

Lecture 1: The Problem(s) of Free Will & Determinism

1. What is determinism?

The thesis that, given the past state of universe together with the laws of nature, there is only one possible future.

- Determinism ≠ predictability:

World might be deterministic and yet we be unable to predict what will happen.

- Determinism ≠ fatalism:

Determinism is about how our world works and fatalism is about our power (or lack thereof) to affect that world. (See lecture 4.)

2. What is free will?

Phenomenology: It certainly *feels like* we have free will.

Rough initial definition to start debate:

Free Will: the capacity of rational agents to choose a course of action from various alternatives.

3. An incompatibility argument

P1: If determinism is true then everything, including all human actions, are causally necessitated by the prior state of the universe in accordance with the laws of nature.

P2: If human actions are causally necessitated by the past together with the laws of nature, then you cannot ever do otherwise than what you do, unless you can falsify the laws of nature or change the past.

P3: You cannot falsify the laws of nature or change the past.

P4: If you cannot act otherwise than you do, then you lack FW.

Conc.: Hence if determinism is true then we lack free will.¹

Incompatibilists accept the incompatibility of free will & determinism.

Compatibilists reject the incompatibility of free will and determinism.

¹ Adapted from Watson (2003) p.2-3.

One traditional compatibilist response

'Could have done otherwise' means 'would have done otherwise if I had desired to do otherwise'. (Hobbes)

E.g. When choosing lunch, doesn't matter if your choice of soup was determined. You had free will because if you'd desired a sandwich, you'd have taken one.

Two incompatibilist rejoinders

1. Just pushes problem back onto our desires, since they are determined too?
2. 'Could have done otherwise' just doesn't mean the same as 'Would have done otherwise if I had desired to do so'.

E.g. I narrowly miss running you over. I say: "I didn't see you there! I could have hit you!". Not best understood as "I would have hit you if I'd desired to".

4. Further worry: moral responsibility

P5: If we cannot ever act otherwise than we do, we cannot appropriately hold one another responsible.

C2: If determinism is true, we cannot appropriately hold one another morally responsible.

*Reasoning: If determinism is true, we cannot act otherwise than we do (from P2 & P3).
Thus, we cannot be held responsible for our actions (from P5).*

One 'responsibility compatibilist' response: Frankfurt cases

Frankfurt challenges alleged incompatibility of determinism & responsibility.

Argues: responsibility doesn't require alternative possibilities be open to us.

E.g. You enter voting booth undecided. Unbeknown to you, a scientist monitors your brainwave patterns. If she sees patterns implying you'll vote anyone but Trump, she'll send targeted impulses to make you change course & vote Trump. You decide to vote Trump on your own.

Seems you never had genuine alternative possibilities open to you regarding who you voted for. Nevertheless, you seem responsible for your vote.

Responsibility incompatibilist rejoinder:

Are there really *no* alternative possibilities open to you in the voting booth?

References:

- Watson, G. (2003). Introduction. In G. Watson, *Free Will* (pp. 1-25). Oxford University Press.
Frankfurt, H. (1969). 'Alternative Possibilities and Moral Responsibility'. *Journal of Philosophy* 66
(<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2023833>).