

the case
for
free will

free will
and
determinism

against
compatibilist
free will

against
incompatibilist
free will

Free will vs. determinism

the case
for
free will

free will
and
determinism

against
compatibilist
free will

against
incompatibilist
free will

We've been discussing the free will defense as a response to the argument from evil. This response assumes something about us: that we have free will.

But what does this mean?

To say that we have free will is to say that some of our actions are up to us; it is to say that, at least sometimes, we have the ability to choose what we do.

Is it true that some of our actions are up to us, and that we sometimes are able to choose what we will do?

This is the question we'll be asking ourselves for the next two weeks. Our discussion will involve us considering the three strongest arguments **against** the view that we have free will.

But before doing that it is worth asking why there is any reason to accept the common view that we do have free will. Are there any arguments in favor of the reality of free will?

the case
for
free will

free will
and
determinism

against
compatibilist
free will

against
incompatibilist
free will

But before doing that it is worth asking why there is any reason to accept the common view that we do have free will. Are there any arguments in favor of the reality of free will?

There are. The first argument starts with an apparent fact about moral responsibility: it seems (at least to a first approximation) that we are only responsible for actions which we freely perform. If you find out that someone's action was not done of their own free will, then it would be odd to blame them for their action.

But it also seems that people are at least sometimes genuinely responsible for their actions.

This suggests the following simple argument:

the case
for
free will

free will
and
determinism

against
compatibilist
free will

against
incompatibilist
free will

This suggests the following simple argument:

The argument from moral responsibility

1. If someone's action is not free, then they are not responsible for that action.
2. We are all responsible for at least some of our actions.

C. At least some of our actions are free.

How should someone who does not believe in free will respond?

the case
for
free will

free will
and
determinism

against
compatibilist
free will

against
incompatibilist
free will

A second argument is similar, and starts from an apparent fact about relationships: genuinely loving relationships of a certain sort must be freely entered into.

This is not true of all loving relationships; for example, the love of a child for a parent is an obvious counterexample. But certain kinds of loving relationships, like those between spouses or friends, seem to require an element of freedom.

But if this is true then we can construct an argument in the obvious way:

The argument from loving relationships

1. Certain kinds of loving relationships must be freely entered into.
 2. These kinds of loving relationships exist.
-
- C. People in such relationships exercise free will.

the case
for
free will

free will
and
determinism

against
compatibilist
free will

against
incompatibilist
free will

A third argument begins with the premise that it really, really, seems as though we have free will.

This, by itself, might not seem to be a very impressive fact. But consider for a moment your beliefs about the color of the carpet. Do you have any reason for believing that the carpet is a certain color other than that it really seems to you to be that color?

Of course, you wouldn't form your belief about the carpet if you knew that you were wearing tinted glasses or otherwise subject to an illusion of some kind. But your current situation is not like that; you have no particular reason to doubt that the world is as it seems.

This might suggest the following general rule:

If the world seems to you to be some way, and you have no reason to doubt that the world is that way, then you should believe that the world is that way.

the case
for
free will

free will
and
determinism

against
compatibilist
free will

against
incompatibilist
free will

This might suggest the following general rule:

If the world seems to you to be some way, and you have no reason to doubt that the world is that way, then you should believe that the world is that way.

But then we can argue as follows:

The argument from seeming

1. It seems to me that I have free will.
2. If the world seems to you to be some way, and you have no reason to doubt that the world is that way, then you should believe that the world is that way.
3. I have no reason to doubt that I have free will.

C. I should believe that I have free will.

the case
for
free will

free will
and
determinism

against
compatibilist
free will

against
incompatibilist
free will

The argument from seeming

1. It seems to me that I have free will.
 2. If the world seems to you to be some way, and you have no reason to doubt that the world is that way, then you should believe that the world is that way.
 3. I have no reason to doubt that I have free will.
-
- C. I should believe that I have free will.

What we are going to see over the next three classes is that premise (3) of this argument can be called into question.

the case
for
free will

free will
and
determinism

against
compatibilist
free will

against
incompatibilist
free will

What we are going to see over the next three classes is that premise (3) of this argument can be called into question.

To introduce our first challenge to the reality of free will, it will be useful to begin with the question of what makes an action free.

Consider the following two examples:

Jim likes to annoy Dwight. Knowing that Dwight is fastidious about his office space, Jim encases Dwight's stapler in jello.

Bob likes to bring his stapler to the dining hall. One day while perusing the dessert bar, he drops his stapler into the jello.

the case
for
free will

free will
and
determinism

against
compatibilist
free will

against
incompatibilist
free will

Jim likes to annoy Dwight. Knowing that Dwight is fastidious about his office space, Jim encases Dwight's stapler in jello.

Bob likes to bring his stapler to the dining hall. One day while perusing the dessert bar, he drops his stapler into the jello.

They both performed an act of putting a stapler into jello. But it seems that Jim's act was free, whereas Bob's was not. What's the difference?

What makes Jim's act free, and Bob's not?

One obvious difference is that Jim wanted to do this, whereas Bob did not. This gives us a suggestion for what makes an action free: it is free when the action is one that you want to do.

the case
for
free will

free will
and
determinism

against
compatibilist
free will

against
incompatibilist
free will

One obvious difference is that Jim wanted to do this, whereas Bob did not. This gives us a suggestion for what makes an action free: it is free when the action is one that you want to do.

But, arguably, this is a bit too simple.

Let's look at another pair of cases.

Sam is a heroine addict, but desperately wants to be rid of his addiction. One day he is overcome with desire and takes some of the drug.

Bill enjoys taking heroine. One day he has the opportunity to take the drug, and does so.

They both perform the act of taking heroine. But at least arguably Bill's act is free whereas Sam's is not. However, both desire to take heroine.

the case
for
free will

free will
and
determinism

against
compatibilist
free will

against
incompatibilist
free will

They both perform the act of taking heroine. But at least arguably Bill's act is free whereas Sam's is not. However, both desire to take heroine.

This suggests that freedom is not just doing what you desire.

Another more farfetched pair of cases brings out the same moral.

Maria likes pasta. One day she is in the dining hall, and eats some.

An evil neurosurgeon has implanted in Jane a chip which causes her to desire to eat pasta when in the dining hall. One day she eats some.

Again, both perform the same action, and both desire to perform that action. But it looks like Maria's action is free whereas (at least arguably) Jane's is not.

the case
for
free will

free will
and
determinism

against
compatibilist
free will

against
incompatibilist
free will

Again, both perform the same action, and both desire to perform that action. But it looks like Maria's action is free whereas (at least arguably) Jane's is not.

These cases suggest that we need something a little more complicated than the idea that free will is just doing what you want to do.

What could this more complicated account be?

One idea is that you have to not desire to perform the action, but also desire to have that desire. Consider the case of the addicts. It looks like Bill desires to desire heroine, whereas Sam does not.

Another idea is that it has to be true that if you did not desire the action, then you would have been able to avoid performing it.

We are not going to worry about the details here. The main point is that both approaches suggest what we might call a **psychological theory of free will**. According to psychological theories of free will, for an act to be free is for it to fit into your overall desires, beliefs, and other psychological states.

the case
for
free will

free will
and
determinism

against
compatibilist
free will

against
incompatibilist
free will

We are not going to worry about the details here. The main point is that both approaches suggest what we might call a **psychological theory of free will**. According to psychological theories of free will, for an act to be free is for it to fit into your overall desires, beliefs, and other psychological states.

We will find some reason to doubt psychological theories of free will. At this point, though, it looks like this general approach is a pretty plausible way to understand the distinction between free and un-free actions.

This is enough background to get into our challenges to the reality of freedom of the will.

Our topic today is the challenge to free will posed by **determinism**.

the case
for
free will

free will
and
determinism

against
compatibilist
free will

against
incompatibilist
free will

Our topic today is the challenge to free will posed by **determinism**.

More precisely, our topic is the relationship between freedom of the will and determinism, and a cluster of arguments which seem to show that free will is incompatible with both determinism and indeterminism, and hence impossible.

What is "determinism"?

““Determinism is the thesis that it is true at every moment that the way things then are determines a unique future, that only one of the alternative futures that may exist relative to a given moment is consistent with the laws of nature.””

The example of "rolling back history" as an illustration of what determinism implies.

It is common to use "determinism" as name for the thesis that we have no free will. This is the source of much confusion. **"Determinism" is the name of a thesis about the laws of nature, and that is all.**

the case
for
free will

free will
and
determinism

against
compatibilist
free will

against
incompatibilist
free will

““Determinism is the thesis that it is true at every moment that the way things then are determines a unique future, that only one of the alternative futures that may exist relative to a given moment is consistent with the laws of nature.””

It is common to use “determinism” as name for the thesis that we have no free will. This is the source of much confusion. **“Determinism” is the name of a thesis about the laws of nature, and that is all.**

The question of the compatibility of free will and determinism is then: can it ever be the case that choices A and B are open to you, despite the fact that the laws of nature (and the prior state of the universe) are consistent only with you doing one of those things?

The **incompatibilist** says ‘No.’ The **compatibilist** says ‘Yes.’

the case
for
free will

free will
and
determinism

against
compatibilist
free will

against
incompatibilist
free will

This gives us three possible views about freedom of the will.

freedom of the
will is real, and
compatible with
determinism

freedom of the
will is real, and
incompatible with
determinism

freedom of the will
is an illusion

It is worth noting two important things about these options.

The first is that if a psychological theory of free will is true, that would seem to count in favor of the first (compatibilist) option. After all, it seems clear that even if determinism were true we could have beliefs and desires. (These would be just the beliefs and desires we were determined to have.)

the case
for
free will

free will
and
determinism

against
compatibilist
free will

against
incompatibilist
free will

freedom of the
will is real, and
compatible with
determinism

freedom of the
will is real, and
incompatible with
determinism

freedom of the will
is an illusion

The first is that is a psychological theory of free will is true, that would seem to count in favor of the first compatibility option. After all, it seems clear that even if determinism were true we could have beliefs and desires. (These would be just the beliefs and desires we were determined to have.)

Further, nothing would stop some actions from fitting in the right way with these beliefs and desires. So nothing in determinism, it seems, could prevent exercises of free will **if** a psychological theory of free will is true.

the case
for
free will

free will
and
determinism

against
compatibilist
free will

against
incompatibilist
free will

freedom of the
will is real, and
compatible with
determinism

freedom of the
will is real, and
incompatible with
determinism

freedom of the will
is an illusion

The second thing to note is that if the free will defense is to have any hope of explaining the existence of evil in the world, it looks like the second option (incompatibilism) must be true. Can you see why?

If freedom of the will is an illusion, then the free will defense is obviously a non-starter.

But less obviously, if compatibility were true, it is hard to see why God could not have set up the world in such a way that it was determined to lead only to free actions which caused no evil. (Remember that this was Mackie's objection to the free will defense.)

the case
for
free will

free will
and
determinism

against
compatibilist
free will

against
incompatibilist
free will

freedom of the
will is real, and
compatible with
determinism

freedom of the
will is real, and
incompatible with
determinism

freedom of the will
is an illusion

The puzzle of free will is that it looks like there are strong arguments against both of the first two options. If that is right, then the very idea of free will is confused, and free will must be an illusion.

We can lay out this puzzle in terms of the following **master argument** against the reality of free will.

the case
for
free will

free will
and
determinism

against
compatibilist
free will

against
incompatibilist
free will

We can lay out this puzzle in terms of the following **master argument** against the reality of free will.

The master argument against the reality of free will

1. Free will is incompatible with determinism.
 2. If free will is incompatible with determinism, then there is no free will.
-
- C. There is no free will.

A compatibilist believer in free will rejects premise (1). An incompatibilist believer in free will rejects premise (2).

As we'll see, strong arguments can be given in support of both of these premises.

the case
for
free will

free will
and
determinism

against
compatibilist
free will

against
incompatibilist
free will

As we'll see, strong arguments can be given in support of both of these premises.

van Inwagen provides a defense of (1) with an argument which is called the **consequence argument**.

A way into the argument begins with van Inwagen's definition of the notion of an "untouchable" fact:

“Let us understand ‘x can’t do anything about y (and never could have)’ in the following very strong sense: ‘x can’t do any- thing about y (and never could have), no matter what knowledge x might have had and no matter how lucky x might have been’. Even in this very strong sense of the words, it remains true that there are facts that no human being can do anything about and that no human being in history could ever have done anything about: the four facts I have cited, and, of course, an enormous number of others. Let us call these facts “untouchable” facts.’”

the case
for
free will

free will
and
determinism

against
compatibilist
free will

against
incompatibilist
free will

“Let us understand ‘x can’t do anything about y (and never could have)’ in the following very strong sense: ‘x can’t do any- thing about y (and never could have), no matter what knowledge x might have had and no matter how lucky x might have been’. Even in this very strong sense of the words, it remains true that there are facts that no human being can do anything about and that no human being in history could ever have done anything about: the four facts I have cited, and, of course, an enormous number of others. Let us call these facts ‘untouchable’ facts.”

van Inwagen then suggests that the following principle holds of
untouchable facts:

If P is untouchable,
and if P, then Q is
untouchable, then Q
is untouchable.

As van Inwagen says, this principle seems intuitively very plausible: “how could I have a choice about something that is an inevitable consequence of something I have no choice about?”

But if this principle is true, we can show — with the assumption of two other plausible principles — that free will is inconsistent with determinism.

the case
for
free will

free will
and
determinism

against
compatibilist
free will

against
incompatibilist
free will

If determinism is true,
then only one future is
consistent with the state
of the world at a time +
the laws of nature.

If P is untouchable,
and if P, then Q is
untouchable, then Q
is untouchable.

Each of the additional principles in van Inwagen's argument says that
a certain kind of fact is untouchable:

Facts about
events which
happened in the
distant past are
untouchable.

Facts about the
laws of nature
are untouchable.

Putting these principles together, we can construct an argument for the
incompatibility of free will and determinism.

To state the consequence argument, let 'DINOSAUR' stand for the entire state of
the universe during some time when dinosaurs roamed the earth, and let
'DECISION' stand for my decision to eat a cheeseburger tonight.

the case for free will

free will and determinism

against compatibilist free will

against incompatibilist free will

Facts about events which happened in the distant past are untouchable.

Facts about the laws of nature are untouchable.

If determinism is true, then only one future is consistent with the state of the world at a time + the laws of nature.

DINOSAUR is untouchable.

If determinism is true, then the fact that if DINOSAUR then DECISION is untouchable.

If determinism is true, then the laws of nature say that if DINOSAUR happens, then DECISION happens.

If determinism is true, then DECISION is untouchable.

If P is untouchable, and if P, then Q is untouchable, then Q is untouchable.

the case
for
free will

free will
and
determinism

against
compatibilist
free will

against
incompatibilist
free will

The consequence argument

1. Facts about events which happened in the distant past are untouchable.
 2. DINOSAUR is untouchable. (1)
 3. If determinism is true, then only one future is consistent with the state of the world at a time + the laws of nature.
 4. If determinism is true, then the laws of nature say that if DINOSAUR happens, then DECISION happens. (3)
 5. Facts about the laws of nature are untouchable.
 6. If determinism is true, then the fact that if DINOSAUR then DECISION is untouchable. (4,5)
 7. If P is untouchable, and if P, then Q is untouchable, then Q is untouchable.
-
- C. If determinism is true, then DECISION is untouchable. (2,6,7)

This argument seems to show that the combination of four theses — that we have no choice about the past, no choice about the laws of nature, the principle, and determinism — rules out free will.

Since the first three of these theses seem quite plausible, the argument seems to show that if determinism is true, there are no free actions — and hence that free will is incompatible with determinism.

the case
for
free will

free will
and
determinism

against
compatibilist
free will

against
incompatibilist
free will

Since the first three of these theses seem quite plausible, the argument seems to show that if determinism is true, there are no free actions — and hence that free will is incompatible with determinism.

This was the first premise of our master argument:

The master argument against the reality of free will

1. Free will is incompatible with determinism.
 2. If free will is incompatible with determinism, then there is no free will.
-
- C. There is no free will.

If you find the consequence argument plausible, then it is natural to reject premise (2) of this argument. What's so bad about saying that free will is real, and incompatible with determinism?

But, as we'll now see, this premise can also be given a plausible defense.

One way to introduce this defense is with the following quote from David Hume:

“It is commonly allowed that mad-men have no liberty. But were we to judge by their actions, these have less regularity and constancy than the actions of wise-men, and consequently are farther removed from necessity. Our way of thinking in this particular is, therefore, absolutely inconsistent.”

Hume's basic thought is that there is a big difference between **free** actions and actions which are **random** or **chance**.

the case
for
free will

free will
and
determinism

against
compatibilist
free will

against
incompatibilist
free will

the case
for
free will

free will
and
determinism

against
compatibilist
free will

against
incompatibilist
free will

Hume's basic thought is that there is a big difference between **free** actions and actions which are **random** or **chance**.

Here's a thought experiment:

The Randomizer

Scientists have created a small device called a Randomizer. Pushing a button on the Randomizer starts an indeterministic process which results in a 0 or a 1. Alex's brain is hooked up to a Randomizer. When he is deciding whether to do something, this pushes the button on the Randomizer. If the Randomizer generates a 1, this makes him do the action. If the Randomizer generates a 0, this makes him not do the action.

Now ask yourself: is Alex's choice free? It seems very clear that it is not. It is undetermined by facts prior to the relevant run of the Randomizer, but it is random. It is not up to Alex what he does; and free actions have to be up to the person doing the action.

the case
for
free will

free will
and
determinism

against
compatibilist
free will

against
incompatibilist
free will

Now ask yourself: is Alex's choice free? It seems very clear that it is not. It is undetermined by facts prior to the relevant run of the Randomizer, but it is random. It is not up to Alex what he does; and free actions have to be up to the person doing the action.

This suggests:

No random acts
are free.

But now consider the idea that free will requires the falsity of determinism. If this is true, then it must be that free actions (or their immediate causes) are undetermined:

If free will is incompatible
with determinism, then, if
there are free actions,
those actions are
undetermined.

the case
for
free will

free will
and
determinism

against
compatibilist
free will

against
incompatibilist
free will

No random acts
are free.

If free will is incompatible
with determinism, then, if
there are free actions,
those actions are
undetermined.

But consider what an undetermined act would be. It would be an action which is such that the entire history of the universe up to that point is consistent with the act either happening or not happening. So if the act happens, nothing **makes** it happen. In particular, nothing that the person who does the action, or anyone else, does makes the action happen.

So it is not up to anyone whether the action happens. But this suggests:

If an action is
undetermined,
then it is
random.

the case
for
free will

free will
and
determinism

against
compatibilist
free will

against
incompatibilist
free will

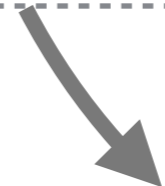
No random acts
are free.

If free will is incompatible
with determinism, then, if
there are free actions,
those actions are
undetermined.

If an action is
undetermined,
then it is
random.

If free will is incompatible
with determinism, then, if
there are free actions,
those actions are random.

If free will is incompatible
with determinism, then
there are no free actions.



the case
for
free will

free will
and
determinism

against
compatibilist
free will

against
incompatibilist
free will

The no-randomness argument

1. If free will is incompatible with determinism, then, if there are free actions, those actions are undetermined.
 2. If an action is undetermined, then it is random.
 3. If free will is incompatible with determinism, then, if there are free actions, those actions are random. (1,2)
 4. No random acts are free.
-
- C. If free will is incompatible with determinism, then there are no free actions.

The conclusion of this argument is premise (2) of the master argument against the reality of free will.

How should the defender of free will reply to this argument?

the case
for
free will

free will
and
determinism

against
compatibilist
free will

against
incompatibilist
free will

2. If an action is
undetermined,
then it is
random.

It is natural to focus on the second premise.

There are two main arguments in favor of this premise.

The first is related to the “Randomizer” example we have already discussed. The idea is that if some action of mine is undetermined, it is just **as if** I had a Randomizer implanted in my brain. What could the relevant difference be between the Randomizer and some non-deterministic process in my brain?

the case
for
free will

free will
and
determinism

against
compatibilist
free will

against
incompatibilist
free will

2. If an action is
undetermined,
then it is
random.

The second is based on a different thought experiment.

The roll-back

You have the power to roll back history to an earlier moment and then re-start it. Veronica has just decided that she wants to major in Philosophy rather than Accounting, and this decision was undetermined. So you roll back history to a moment just before her decision; this time, Veronica chooses Accounting. You do this 800 times. In 412 of the trials, she chooses Philosophy; in the other 388, she chooses Accounting.

If we consider trial #801, it will seem to us random which one Veronica chooses. But there is no real difference between the 801st trial and the first one. So all undetermined actions are random.

the case
for
free will

free will
and
determinism

against
compatibilist
free will

against
incompatibilist
free will

The no-randomness argument

1. If free will is incompatible with determinism, then, if there are free actions, those actions are undetermined.
 2. If an action is undetermined, then it is random.
 3. If free will is incompatible with determinism, then, if there are free actions, those actions are random. (1,2)
 4. No random acts are free.
-
- C. If free will is incompatible with determinism, then there are no free actions.

One way to state the conclusion of the no-randomness argument is that free will **requires** determinism.

the case
for
free will

free will
and
determinism

against
compatibilist
free will

against
incompatibilist
free will

One way to state the conclusion of the no-randomness argument is that free will **requires** determinism.

But this is very bad news for free will if you found the consequence argument convincing. For that argument seems to show that free will is **incompatible** with determinism.

And if free will both requires determinism and is incompatible with it, then the very idea of free will seems to be contradictory. If this is right, then the idea of a free action is like the idea of a married bachelor.

The problem is that our idea of free action seems to require that those actions be both undetermined and under our control. The master argument is based on the idea that no action could have both of these features.

the case
for
free will

free will
and
determinism

against
compatibilist
free will

against
incompatibilist
free will

The problem is that our idea of free action seems to require that those actions be both undetermined and under our control. The master argument is based on the idea that no action could have both of these features.

The master argument against the reality of free will

1. Free will is incompatible with determinism.
2. If free will is incompatible with determinism, then there is no free will.

C. There is no free will.

But: it really does seem like we have free will! If you agree with that, then it seems that this is not a belief which we should give up easily.

Then the question to ask yourself is whether you think that the consequence argument or the no-randomness argument is more likely to have a flaw — and what that flaw might be.