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A CONTEMPORARY  
INTRODUCTION TO

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Free Will

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## The Free Will Problem

### *1. Introduction*

“There is a disputation that will continue till mankind is raised from the dead, between the necessitarians and the partisans of free will.”

These are the words of Jalalu'ddin Rumi, twelfth-century Persian poet and mystic. The problem of free will and necessity (or determinism), of which he speaks, is one of the most difficult and “perhaps the most voluminously debated of all philosophical problems,” according to a recent history of philosophy. Debates about free will have affected and been affected by both religion and science.

In his classic poem *Paradise Lost*, John Milton describes the angels debating how some of them could have sinned of their own free wills given that God had made them intelligent and happy. Why would they have done it? And why were they responsible for their sins rather than God, since God had made them the way they were and had complete foreknowledge of what they would do? While puzzling over such questions even the angels, according to Milton, were “in Endless Mazes lost” (not a comforting thought for us humans).

On the scientific front, issues about free will lead us to ask about the nature of the physical universe and our place in it (Are we determined by physical laws and movements of the atoms?), about human psychology and the springs of action (Can our actions be predicted by those who know our psychology?), and about social conditioning (Are we determined to be the kinds of persons we are by heredity and environment, birth and upbringing?).

In philosophy, debates about free will lead to issues about crime and punishment, blameworthiness and responsibility, coercion and control, mind and body, necessity and possibility, time and chance, right and wrong, and much more. In consequence, the free will problem is not fitted easily into one area of philosophy. It touches ethics, social and political philosophy, philosophy of mind, metaphysics, theory of knowledge, philosophy of law, philosophy of science, and philosophy of religion.

To understand what this "problem of free will" is and why it has puzzled so many minds for centuries, the best way to begin is with two familiar notions we all understand—or think we understand—freedom and responsibility.

## 2. Freedom

Nothing could be more important than freedom to the modern age. All over the world, people clamor for freedom; and the trend (in spite of frequent violent resistance to it) is toward societies that are more free. But why do we want freedom? The simple, and not totally adequate, answer is that to be more free is to be able to satisfy more of our desires. In a free society, we can buy what we want and travel where we please. We can choose what movies to see, what books to read, whom to vote for.

But these freedoms are what you might call *surface* freedoms. What we mean by *free will* runs deeper than these ordinary freedoms. To see how, suppose we had maximal freedom to make choices of the kinds just noted to satisfy our desires, yet the choices we actually made were in fact manipulated by others, by the powers that be. In such a world we would have a great deal of everyday freedom to do whatever we wanted, yet our freedom of *will* would be severely limited. We would be free to *act* or to choose *what* we willed, but we would not have the ultimate power over what it is that we willed. Other persons would be pulling the strings, not by coercing or forcing us to do things against our wishes, but by manipulating us into having the wishes they wanted us to have.

Now it may occur to you that, to some extent, we do live in such a world, where we are free to make choices but may be manipulated into making many of them by advertising, television, spin doctors, salespersons, marketers, and sometimes even by friends, parents, relatives, rivals, or enemies. One sign of how important free will is to us is that people feel revulsion at such manipulation and feel demeaned by it when they find out it has been done to them. They realize that they may have thought they were their own persons because they were choosing in accord with their own desires and purposes, but all along their desires and purposes had

been manipulated by others who wanted them to choose exactly as they did. Such manipulation is demeaning because, when subjected to it, we realize we were not our own persons; and having free will is about being your own person.

The problem is nicely illustrated by twentieth-century utopian novels, such as Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* and B. F. Skinner's *Walden Two*. (You may be familiar with more recent films or science fiction works with similar themes.) In the futuristic societies described in these classic works, people can have and do what they will or choose, but only to the extent that they have been conditioned since birth by behavioral engineers or neurochemists to will or choose what they can have and do. In *Brave New World*, the lower-class workers are under the influence of powerful drugs, so that they do not think about things they cannot have. They are quite content to play miniature golf all weekend. They can do what they want, but their wants are limited and controlled by drugs.

The citizens in Skinner's *Walden Two* have it better than the workers in *Brave New World*. Yet the desires and purposes of those who live in Walden Two are also covertly controlled, in this case by behavioral engineers. Citizens of Walden Two live collectively in what can be described as a rural commune; and because they share duties of farming and raising children, they have plenty of leisure. They pursue arts, sciences, and crafts, engage in musical performances, and enjoy what appears to be a pleasant existence. Indeed, the leading figure of the novel, a fellow named Frazier, who founded Walden Two, forthrightly says that their pleasant existence is brought about by the fact that, in his community, persons can do whatever they want or choose because they have been behaviorally conditioned since childhood to want and choose only what they can have and do.

Frazier then adds provocatively that, in his view, Walden Two "is the freest place on earth," since people there can choose and do anything they want. And in a sense he is right. There is no need for *coercion* in Walden Two or for *punishment* (there are no prisons). No one has to be forced to do anything against his or her will. No one harasses the citizens, and no one has to harass them. Yet we might wonder whether Walden Two is the freest place on earth. Is all this *surface* freedom in Walden Two not brought about at the expense of a *deeper* freedom of the will? The citizens of Walden Two can indeed do anything they want or will to do, but they do not have the ultimate say about what it is that they want or will. Their wills are determined by factors they do not control. Such an objection is in fact made by one of Frazier's critics in the novel, a philosopher named Castle who visits Walden Two.

But Frazier is untroubled by Castle's criticism. He admits that this supposedly deeper freedom of the will does not exist in Walden Two but

argues that it is no real loss. Echoing the novel's author, B. F. Skinner (who was a foremost defender of behaviorism in psychology), Frazier thinks this so-called freedom of the will—the freedom that Castle and other philosophers have trumpeted for centuries—is an illusion. We do not and cannot have such a freedom anyway, he says, inside *or* outside Walden Two. In our ordinary lives, we are just as much the products of upbringing and social conditioning as the citizens of Walden Two, though we may delude ourselves into thinking otherwise. We may think we are the creators or originators of our own wills only because we are unaware of most of the genetic, psychological, and social factors that influence us. Moreover, the idea that we could be ultimate or “original” creators of our own wills—that we could somehow be “causes of ourselves”—is an impossible ideal, according to Frazier. If we trace the psychological springs of actions back to their origins—back to childhood, say—we find that we were less free then, not more.

Thus the gauntlet is thrown down by Frazier—echoing Skinner and many other modern thinkers: the so-called deeper freedom of the will is an illusion dreamt up by philosophers and theologians before we understood more about the hidden causes of behavior. It is an outdated idea that has no place in modern scientific picture of the world or of human beings. (Note that the philosopher who defends this “outdated” notion in Walden Two is given the medieval-sounding name “Castle.”) Why sacrifice the everyday freedoms that really matter to us—freedoms from coercion, punishment, constraint, oppression, and the like—for an illusory freedom of the will that we cannot have anyway?

### 3. Responsibility

Reflecting in this way on the idea of *freedom* is one path to the free will problem. Another path is accessed by reflecting on the notion of *responsibility*. Free will is also intimately related to notions of accountability, blameworthiness, and praiseworthiness for actions.

Suppose a young man is on trial for an assault and robbery in which the victim was beaten to death. Let us say we attend his trial and listen to the evidence in the courtroom. At first, our attitude toward the defendant is one of anger and resentment. What the young man did was horrible. But as we listen daily to how he came to have the mean character and perverse motives he did have—a sad story of parental neglect, child abuse, sexual abuse, and bad role models—some of our resentment against the defendant is shifted over to the parents and others who abused and mistreated him. We begin to feel angry with them as well as with him. (Note how

natural this reaction is.) Yet we aren't quite ready to shift all the blame away from the young man himself. We wonder whether some residual responsibility may not belong to him. Our questions become: To what extent is *he* responsible for becoming the sort of person he now is? Was his behavior *all* a question of bad parenting, societal neglect, social conditioning, and the like, or did he have any role to play in choosing it?

These are crucial questions about free will, and they are questions about what may be called the young man's ultimate responsibility. We know that parenting and society, genetic makeup and upbringing, have an influence on what we become and what we are. But were these influences entirely *determining*, or did they “leave anything over” for us to be responsible for? That is what we want to know about the young man. The question of whether he is merely a victim of bad circumstances or has some residual responsibility for being what he is—the question, that is, of whether he became the person he is *of his own free will*—seems to depend on whether these other factors were or were not *entirely* determining.

### 4. Determinism and Necessity

The problem of free will arises in human history when, by reflections such as these, people are led to suspect that their actions might be determined or necessitated by factors unknown to them and beyond their control. This is why doctrines of *determinism* or *necessity* are so important in the history of debates about free will. Whenever determinist doctrines arise, their appearance signals that humans have reached a higher stage of self-consciousness in which they begin to wonder about the sources of their behavior and about their place as actors in the universe. Philosophy begins in *wonder*, said the ancient philosopher Aristotle, and no wondering affects our self-image more profoundly than this one about free will. We do not want to be pawns in some unknown chess game.

Doctrines of determinism have taken many historical forms. People have wondered at different times whether their choices and actions might be determined by fate or by God, by laws of physics or laws of logic, by heredity and environment, by unconscious motives or psychological or social conditioning, and so on. But there is a core idea running through all historical doctrines of determinism that reveals why they are a threat to free will—whether the doctrines be fatalistic, theological, logical, physical, psychological, or social. According to this core idea:

An event (such as a choice or action) is *determined* when there are conditions obtaining earlier (such as the decrees of fate or the foreordaining acts of God or antecedent causes plus laws of nature)

whose occurrence is a sufficient condition for the occurrence of the event. In other words, it *must* be the case that, *if* these earlier determining conditions obtain, then the determined event will occur.

In more familiar terms, we say that a determined event is *inevitable* or *necessary* (it cannot but occur), given the determining conditions. If fate decreed or God foreordained (or the laws of nature and antecedent causes determined) that John would choose at a certain time to go to Samarra, then John *will* choose at that time to go to Samarra. Determinism is thus a kind of necessity, but it is a conditional necessity. A determined event does not have to occur, no matter what else happens (it need not be *absolutely* necessary). But it must occur when the determining conditions have occurred. If the decrees of fate had been different or the past had been different in some way, John may have been determined to go to Damascus rather than to Samarra. Historical doctrines of determinism refer to different determining conditions. But all doctrines of determinism imply that every event, or at least every human choice and action, is determined by some determining conditions in this sense.

### 5. Free Choices and Open Futures

To see where the conflict lies between determinism and free will, consider again what free will requires. We believe we have free will when we view ourselves as agents capable of influencing the world in various ways. Open alternatives, or alternative possibilities, seem to lie before us. We reason and deliberate among them and choose. We feel (1) it is “up to us” what we choose and how we act; and this means we could have chosen or acted otherwise. As Aristotle noted: when acting is “up to us,” so is not acting. This “up-to-us-ness” also suggests that (2) the ultimate sources of our actions lie in us and not outside us in factors beyond our control.

If free will implies these conditions, one can see why determinism would be a threat to free will. If one or another form of determinism were true, it seems that it would *not* be (1) “up to us” what we chose from an array of alternative possibilities, since only one alternative would be possible. And it seems that the (2) sources or origins of our actions would not be “in us” but in something else (such as the decrees of fate, the foreordaining acts of God, or antecedent causes and laws of nature) outside us and beyond our control.

To illustrate these conflicts, suppose Molly has just graduated from law school and has a choice between joining a large law firm in Dallas or a smaller firm in Austin. If Molly believes her choice is a *free* choice (made

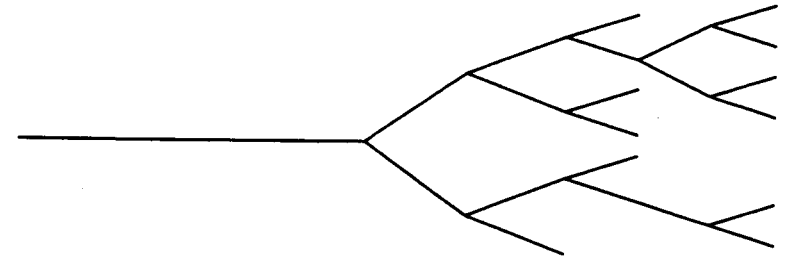


Figure 1.1 A Garden of Forking Paths

“of her own free will”), she must believe both options are “open” to her while she is deliberating. She could choose either one. (If she did not believe this, what would be the point of deliberating?) But that means she must believe there is more than one possible path into the future available to her and it is “up to her” which of these paths will be taken. Such a picture of an open future with forking paths—a “garden of forking paths,” we might call it—is essential to our understanding of free will. Such a picture of different possible paths into the future is also essential, we might even say, to what it means to be a person and to live a human life.

But determinism threatens this picture, for it seems to imply that there really is only one possible path into the future, not many. And yet, first impressions are an unreliable guide on a subject as contentious and difficult as free will. We shall see that many philosophers and scientists, especially in modern times, have argued that, despite appearances to the contrary, determinism poses no real threat to free will, or at least to any kind of freedom or free will “worth wanting” (as Daniel Dennett has put it). The open future or garden of forking paths depicted in figure 1.1 looks convincing, they say, but it hides a multitude of puzzles and confusions.

So the question of whether determinism is true (“the Determinist Question”) is not the only question that must concern us as we begin our inquiries into free will. We must also consider whether determinism really does conflict with free will. (This second question is often called “the Compatibility Question.”) Let us look at these two questions in turn.

### 6. The Determinist Question and Modern Science

Many people wonder why worries about determinism persist today, when universal determinism is no longer accepted even in the physical sciences, which were once the strongholds of determinism. In the eighteenth

century, a great physicist, the Marquis de Laplace, imagined that a super-intelligent being (often called Laplace's Demon), knowing all the physical facts about the universe at one moment and applying Newton's laws of motion, could know everything that is going to happen in the future, down to the minutest detail.

This Laplacian or Newtonian vision of universal physical determinism was taken for granted by many scientists and philosophers until the end of the nineteenth century, but it can no longer be taken for granted today. You are probably familiar with the claim that modern quantum physics has introduced indeterminism or chance into the physical world. Much of the behavior of elementary particles, it is said, from quantum jumps in atoms to radioactive decay, is not precisely predictable and can be explained only by statistical, not deterministic, laws. We are also told that the uncertainty and indeterminacy of this world of quantum physics, according to the standard view of it, is not due to our limitations as knowers, but to the unusual nature of elementary particles themselves, such as protons and electrons, which have both wavelike and particle-like properties. No superintelligence (not even God perhaps) could know the exact positions and momenta of all the particles of the universe at a given moment because the particles do not *have* exact positions and momenta at the same time (the Heisenberg uncertainty principle); hence their future behavior is not precisely predictable or determined.

One might think these indeterministic developments in modern physics would have disposed of philosophical worries about free will. Why be concerned that free will conflicts with determinism if determinism is not even true in the physical world? But the interesting fact is that despite these developments in physics, worries about free will did not go away in the twentieth century. Concerns about determinism of human behavior persist to this day, and debates about free will have become more heated than ever. Why is this so? There are four reasons why indeterministic developments in modern physics have not disposed of traditional concerns about free will and determinism.

First, the new quantum world of elementary particles is as mysterious as free will itself, and there is still much debate about how to interpret it. Standard views of quantum physics hold that the behavior of elementary particles involves chance and is undetermined. But these standard views have been challenged; and there exist alternative interpretations of quantum theory that are deterministic.<sup>1</sup> These alternative interpretations are the minority view among physicists at present, and they are controversial. But they cannot be ruled out. There is also the possibility that modern quantum physics will one day be superseded by a more comprehensive theory that

is deterministic. So the question of determinism in the physical world is not finally settled. But it is true that modern physics does give us more reason to believe that indeterminism and chance might have a more significant role to play in the physical universe than did the classical physics of Newton and Laplace. So there may be more room for free will in nature, though this is not guaranteed.

But there is a second problem. Suppose it were true that the behavior of elementary particles is not always determined? What would this have to do with *human behavior*? Contemporary determinists often point out that, while quantum indeterminacy may be significant for elementary particles, such as electrons and protons, its indeterministic effects are usually insignificant in large physical systems such as the human brain and body.<sup>2</sup> Complex physical systems involving many particles and higher energies tend to be regular and predictable in their behavior, according to quantum physics itself. Thus, modern determinists, such as Ted Honderich, argue that we can continue to regard human behavior as determined "for all practical purposes" or "near-determined," whatever the truth may be about electrons and protons. And this is all that matters in free will debates.

A third point complicates matters even further. Suppose for the sake of argument that quantum jumps or other undetermined events in the brain or body *do* sometimes have large-scale undetermined effects on human behavior. How would this help with free will? Suppose a choice was the result of a quantum jump or other undetermined event in a person's brain. Would this be a *free* or responsible choice? Such undetermined effects in the brain or body would happen by chance and would be unpredictable and uncontrollable, like the sudden occurrence of a thought or the jerking of an arm that one could not predict or control. Such an effect would be quite the opposite of what we take free and responsible actions to be.

A similar objection was made against the ancient Epicurean philosophers, who had argued that the atoms must "swerve" in chance ways if there was to be room in nature for free will. How, asked the critics, would chance swerves of the atoms help to give us free will? It seems that undetermined events happening in the brain or body would occur spontaneously and would be more of a nuisance, or a curse, like epilepsy, than an enhancement of our freedom. If free will is not compatible with *determinism*, it does not appear to be compatible with *indeterminism* either, since indeterminism would seem to be mere chance.

To these considerations, we can add a fourth and final reason why indeterministic developments in modern physics have not disposed of worries

about free will and determinism. At the same time that determinism has been in retreat in the physical sciences in the past century, developments in sciences other than physics—in biology, biochemistry, and neuroscience, in psychiatry, psychology, and other social and behavioral sciences—have been moving in the opposite direction. These other sciences have convinced many persons that more of their behavior than previously believed is determined by causes unknown to them and beyond their control.

Developments in sciences other than physics that suggest determinism have been many, but they surely include a greater knowledge of the influence of genetics and heredity on human behavior. (Note the controversy caused by the recent mapping of the human genome, which naturally arouses fears of future control of behavior by genetic manipulation.) Other relevant scientific developments have raised more questions. We now have a greater awareness of biochemical influences on the brain: hormones, neurotransmitters, and the susceptibility of human moods and behavior to different drugs that radically affect the way we think and behave. The advent of psychoanalysis and other theories of unconscious motivation have proposed new ways of thinking about the human brain, no less than the development of computers and intelligent machines that can do many of the things we can do even though they are preprogrammed (like Deep Blue, the chess master computer). Comparative studies of animal and human behavior have further enriched our understanding, suggesting that much of our motivation and behavior is a product of our evolutionary history, and helping us to see the influences of psychological, social, and cultural conditioning upon upbringing and subsequent behavior.

It is difficult not to be influenced by these scientific developments, which we can read about in the newspapers every day. To be sure, these newly discovered influences on our behavior do not prove definitively that we lack free will. There may still be some leeway for us to exercise our free will in the midst of all the biological, psychological, and social influences upon us. But these new scientific developments in fields other than physics do show why worries about the determinism of human behavior persist in contemporary debates about free will, despite indeterministic developments in physics. And continuing worries about determinism of human behavior make the second pivotal question we are going to address (in the next chapter) all the more important, namely, the Compatibility Question: does determinism really conflict with free will, or are the two compatible? If there really is no conflict between free will and determinism, as many modern thinkers believe, then we do not have to worry about all these new scientific threats to our freedom. For we could still be free and responsible, even if determinism should turn out to be true.

### Suggested Reading

Three collections of readings on free will that deal with many of the topics of this book are Gary Watson (ed.) *Free Will* (Oxford, 2003), Robert Kane (ed.) *Free Will* (Blackwell, 2002), and Laura Waddell Ekstrom (ed.) *Agency and Responsibility: Essays on the Metaphysics of Freedom* (Westview, 2000). More advanced discussion of most of the topics of the book can be found in *The Oxford Handbook of Free Will* (Kane, ed., Oxford, 2002).





## Compatibilism

### 1. Introduction

The view that there is really is no conflict between determinism and free will—that free will and determinism are compatible—is known as *compatibilism*; and it is the first view about free will we shall consider. Compatibilism has become an increasingly popular doctrine in modern philosophy because it provides what seems to be a neat, simple solution to the free will problem. If there really is no conflict between free will and determinism, as compatibilists say, then the age-old problem of free will is resolved in one fell swoop.

Compatibilism was held by some ancient philosophers, like the Stoics, and perhaps Aristotle too, according to some scholars. But it has become especially popular since the seventeenth century. Influential philosophers of the modern era, such as Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, David Hume, and John Stuart Mill, were compatibilists. They saw compatibilism as a way of reconciling ordinary experience of being free with scientific views about the universe and human beings. Compatibilism remains popular among philosophers and scientists today for similar reasons. If compatibilists are right, we can have both freedom and determinism, and need not worry that future science will somehow undermine our ordinary conviction that we are free and responsible agents.

This is a comforting thought. But is compatibilism believable? In my experience, most persons resist the idea that free will and determinism might be compatible when they first encounter it. The idea that determinism might be compatible with freedom and responsibility looks at first like a “quagmire of evasion,” as William James called it, or a “wretched subterfuge” as Kant called the compatibilism of Hobbes and Hume. If

compatibilism is to be taken seriously by ordinary persons, they have to be talked out of this natural belief in the incompatibility of free will and determinism by means of philosophical arguments; and supplying such arguments is what compatibilists try to do.

### 2. Freedom as the Absence of Constraints

The first step in the compatibilists' argument is to ask us to reflect on what we ordinarily mean by saying actions or choices are “free.” What does it mean to say I am free to take the bus this morning? It does not mean I will actually take the bus, for I may choose not to take it. But I am free to take the bus, if I have the *power* or *ability* to take it, should I want or decide to do so. Freedom then is, first of all, a power or ability to do something, a power I may or may not choose to exercise.

Second, this power or ability, which is my freedom, entails that there are no *constraints* or *impediments* preventing me from doing what I want to do. I would not be free to take the bus if various things prevented me: such as being in jail or if some one had tied me up (physical restraint); or if someone were holding me at gunpoint, commanding me not to move (coercion); or if I were paralyzed (lack of ability); or if buses were not running today (lack of opportunity); or if fear of crowded buses compelled me to avoid them (compulsion), and so on.

Putting these thoughts together, compatibilists argue that to be free, as we ordinarily understand it, is (1) to have the *power* or *ability* to do what we want or desire to do, which in turn entails (2) an *absence of constraints* or *impediments* (such as physical restraints, coercion, and compulsion) preventing us from doing what we want. Let us call a view that defines freedom in terms of 1 and 2 “classical compatibilism.” Most traditional compatibilists, such as Hobbes, Hume, and Mill, were classical compatibilists in this sense. Hobbes stated the view succinctly, saying a man is free when he finds “no stop in doing what he has the will, desire or inclination to do.”<sup>1</sup> And Hobbes noted that if this is what freedom means, then freedom is compatible with determinism. For, as he put it, there may be no constraints or impediments preventing persons from doing what they “will or desire to do,” even if it should turn out that what they will or desire was determined by their past.

But doesn't freedom also require alternative paths into the future, and hence the freedom *to do otherwise*? How do classical compatibilists account for the freedom to do otherwise? They begin by defining the freedom to do otherwise in terms of the same conditions 1 and 2. You are free to do otherwise than take the bus if (1) you have the power or ability to

avoid taking it, which entails (2) that there are also no constraints preventing you from *not* taking the bus, if you wanted to (no one is holding a gun on you, for example, forcing you to get on the bus.)

Of course, an absence of constraints preventing you from doing otherwise does not mean you will actually do otherwise. But, for classical compatibilists, the freedom to do otherwise does mean that you *would* have done otherwise (nothing would have stopped you) *if* you had wanted or desired to do otherwise. And they argue that if the freedom to do otherwise has this *conditional* or *hypothetical* meaning (you *would* . . . , if you wanted to), then the freedom to do otherwise would also be compatible with determinism. For it may be that you *would* have done otherwise if you had wanted to, even though you did not in fact want to do otherwise, and even if what you wanted to do was determined.

### 3. Freedom of Will

Is this classical compatibilist account of freedom plausible? It does seem to capture the *surface freedoms* discussed in chapter 1. Surface freedoms, you may recall, were those everyday freedoms to buy what we want, walk where we please, take buses when we want to, without anything preventing us. These everyday freedoms do seem to amount to (1) the power or ability to do what we want (and the power to have done otherwise, if we had wanted to) and (2) doing so without any constraints or impediments getting in our way. But if the classical compatibilist analysis of freedom does capture these surface freedoms of *action* discussed in chapter 1, does it also capture the “deeper” freedom of the *will*?

Classical compatibilists respond to this question in two ways. First, they say:

It all depends on what you mean by “freedom of will.” In one sense, freedom of will has a perfectly ordinary meaning. For most of us, it means *freedom of choice* or *decision*. But freedom of choice or decision can be analyzed in the same way that we compatibilists analyze freedom of action generally. You are free to *choose* to lend money to a friend, for example, if (1) you have the power or ability to *choose* to lend the money in the sense that (2) no constraints would prevent you from making the choice, *if* you wanted to, and, in addition, nothing would have prevented you from *choosing otherwise* (choosing not to lend the money), if you had wanted to choose otherwise.

In short, compatibilists say that free choices or decisions can be treated like free actions of other kinds. For, choices or decisions can be subject to

constraints just like other kinds of actions; and when choices or decisions are subject to constraints, they are also not free. For example, you might have been brainwashed or hypnotized, so that you could not have chosen otherwise (chosen not to lend money), even *if* you wanted to. Conditions such as brainwashing and hypnosis are two further constraints that can take away freedom; and they sometimes take away even the freedom to *choose* what we would otherwise have wanted to choose. When brainwashing or hypnosis do this they take away our freedom of *will*.

Here is another example of constraint on choices or decisions. If a man holds a gun to your head and says “Your money or your life,” he is giving you a choice of sorts. You can choose to hand over your money or take a chance on losing your life. But in another sense, the man has not given you any *real* choice at all, if you believe he is serious. For the prospect of losing your life is so horrible this is no choice at all. Your choice to hand over the money is therefore not really free. It is *coerced*; and coercion is a constraint on your freedom of choice or freedom of will. The thief’s actions have kept you from making the choice you really wanted to make, which was to keep both money *and* life.

So the first response of compatibilists regarding “freedom of will” is to say that if freedom of will means what we usually mean by it—*unconstrained freedom of choice or decision*—then freedom of will can also be given a compatibilist analysis. You have freedom of will when nothing would have prevented you from choosing *or* from choosing otherwise *if* you had wanted to; and if this is what freedom of will means, they argue, then freedom of will (as well as freedom of action) is consistent with determinism.

### 4. If the Past Had Been Different

But compatibilists are aware that many persons are not going to be satisfied with this account of free will as mere unconstrained choice or decision. So they have a second response.

If you are still not satisfied with the above account of freedom of will, then it is no doubt because you are thinking of free will in some further sense than simply the ability to choose or decide *as* you will without constraint. You must be thinking of freedom of will in something like the ‘deeper’ sense of free will of chapter 1—as a kind of *ultimate* control over what you will or want in the first place: A control incompatible with your will’s being determined by any events in the past over which you did not have control. Now we compatibilists obviously can’t

capture *that* deeper sense of freedom of will, no matter what we do, because it is incompatible with determinism. But, as compatibilists, we believe that any so-called deeper freedom of the will—or any kind of free will that requires indeterminism—is incoherent anyway. No one *could* have a freedom of will of such a deeper kind.

Why do compatibilists believe that any kind of deeper freedom of will that requires indeterminism must be incoherent? Well, if determinism means (as it does): *same past, same future*, then, the denial of determinism—indeterminism—must mean: *same past, different possible futures*. (Think of the garden of forking paths of chapter 1.) But if that is what indeterminism means—same past, different possible futures—indeterminism has some odd consequences regarding free choices. Consider Molly again deliberating about whether to join the law firm in Dallas or the one in Austin. After much thought, let us say, Molly decided that the Dallas firm was a better one for her career plans and she chose it. Now if her choice was undetermined, she might have chosen differently (she might have chosen the Austin firm instead), *given the same past*—since that is what indeterminism requires: same past, different possible futures. But note what this requirement means in Molly's case: exactly the same prior deliberation, the same thought processes, the same beliefs, desires, and other motives (not a sliver of difference!) that led to Molly favoring and choosing the Dallas firm *might have issued in her choosing the Austin firm instead*.

That scenario makes no sense, say compatibilists. It would be senseless and irrational for Molly to choose the Austin firm, given exactly the same motives and prior process of reasoning that *in fact* led her to believe the Dallas firm was the better one for her career. To say that Molly "could have chosen otherwise" in these circumstances must mean something else, say compatibilists—something like the following: *if* Molly had had *different* beliefs or desires, or had reasoned differently, or *if* other thoughts had entered her mind before she chose the Dallas firm, *then* she might have come to favor the Austin firm instead and chosen it. But this more sensible interpretation of "could have done otherwise," say compatibilists, means only that Molly would have done otherwise, if things had been different—*if the past had been different in some way*. And such a claim, they insist, does not conflict with determinism. In fact, this interpretation of "could have chosen otherwise" perfectly fits the classical compatibilists' *conditional* or *hypothetical* analysis—"Molly could have chosen otherwise" means "She *would* have chosen otherwise, *if* she had wanted to (if her mind-set had been different in some way). And such a hypothetical interpretation of "could have chosen otherwise" is, as we have seen, compatible with determinism.

One's first thought when encountering this argument is that there must be some way around the conclusion that if Molly's choice is undetermined, she must have been able to choose otherwise "given exactly the same past." But in fact there is no easy way around this conclusion. For indeterminism, which is the denial of determinism, *does* mean "different possible futures, given the same past." In the diagram of forking paths of chapter 1, the single line going back into the past is just that: a single line indicating "same past"; while the multiple lines going into the future represent "different possible futures." By contrast, determinism means only one line into the future. If Molly really is free to choose different options at any time during her deliberation, and her choice is not determined, then she must be able to choose *either* path (the Dallas firm or the Austin firm), given the *same* past up to the moment when she chooses.

You can't cheat here by suggesting that if the past had been a *tiny bit* different, then Molly might have chosen differently (chosen the Austin firm). *Determinists* and *compatibilists* can say this: for they insist that Molly might have sensibly and rationally chosen otherwise only if the past had been different in some way (however small the difference). But persons who believe free choices cannot be determined must say that Molly may have chosen different possible futures, given the same past at the time she did choose. And this does seem to make choosing otherwise in the same circumstances arbitrary and irrational.

To sum up: compatibilists have a twofold response to the objection that their view accounts only for freedom of action but not for freedom of will. On the one hand, they say, if "freedom of will" means what we ordinarily mean by *free choices* or *decisions* (those that are uncoerced and unconstrained), then freedom of will can also be given a compatibilist analysis and can thus be seen to be compatible with determinism. On the other hand, if "freedom of will" has a stronger meaning—if it refers to some kind of "deeper" freedom of the will that is not compatible with determinism—then that deeper freedom of will is incoherent and is not something we can have anyway.

### 5. Constraint, Control, Fatalism, and Mechanism

So far, the compatibilist argument has been that people believe determinism conflicts with free will because they have confused ideas about *freedom*. But compatibilist arguments about freedom of action and will are only half of the compatibilists' case. They also argue that people mistakenly believe determinism and free will conflict because they also have confused ideas about *determinism*. Determinism, compatibilists insist, is not

the frightful thing we think it is. People believe determinism is a threat to freedom because they commonly confuse determinism with a host of other things that are a threat to freedom. But determinism does not imply these other threatening things, according to compatibilists. For example, they say:

1. "Don't confuse *determinism* with *constraint*, *coercion*, or *compulsion*." Freedom is the opposite of constraint, coercion, and compulsion; compatibilists insist; but it is not the opposite of determinism. Constraint, coercion, and compulsion act *against* our wills, preventing us from doing or choosing what we want. By contrast, determinism does *not* necessarily act against our wills; nor does it always prevent us from doing what we want. Causal determinism, to be sure, *does* mean that all events follow from earlier events in accordance with invariable laws of nature. But, say compatibilists, it is a mistake to think that laws of nature *constrain* us. According to A. J. Ayer (a noted twentieth-century compatibilist), many people think freedom is inconsistent with determinism because they have a mistaken image of natural causes or laws of nature "overmastering" us, forcing us against our wills. But, in fact, the existence of laws of nature indicates only that certain events follow others according to regular patterns. To be governed by laws of nature is not to be in chains.

2. "Don't confuse *causation* with *constraint*." Compatibilists also insist that it is constraints, not mere *causes* of any kind, that undermine freedom. Constraints *are* causes, but they are causes of special kinds: impediments or hindrances to our doing what we want, such as being tied up or paralyzed. Not all causes are impediments to freedom in this sense. In fact, some causes, such as muscular strength or inner strength of will, actually *enable* us to do what we want. It is therefore a mistake to think that actions are unfree simply because they are caused. Whether actions are free or not depends on what *kinds* of causes they have: some causes enhance our freedom, while other causes (i.e., constraints) hinder our freedom.

It is a further mistake, say compatibilists, to think that, when we act or choose freely in accordance with our wills, our actions are entirely *uncaused*. To the contrary, our free actions are caused by our characters and motives; and this state of affairs is a good thing. For if actions were not caused by our characters and motives, we could not be held responsible for the actions. They would not be *our* actions. This point was made in a well-known passage by perhaps the most influential classical compatibilist, David Hume:

Where [actions] proceed not from some *cause* in the character and disposition of the person who performed them, they can neither redound to his honour, if good; nor infamy, if evil. . . . The person is not answerable for them;

and as they proceeded from nothing in him that is durable and constant . . . it is impossible he can, upon their account, become the object of punishment or vengeance.<sup>2</sup>

Classical compatibilists follow Hume in saying that responsible actions cannot be uncaused; such actions must have the right kinds of causes—causes that come from inside our selves and express our characters and motives, rather than causes imposed upon us against our wills. It is a mistake to think that free will and determinism are not compatible because free actions should be uncaused. Free actions are *unconstrained*, not *uncaused*.

3. "Don't confuse *determinism* with *control* by other agents." Compatibilists can concede (and often do concede) that it *does* count against our freedom if we are controlled or manipulated by other *persons*. That is why sci-fi utopias, like *Brave New World* and *Walden Two*, where people are controlled by behavior engineers or neurochemists, seem to undermine human freedom. But compatibilists insist that determinism by itself does not necessarily imply that any other persons or agents are controlling our behavior or manipulating us.

Nature by itself "does not control us," says compatibilist Daniel Dennett, since nature is not an agent.<sup>3</sup> What is objectionable about control by other agents, Dennett argues—whether they be behavioral engineers or con men—is that other persons are using us as means to their ends, lord-ing it over us and making us conform to their wishes. We resent this kind of interference. But merely being determined does not imply that any other *agents* are interfering with us or using us in this way. So compatibilists can reject *Brave New World* and *Walden Two* scenarios, says Dennett, without giving up their belief that determinism is consistent with freedom and responsibility.

4. "Don't confuse *determinism* with *fatalism*." This is one of the most common confusions in free will debates. Fatalism is the view that whatever is going to happen, is going to happen, *no matter what we do*. Determinism alone does not imply such a consequence. What we decide and what we do would make a difference in how things turn out—often an enormous difference—even if determinism should be true. This important point was made by another influential classical compatibilist, John Stuart Mill:

A fatalist believes . . . not only that whatever is about to happen will be the infallible result of causes that precede it [which is what determinists believe], but moreover that there is no use in struggling against it; that it will happen however we may strive to prevent it. . . . [Thus, fatalists believe that a man's]

character is formed *for* him, and not *by* him; therefore his wishing it was formed differently is of no use; he has no power to alter it. This is a grand error. He has, to a certain extent, a power to alter his character. Its not being, in the ultimate resort, formed for him, is not inconsistent with its being, in part, formed *by* him as one of the immediate agents. His character is formed by his circumstances . . . but his own desire to mold it in a particular way is one of those circumstances, and by no means the least influential.<sup>4</sup>

Determinism, Mill is saying, does not imply that we have no influence on how things turn out, including the molding of our characters. We obviously do have such an influence, and determinism alone does not rule it out. Believing in fatalism, by contrast, can have fatal consequences. A sick man may excuse himself for not seeing a doctor saying: "If your time is up, it doesn't matter what you do about it." Or a soldier may use a familiar line for not taking precautions: "There's a bullet out there with your name on it. When it comes, you will not be able to avoid it, no matter what you do." Mill is saying that such fatalist claims do not follow merely from determinism. To think they do is a "grand error."

The claims of the sick man and the soldier are in fact examples of what the ancient philosophers called the "lazy sophism" ("sophism" meaning a fallacy of reasoning). The proper answers to the sick man and the soldier would be, "*Whether* your time is now up may depend in great part on whether you see a doctor; and *whether* any bullet out there right now has your name on it may depend on what precautions you take. So instead of sitting around doing nothing, see a doctor and take precautions." This is the response that compatibilists, such as Mill, would give to the "lazy sophism." Believing that determinism is compatible with freedom, they would say, should not make you a fatalist. Indeed this belief should convince you that your life is to some extent in your own hands, since how you deliberate can still make a difference in your future, even if determinism should turn out to be true.

*Sometimes* our deliberations do not matter to our fate, but not always. For example, Dennett describes a despairing man who jumps off a bridge intending to commit suicide. Halfway down, the man deliberates again, and thinks of life from a different perspective, deciding that perhaps suicide isn't a good idea after all. Now *this* man's deliberation no longer does matter to his fate. But ordinarily when we deliberate we are not in such desperate straits. Indeed, conditions like this man's are rare. Most of the time, say compatibilists, our deliberations do affect our future, even if determinism should be true.

5. "Don't confuse *determinism* with *mechanism*." Another common confusion, according to compatibilists, is to think that if determinism were true, we would all be machines, running mechanically, like watches,

robots, or computers. Or, alternatively, we would be like amoebae or insects and other lower creatures responding automatically, and with a fixed set of responses, to the stimuli of our environment. But, compatibilists insist, none of these consequences follows from determinism either.

Suppose it should turn out that the world is determined. There would still be an enormous difference between human beings, on the one hand, and amoebae and insects, or machines and robots, on the other. Unlike machines (even complex machines like computers) or robots, we humans have an inner conscious life of moods and feelings, and we react to the world accordingly. And unlike amoebae, insects, and other such creatures, we do not just react to the environment instinctually and in automatic ways. We reason and deliberate, question our motives, reflect on our values, make plans about the future, reform our characters, and make promises to others that we then feel obligated to keep.

Determinism does not rule out any of these capacities, say compatibilists, and they are the capacities that make us free and responsible beings, capable of moral action—as machines and insects are not. Determinism does not necessarily imply mechanical, inflexible, or automatic behavior either. Determinism is consistent with a whole spectrum of complexity and flexibility of behavior in living things, from the simplest amoeba all the way to human beings. The complexity and degrees of freedom of creatures in the world, from amoebae to humans, might differ incredibly, yet all these properties might be determined.

### 6. *Assessing Classical Compatibilism*

In summary, classical compatibilists say that our natural belief in the incompatibility of free will and determinism rests on confusions of two kinds—confusions about the nature of *freedom* and confusions about the nature of *determinism*. Once these confusions have been cleared up, they insist, we should see there is no necessary conflict between freedom and determinism. To assess the classical compatibilists' position, one must therefore ask whether their account of freedom really does capture what we mean by freedom of will and action; and one must ask whether the belief that determinism conflicts with free will does rest on confusions about determinism. Both these questions will be considered in the next chapter.

It is worth noting in conclusion, however, that classical compatibilists do seem to be right about certain things, whatever the final judgment may be about their view. They would appear to be right, for example, in saying determinism *in and of itself* does not imply *constraint, control by other agents, fatalism, or mechanism*. These *would* indeed rule out free will, but determinism does not necessarily imply them, and it would be a mistake to

believe determinism to be incompatible with free will *merely* because determinism implied them. Many people probably have confused determinism with constraint or control or fatalism or mechanism, and so thought determinism to be incompatible with free will for the wrong reasons.

But if these are bad reasons for thinking free will and determinism are incompatible, there may nonetheless be some good reasons. We may still wonder whether determinism *itself* might not conflict with free will—not because it implies constraint, control, and so on, but *just because it is determinism*. For it seems that if determinism is true, there is only one possible future (hence no garden of many forking paths into the future); and this fact alone seems to rule out the possibility of free will and responsibility for actions.

To this objection, compatibilists issue a challenge of their own. “If there is an argument to show that determinism *must* be incompatible with free will, *just because* it is determinism, and *not* because it implies constraint or control by others or fatalism or mechanism, then provide us with such a direct argument for the incompatibility of free will and determinism! In short, “prove it.” In the next chapter, we will consider how incompatibilists try to meet this challenge.

### *An Addendum on the Term Soft Determinism*

In many writings on free will, compatibilists are often referred to as *soft determinists*. Soft determinists are compatibilists who also believe that determinism is true. Classical compatibilists, such as Hobbes, Hume, and Mill, were also soft determinists, since they believed that determinism was true in addition to believing that freedom and determinism were compatible.

### Suggested Reading

A lively and readable defense of compatibilism is Daniel Dennett's *Elbow Room: The Varieties of Free Will Worth Wanting* (MIT, 1984). Defenses of classical compatibilism appear in essays by J.J.C. Smart (in Gary Watson, ed., *Free Will* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2nd ed., 2003]) and Kai Nielsen (in Robert Kane, ed., *Free Will*). Other selections from classical compatibilists are contained in Derk Pereboom, ed., *Free Will* (Hackett, 1997); and classical compatibilist positions are discussed in Ilham Dilman's historical introduction, *Free Will* (Routledge, 1999).



## Incompatibilism

### *1. The Consequence Argument*

The popularity of compatibilism among modern philosophers and scientists means that *incompatibilists*—those who hold the traditional belief that free will and determinism are in conflict—must provide arguments to support their position. Incompatibilists cannot merely rely on their intuitions about forking paths into the future to make their case, as in chapter 1. They must back up their intuitions with arguments that show why free will and determinism must be incompatible. New arguments for incompatibilism have indeed been proposed in modern philosophy to meet this challenge. The most widely discussed of these new arguments for the incompatibility of free will and determinism is the subject of this chapter.

The argument is called the Consequence Argument, and it is stated informally as follows by one of its proponents, Peter van Inwagen:

If determinism is true, then our acts are the consequences of the laws of nature and events in the remote past. But it is not up to us what went on before we were born; and neither is it up to us what the laws of nature are. Therefore the consequences of these things (including our own acts) are not up to us.<sup>1</sup>

To say it is not “up to us” what “went on before we were born,” or “what the laws of nature are,” is to say that there is nothing we can now do to change the past or alter the laws of nature (such things are beyond our control). This gives us two premises of the Consequence Argument.

- (1) There is nothing we can now do to change the past.
- (2) There is nothing we can now do to change the laws of nature.