

The scope of free will

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Let's say that we are incompatibilists, convinced by van Inwagen's consequence argument. Then we must accept the 'no choice principle', which says that if we have no choice about x , and no choice about the fact that if x , then y , we have no choice about y .

van Inwagen argues that this principle shows that we act freely much less often than one might have thought.

In particular, he thinks that it shows that we have no choice about whether we will perform actions of the following types:

- Acts which I regard as indefensible. These are acts which I regard as clearly wrong, and which I have no desire to perform, and I see no objection at all to not doing the act.
- Acts which I want very much to do, and which I have no desire not to do, and which I do not see as wrong in any way.
- Acts which I regard as the obvious thing to do in the circumstances, and that I see no reason at all not to do, and which I don't desire not to do.

In the cases of each of these types of action, van Inwagen thinks, we can run an instance of the consequence argument. After all, in each case I have no choice (at the time of action) about whether I have the relevant attitude toward the act (regarding it as indefensible, having a strong unopposed desire to do it, etc.) and no choice about the fact that if I have this attitude, I will perform the act.

This last point is the most contentious. Why does van Inwagen think that I have no choice about the fact that if I regard an act as indefensible, I will not do it?

If van Inwagen is right, then, he says, we can only be free with respect to actions if it is not absolutely clear to me what the thing to do in the relevant situation is.

He thinks that there are three sorts of cases in which it is not absolutely clear to me what the thing to do is:

1. Cases in which one has to decide between two things which are, for the agent's purposes, interchangeable.

2. Cases of duty vs. inclination.
3. Cases of ‘incommensurable values.’ These are cases in which one is deciding what value ought to guide one’s action, as opposed to cases in which

van Inwagen thinks that cases of type (1) are not cases in which we have a choice about what we will do; his argument seems to be that there is no basis for making such a choice. Is he right about this?

Here, at the least, he seems to be denying the reality of the most common examples of free action from students in Intro to Philosophy, which invariably involve ordering at restaurants and raising one’s finger.

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The problem such cases pose for agent-causal theories: this is not something which van Inwagen discusses, but it seems to me that if van Inwagen is right that we have no choice about whether we will perform acts of the sorts he describes, then this is a problem for agent-causal theories since it seems that if such theories were true, we would be free to perform acts of these sorts.

On the other hand, if one thinks that cases of type (1) really are cases in which we have free will, these cases look pretty good for the agent-causal theory.

Some further thoughts on agent-causal theories; comparing agent-causal theories to theories in which my agent-causing a brain event is replaced by an event like my deciding to ϕ . Do agent-causal theories have any advantage over these sorts of theories?