

Free will and foreknowledge

Last time we discussed two related arguments for the view 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.

The second of these -- the consequence argument -- was a long argument, but had the following as its three key premises:

- If something happened before your birth, you have no choice about whether it happened.
- You have no choice about what the laws of nature are.
- 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.

These theses, plus determinism, seem to imply that I have no choice about any of my future actions.

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.

So, if we believe the arguments for incompatibilism, we must give up believing in free will, or give up believing in determinism. The first option is what Sider calls *hard determinism*, which we discussed briefly at the end of last class.

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? How would the argument work if physics turns out to be deterministic? What if our best physical theory ends up being indeterministic?

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. Remember, the consequence argument for incompatibilism seems to involve only the following premises:

- If something happened before your birth, you have no choice about whether it happened.
- You have no choice about what the laws of nature are.
- 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.

Remember that the free will defense given in reply to the argument from evil requires an incompatibilist, rather than a compatibilist, view of free will. In this sense, there is a close connection between the main argument against the existence of God and the topic of free will.

But there's also another connection between free will and discussions of the existence and nature of God. This connection comes not from the existence of evil, but rather from a traditional attribute of God: God's omniscience and, in particular, God's foreknowledge of future events.

The selection we read for today, from Jonathan Edwards, can be seen as an attempt to show that there is a kind of conflict between divine foreknowledge and our having free will.

Edwards lays out his argument in four numbered paragraphs, each of which corresponds to a premise in his argument. The first is this one:

1. I observed before, in explaining the nature of necessity, that in things which are past, their past existence is now necessary: having already made sure of existence, it is too late for any possibility of alteration in that respect: it is now impossible that it should be otherwise than true that that thing has existed.

In other words:

1. We have no choice about past events.

He states his second premise as follows:

2. If there be any such thing as a divine foreknowledge of the volitions of free agents, that foreknowledge, by the supposition, is a thing which already has, and long ago had, existence; and so, now its existence is necessary; it is now utterly impossible to be otherwise than that this foreknowledge should be, or should have been.

So we can add a second premise to our argument, which together with (1) implies (3):

1. We have no choice about the past.
2. God had foreknowledge of our future actions in the past.
3. We have no choice about whether God has foreknowledge of our future actions. (1,2)

His next premise is stated in the following passage:

3. It is also very manifest, that those things which are indissolubly connected with other things that are necessary, are themselves necessary. As that proposition whose truth is necessarily connected with another proposition, which is necessarily true, is itself necessarily true. To say otherwise, would be a contradiction:

As elsewhere, Edwards is using “necessary” to mean, in part “beyond our control” or “something we don’t have any choice about.” If we focus on this, then it looks like we can state what he is saying in the above passage as premise (4) below:

1. We have no choice about the past.
2. God had foreknowledge of our future actions in the past.
3. We have no choice about the fact that God has foreknowledge of our future actions. (1,2)
4. If we have no choice about the truth of x, and no choice about the fact that if x is true then y must be true, then we have no choice about the fact that y is true.

(This should remind you of a premise in the consequence argument for incompatibilism.)

The last key assumption of the argument is contained in the following:

4. It is no less evident, that if there be a full, certain, and infallible foreknowledge of the future existence of the volitions of moral agents, then there is a certain infallible and indissoluble connexion between those events and that foreknowledge; and that therefore, by the preceding observations, those events are necessary events;

Edwards is saying that there is an **indissoluble** connection between something being known, and its being true. It is a necessary truth that if x is known, x must be true. Since we can't do anything to change necessary truths -- they are, by definition, what can't fail to be the case -- we can add premise (5), and also premise (6), to our argument:

1. We have no choice about the past.
2. God had foreknowledge of our future actions in the past.
3. We have no choice about whether God has foreknowledge of our future actions. (1,2)
4. If we have no choice about the truth of x, and no choice about the fact that if x is true then y must be true, then we have no choice about the fact that y is true.
5. Necessarily, if x is known, then x is true.
6. We have no choice about the fact that if x is known, then x is true. (5)

But (3), (4), and (6) are enough to give us our conclusion:

(C) We have no choice about our future actions. (3,4,6)

Let's examine this argument:

1. We have no choice about the past.
2. God had foreknowledge of our future actions in the past.
3. We have no choice about the fact that God has foreknowledge of our future actions. (1,2)
4. If we have no choice about the truth of x, and no choice about the fact that if x is true then y must be true, then we have no choice about the fact that y is true.
5. Necessarily, if x is known, then x is true.
6. We have no choice about the fact that if x is known, then x is true. (5)

(C) We have no choice about our future actions. (3,4,6)

As noted, this bears a close resemblance to the consequence argument for the incompatibility of free will and divine foreknowledge. But this puts the proponent of the free will defense who believes in divine foreknowledge in a difficult position. It seems like pretty much the same argument which helps to show that evil can coexist with an all-good and omnipotent God also shows that free will can't coexist with an omniscient God.

Someone who wants to endorse both the free will defense and divine foreknowledge of human actions therefore might like to find a flaw in Edwards' argument which is not a flaw in the consequence argument.

One sort of response is suggested by Aquinas' discussion of divine foreknowledge. Here is what he says:

“although contingent things become actual successively, nevertheless God knows contingent things not successively, as they are in their own being, as we do but simultaneously. The reason is because His knowledge is measured by eternity, as is also His being; and eternity being simultaneously whole comprises all time, as said above ...Hence all things that are in time are present to God from eternity, not only because He has the types of things present within Him, as some say; but because His glance is carried from eternity over all things as they are in their presentiality. Hence it is manifest that contingent things are infallibly known by God, inasmuch as they are subject to the divine sight in their presentiality; yet they are future contingent things in relation to their own causes.”

The view Aquinas has in mind here is often stated with the slogan that “God is outside of time.” Part of what is meant by this is that even though events in the world are past and future relative to each other, God's knowledge is not past or future at all. So, strictly speaking, it is false to say that “God had foreknowledge of our future actions in the past.” But this is premise (2) of Edwards' argument; so, denying this claim gives us a way to maintain belief in both divine foreknowledge of our actions and in our own free will.

However, this reply to Edwards faces a problem. Recall Edwards' argument:

1. We have no choice about the past.
2. God had foreknowledge of our future actions in the past.
3. We have no choice about the fact that God has foreknowledge of our future actions. (1,2)
4. If we have no choice about the truth of x, and no choice about the fact that if x is true then y must be true, then we have no choice about the fact that y is true.
5. Necessarily, if x is known, then x is true.
6. We have no choice about the fact that if x is known, then x is true. (5)

(C) We have no choice about our future actions. (3,4,6)

The suggestion we are considering is that we reject (2). But (2) is only used in the argument to get to (3); and perhaps we can get to (3) without assuming that God's knowledge is, strictly speaking, something which happens in time. Here's one suggestion about how to change premises (1) and (2) of the argument to do this:

- 1*. We have no choice about things which are outside of time.
- 2*. If God's foreknowledge of our future actions is outside of time.
3. We have no choice about the fact that God has foreknowledge of our future actions. (1,2)

From here, the argument could run as before. Can Aquinas' objection be revised so as to respond to this version of the argument? Is premise (1*) as plausible as premise (1)?

This worry about Aquinas' reply to Edwards' argument for the incompatibility of free will and divine foreknowledge makes it reasonable to consider a few other replies to that argument. We will consider two such replies.

Aquinas denied that God knew in the past about our future actions; William of Ockham, a rough contemporary of Aquinas, accepted that God knew in the past about our future actions, but denied that this makes facts about what God knows things about which we have no choice.

One way to explain his view is by a distinction between *hard* and *soft* facts about the past. An example of a hard fact might be

In 2004, George Bush was elected for a second term as president.

About this sort of past fact, we really have no choice. No one now has a choice about whether in 2004, Bush was elected. But not all past facts are like this. Some past facts are partly about the future. For example,

In 2004, it was true that I will refrain from singing the fight song at 2:45 this afternoon.

Suppose, for the sake of argument, that I will so refrain. Then it looks like the above statement is true: it really was true in 2004 that I would so refrain. (If someone had said in 2004, "JS will refrain from singing ...", they would have said something true.) So this is a fact about the past. But it is surely not, on that account, something about which I have no choice. This is what a defender of Ockham's solution would call a *soft* fact about the past: it is a fact about the past, but it is one about which I have a choice. If I decide to sing the fight song, then this will not be a fact about the past.

Now consider the following fact about the past:

In 2004, God knew that I will refrain from singing the fight song at 2:45 this afternoon.

Is this a soft fact or a hard fact about the past? If it is a soft fact, how would that help resolve the apparent incompatibility between free will and divine foreknowledge?

A final response to Edwards' argument for the incompatibility of free will and divine foreknowledge is a very simple one: give up the idea that God knows what actions we will perform. (This is sort of analogous to the position of the libertarian, who gives up the idea that the world is deterministic in response to the consequence argument for the incompatibility of free will and determinism.)

It is obvious how this is a response to Edwards' argument: it is a rejection of premise (2) (and premise (2*) in the revised argument). The question is: is this response one which a theist can accept?

One argument that it is not is as follows: if God does not know what actions we will perform, God is not omniscient; but no being which is not omniscient could be God. How could the theist reply to this objection?

Could omniscience be 'qualified' in something like the same way we qualified omnipotence?

A second kind of worry about the denial of divine foreknowledge comes specific views which are a part of the beliefs of various religions. In the case of Christianity, for example, various passages in the New Testament seem to imply the existence of divine foreknowledge, such as the following well-known passage from the gospel of Matthew, in which Jesus is speaking to Peter:

“Truly, I tell you, this very night, before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times.”

In this sort of case, there is an apparent conflict between a philosophical view about the knowledge of God and the face-value interpretation of certain parts of what Christians regard as a divinely revealed text.