the universe at any time plus the laws of nature guarantees the state of the universe at every future time.
2. If determinism is true, then it is impossible for DINOSAUR to obtain and the laws of nature to be as they are without DECISION happening. (1)
3. Determinism is true.
4. It is impossible for DINOSAUR to obtain and the laws of nature to be as they are without DECISION happening. (2,3)
5. If it is impossible for something not to happen (i.e., if it is necessary that something will happen), then I have no choice about whether it will happen.
6. I have no choice about whether it is true that if DINOSAUR obtains and the laws of nature are as they are, then DECISION will happen. (4,5)
7. I have no choice about whether DINOSAUR obtained.
8. I have no choice about what the laws of nature are.
9. If I have no choice about whether x and y are true, and if I have no choice about the fact that if x and y are true then z is true, then I have no choice about whether z is true.

C. I have no choice about whether DECISION will happen. (6,7,8,9)

The argument is valid, and each of the premises look pretty plausible. But if each of the premises are true, then this argument shows that free will and determinism are incompatible, since we can use this argument to show, assuming the truth of determinism, that any action is unfree.

(You might also want to think about how this argument could be reformulated as a reductio of the claims that determinism is true and we have free will.)

Let's suppose we find one of these arguments is convincing, and hence that we believe that free will and determinism cannot both be true. This view is called *incompatibilism*, since it is the view that free will and determinism are incompatible.

By itself, incompatibilism does not tell us whether determinism is true, or whether we have free will. It just says that we can't have both.

Let's suppose that we are convinced that every event does have a cause, in Sider's sense, and hence that every state of the universe plus the laws of nature determine every later state of the universe. Then if we are incompatibilists, we will have to give up our belief that we have free will. This is the view that Sider calls *hard determinism*.

Hard determinism is a difficult view to accept, for at least two reasons:

- We are morally responsible for some of our actions; but moral responsibility is impossible without free will.
- It is just very hard to believe that we have no choice about our future actions. Consider a choice you now face, such as your choice about whether to scratch your nose in 5 seconds. Could it really be that you have no choice about whether you will do this?

In the end, perhaps hard determinism will be the view we want to accept; but, as Sider says, it seems like a position which we should only adopt if the alternatives face decisive objections.

The other obvious option, if we are incompatibilists, is to give up our belief in determinism. If we are convinced that we do have a choice about some of our actions, and that free will is incompatible with determinism, then it seems that determinism must be false. This is the view that Sider calls *libertarianism*.

Sider thinks that libertarianism faces a serious problem, which he calls the ‘problem of randomness.’ One way to lay out the sort of problem that Sider has in mind is the following argument against libertarianism:

1. If libertarianism is true, then there are some actions which are not determined by prior conditions and are free.
2. Any action not determined by prior conditions is random.
3. If libertarianism is true, then there are some actions which are random and are free. (1,2)
4. No action is both random and free.

C. Libertarianism is false. (3,4)

Let's grant premise (1).

Premise (4) seems quite plausible. Suppose that whether or not you are going to scratch your nose was determined by some device which approximates randomness, like the machines they use to generate lottery numbers. You wouldn't be inclined to regard your decision as free, in that case.

So the key premise is premise (2). Is this premise plausible? What is ‘agent causation’, and how might this help?

Sider gives another argument against libertarianism, which is based on a conflict he sees between libertarianism and science. Here is what he says:

Whether or not libertarianism relies on agent causation, its most worrisome feature is its clash with science. First, libertarians must reject the possibility of an all-encompassing psychology. Human behavior would be governed by the laws of such a science, and libertarians deny that human behavior is controlled by any laws. But the clash does not end there. Libertarians must also reject the possibility of an all-encompassing *physics*. The realms of psychology and physics cannot be neatly separated, for human bodies are physical objects, made up of subatomic particles. An all-encompassing physics could predict the future motions of *all* particles—even those in human bodies—based on the earlier states of particles. Since libertarians say that human behavior cannot be scientifically predicted, they must deny the possibility of such a physics. According to libertarians, if physicists turned their measuring instruments on the subatomic particles composing a free person, formerly observed patterns would break down.

What is the argument here? Is this a worry for the libertarian?

Sider thinks that at this point we should see that both hard determinism and libertarianism face problems. The way out of these problems, he suggests, is to believe in both free will and determinism. This, of course, involves giving up on incompatibilism, the view that there is a conflict between free will and determinism. On a *compatibilist* view (which Sider calls ‘soft determinism’) an action of mine might be free even though it was guaranteed to happen by facts outside my control.

How could this be? How could it be determined by factors outside of my control that I will do something, and yet that act be free? Here is an example designed to convince you that this sort of thing is possible, due to the American philosopher Harry Frankfurt:

“Suppose someone --- Black, let us say --- wants Jones to perform a certain action. Black is prepared to go to considerable lengths to get his way, but he prefers to avoid showing his hand unnecessarily. So he waits until Jones is about to make up his mind what to do, and does nothing unless it is clear to him (Black is an excellent judge of such things) that Jones is going to decide to do something *other* than what he wants him to do. If it does become clear that Jones is going to decide to do something else, Black takes effective steps to ensure that Jones decides to do, and that he does do, what he wants him to do....

Now suppose that Black never has to show his hand because Jones, for reasons of his own, decides to perform and does perform the very action Black wants him to perform. In that case, it seems clear, Jones will bear precisely the same moral responsibility for what he does as he would have borne if Black had not been ready to take steps to ensure that he do it. It would be quite unreasonable to excuse Jones for his action ... on the basis of the fact that he could not have done otherwise. This fact played no role at all in leading him to act as he did.... Indeed, everything happened just as it would have happened without Black's presence in the situation and without his readiness to intrude into it.”

This seems to be a situation in which Jones’ action is free, despite the fact that factors outside of his control guaranteed that he would perform that action. But if this is possible, doesn’t this just show that incompatibilism is false?

Let's suppose for the moment that compatibilism is true, and acts can be both free and determined by factors outside of the agent's control. What might it mean for such an action determined in this way to be free?

Compatibilists answer this question in different ways. An initial possibility is to say that an action is free if and only if it is an action that you desire to perform. Can you think of any problems for this definition?

What about a drug addict who takes a drug out of an intense and irresistible desire -- is their taking of the drug a free act?

A more complicated view is that an action is free if and only if it is an action that you desire to perform, and you desire that that desire move you to action. Can you think of any problems for this view?

Of course, compatibilism might be true even if we can't come up with a good definition of 'free action.' But you should also keep in mind that, if you're a compatibilist, you have to find a flaw in the two arguments for incompatibilism we considered. Incompatibilists tend to think that this is easier said than done.