

van Inwagen's criticism of agent-causal theories

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1 The *Mind* argument

The '*Mind* argument' is really a family of arguments designed to show that indeterminism and free will are incompatible. Or, more precisely, they are designed to show that positing indeterminism in key places in the causal chain leading to the agent's action undermines rather than makes room for free will, by making the relevant actions seem random and hence unfree.

van Inwagen's case against the relevance of agent causation to the problem of free will proceeds in two stages. First, he presents an intuitive version of the *Mind* argument against indeterministic theories of free will that make no use of agent causation. Second, he suggests that adding in agent causation to the picture does not block the argument.

First, the intuitive version of the argument, which can be laid out informally like this:

1. Suppose (for reductio) that incompatibilism is true, and that we have free will.
2. . Then Alice's inner states (and all other relevant facts about the universe) at t are consistent with Alice either lying or not lying at t^* .
3. Suppose that God winds the universe back to time t thousands of times, and then let's the universe 'play forward.' Then sometimes Alice will tell a lie at t^* , and sometimes not.
4. Suppose we are just about to watch replay number 5087. Then surely it is random whether Alice lies, or not, at t^* on this replay.
5. But if it is random whether or not Alice lies on replay 5087, it is random whether or not Alice lies on the first 'play.'
6. But whether or not Alice's lying is random on the first 'play' does not depend on the fact that this event will be followed by God carrying out the thousands of replays.
7. Hence Alice's actual lying (or not) was random.
8. Hence, contrary to our supposition, Alice's actual lying (or not) was not free.

This is an argument for the conclusion that incompatibilism entails the absence of free will. Or, put another way, it is an argument for the conclusion that certain ways that indeterministic causation can enter into the causation of action preclude free will.

2 Adding in agent causation

But so far we have said nothing about agent causation. What need to be shown is that adding agent causation into Alice's situation does not help to block the argument. Let us suppose that agent causation works like this: in free actions, the agent agent-causes a certain brain event, which then (along with other relevant facts about the universe) determines that a certain action will occur. So the indeterminacy precedes rather than follows the relevant brain event.

Let's use LIE as a name for the brain event that in Alice's case would determine lying, and TRUTH as a name for the brain event that would determine telling the truth. We can then argue as follows:

1. Suppose (for reductio) that incompatibilism is true, and that some agent-causal theory of free will of the sort sketched above is true, and hence that we have free will.
2. . Then Alice's inner states (and all other relevant facts about the universe) at t are consistent with Alice either causing LIE or TRUTH at t^* .
3. Suppose that God winds the universe back to time t thousands of times, and then let's the universe 'play forward.' Then sometimes LIE will happen t^* , and sometimes TRUTH.
4. Suppose we are just about to watch replay number 5087. Then surely it is random whether LIE will happen t^* or TRUTH.
5. But if it is random whether whether LIE will happen t^* or TRUTH on replay 5087, then this is random on the first 'play.'
6. But whether or not the occurrence of LIE is random on the first 'play' does not depend on the fact that this event will be followed by God carrying out the thousands of replays.
7. Hence the actual occurrence of LIE (or TRUTH) was random.
8. But if the the actual occurrence of LIE (or TRUTH) was random, Alice's actual lying (or not) was random.
9. Hence, contrary to our supposition, Alice's actual lying (or not) was not free.

3 The example of the promise