

Compatibilism¹

This handout follows the handout on ‘Determinism’. You should read that handout first.

In ‘Midgley on human evil and free will’, we note that Mary Midgley argues that, when understood correctly, determinism and free will are compatible. In this handout, we consider a number of ways in which compatibilism has been defended by other philosophers.

COMPATIBILISM I: FREE WILL AS WILLED ACTION

Compatibilism is the view that determinism is not incompatible with free will, i.e. even if determinism is true, we still have free will.

A first form of compatibilism argues that to have free will is simply for one’s choice to cause one’s action. To do what you want to do is the essence of free will. So, for example, in his *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Hume says that free will is simply ‘a power of acting or not acting, according to the determinations of the will’. In other words, I act as I do because of what I chose to do. If I had chosen to act differently, then I would have acted differently.

This does not conflict with determinism. My action is caused by my choice. And my choice may in turn be caused by other events. So there is a causal story for my choice and action. And determinism agrees that if my choice had been different, then I would have acted differently (different cause, different effect).

Objection

But we can object that this is too weak a notion of free will. It is not enough to say that I would have acted differently if I had chosen differently. We also need to say that I could have chosen differently. Someone may choose to act as they do, but be motivated by a compulsion or addiction. For example, if I am addicted to smoking, there may be times when I feel I have to have a cigarette - I can’t choose not to. Yet it would still be true, that if I did choose not to, then I wouldn’t. But I’m not free to choose not to have a cigarette.

Another example: suppose that someone has inserted a chip into my brain and is able to cause me to choose to act in a particular way. It is true that if I had chosen differently, I would have acted differently. But I couldn’t have chosen differently, because someone is controlling what I choose. In both examples, what I choose determines what I do, yet I could not choose anything else, so in what sense are my choices free?

¹ This handout is based on material from Lacewing, M. (2008) *Philosophy for AS* (London: Routledge), Ch. 10, pp. 359-62, 378-81

COMPATIBILISM II: FREE WILL AS VOLUNTARY ACTION

A second form of compatibilism argues that it is a confusion to oppose free will and causation. The opposite of caused is uncaused; the opposite of free is constrained. Events are caused or uncaused, actions are free or constrained. So the opposite of a free action is not a caused event but a constrained action. Actions that are not constrained are free. The issue of causation is irrelevant.

Here are four cases of constraint that bring out the contrast with free action:

1. You trip and fall into someone, knocking them over. Your knocking them over is physically constrained, not something that you had any choice or control over.
2. Someone puts a gun to your head, and tells you to push someone over. You have a kind of choice here - you can push them or die. But your action is very constrained, by coercion, a psychological constraint.
3. You are addicted to heroin, and acting on the intense desire for it, you steal from a store to get the money to buy more. You hate your addiction and would chose to be without it if you could. Your action is driven by an addiction, so it is physically (and psychologically) constrained, and not free.
4. Kleptomania is the compulsion to steal, without needing to or profiting from it. If you were a kleptomaniac, you would want to steal things, even things that aren't much use to you. You may even want to not want to steal and try to resist stealing; but you don't (always) succeed. We could argue that being a kleptomaniac is a case of psychological compulsion.

These four cases all stand in contrast to what it is to act freely, to act without physical or psychological constraint. This, say compatibilists, is the contrast that matters to whether we are free.

Objections and replies

The 'hard determinist' - someone who believes that determinism is incompatible with free will, and that determinism is true - argues that there is no real difference between free and constrained action. All action is similar to being a kleptomaniac or tripping in falling. The reason there is no relevant difference is that in both cases, the action is caused. All that changes is how the action is caused (whether the cause is gravity, a psychological condition or a series of events in the brain that we call 'choice').

Denying the distinction between free and constrained action is counter-intuitive. But we can ask whether the contrast is clear and reliable. If not, then perhaps free will is not so distinct from constraint, and the determinist isn't wrong after all.

To defend the distinction we can ask whether either threats or rational argument would change what the person does. If the action really is constrained, then they will not - the person can't change what they do. So, for instance, threatening someone who already has a gun to their head will change nothing; and arguing with someone trips and knocks someone over will not make prevent them from knocking someone over next time they trip.

But sometimes drug addicts respond to threats and arguments, and try harder to kick their habit. Perhaps kleptomaniacs would be deterred by greater security in stores. On the other hand, hardened criminals seem not to respond to either - does this mean that they are not free? Are they not responsible for their crimes?

A second way to defend the distinction is in terms of praise and blame. If we would blame someone for what they did, then they acted freely. If we would not - as in the cases above - then the action was constrained. But we can object that this gets things the wrong way around. It tries to define free will in terms of praise and blame. But when is it right to blame someone? Can we say without referring to free will? Surely it is absurd to blame someone unless we already think that they are free. We can't first decide that it is right to blame them, and then conclude that therefore they must be free.

The hard determinist, then, will argue that there is no real distinction between free and constrained action. In that case, to oppose free and caused is not a confusion, so the challenge of determinism remains.

FRANKFURT: SECOND ORDER DESIRES

In 'Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person', Harry Frankfurt argues that in order to define and defend free will, we need to understand the will is complex. 'First-order' desires are desires to do or have certain things, e.g. chocolate, seeing a film, etc. 'Second-order' desires are desires about first-order desires. For example, I may not like going to art galleries, but I may want to like going to art galleries. Or again, I may want a cigarette, but I may want not to want a cigarette.

What we will relates to desires that actually motivate us to do something. About anything that we will, we can have second-order desires. We can want the desire we are acting on to be what we will, or we can want it not to be. I can want to read philosophy, and this desire gets me to read philosophy, and I want this desire to be what I will. On the other hand, I can want a cigarette, and have one, but want my desire for a cigarette not to move me in this way.

In the second case, I am an unwilling smoker. But this is not a conflict between two first-order desires - the desire to smoke and the desire not to. It is a conflict between a first-order desire to smoke and the second-order desire that the desire to smoke not be my will. This gives the feeling that when I smoke, my will is not free. For my will to be free, I must be able to will what I want to will. Someone has free will if they can will what they want to will.

Frankfurt's view explains why just being able to do what I want isn't enough for free will, but his account still identifies free will with a particular kind of cause (compatibilism I), viz. doing what I will when I want to will what I do. His view also provides us with a distinction between voluntary action and psychologically constrained action (compatibilism II). When someone is not able to will what they want to will, then they are psychologically constrained.

Objections

First, what should we say of a drug addict who is happily an addict? He has the second-order desire that his addiction is his will. Is he free? Frankfurt can say 'yes', because he is willing what he wants to will. But Frankfurt can say 'no', because he is only free if he can bring his will into line with what he wants it to be. His addiction makes this impossible - he would continue to want drugs even if he didn't want to want them.

Second, does Frankfurt's view answer the challenge from determinism? When I want to will what I do, could I have wanted otherwise? On Frankfurt's definition, I can will otherwise, but this does not mean that I can change what I want to will. This might be determined, e.g. by my character. Frankfurt can reply that this is true but irrelevant. Free will is about my will being free, i.e. about what I will being responsive to what I want to will. Nothing more is required.

A third objection is that second-order desires are beside the point. We want first-order desires to be responsive to what we think we should want, i.e. they should be responsive to our values and reasons for acting rather than just our desires. To choose freely is to choose according to one's values.

Fourth, even if Frankfurt accepts this amendment, it is still not enough for free will. If our choices and actions are responsive to our values and reasoning, if someone had provided us with a good reason not to act as we chose to act, we would have chosen differently. However, for free will, it must be true that I could have chosen otherwise - in that very situation. Frankfurt's account hasn't said how this is possible if determinism is true.

Frankfurt can reply that we are supposing that my choice depends on my values. Is the objection that I haven't chosen my values? But do we choose our values or our reasons for acting? Don't we rather respond to what is valuable? Where is the lack of freedom in that?

REGULARITY AND NECESSITY

A different defence of compatibilism argues that causation does not rule out free will, because there is no such thing as causal necessity. The determinist has misinterpreted the idea of regularity. Regularity does not entail necessity. Causes don't compel their effects. All we can say is that on each occasion, it is this one effect that occurs. To talk of causation is to talk of unbroken regularities, and so cause and effect are correlated. But we cannot, from this, draw any conclusions about necessity. Causation is about how things are, not how things must be.

Without causal necessity, it is not true that we must do whatever it is we do, or that we could not do anything else. What we choose is not compelled, and the motives on which we act don't force us to act as we do. It is not causation that threatens free will; it is causal necessity. If determinism is just the claim that every event has a cause, this is compatible with free will.

The hard determinist can respond that our concept of causation does involve necessity by pointing to the way science proceeds. In investigating the laws of

nature, when we don't get the same effect in two cases we look for a difference that would explain this. Take 'Water boils at 100°C at sea level'. If we heat water, but it doesn't boil, we would think something about the situation was 'different' from what is specified by the law - perhaps the water isn't pure, perhaps we aren't at sea level, perhaps the water isn't yet 100°C. This demonstrates our commitment to the idea that water must boil at 100°C at sea level - it is the only possible effect (or the law is wrong).

'Other things being equal'

In the handout on 'Determinism', we argued that our usual causal explanations depend upon 'other things being equal'. To defend causal necessity, and get rid of 'other things being equal', we introduced the idea of the entire state of the universe - from this state, only one state could be produced, in accordance with the laws of nature. But in order to understand causation, are we committed to eliminating 'other things being equal' in every case? It is not obvious that we are. Our causal explanations usually have a point, a purpose. They pick out what we consider relevant in the event. The 'other things being equal' clause helps us think about what sorts of other thing we need to 'control for' in establishing a cause (with water boiling: purity, height above sea level, etc.). This suggests that talking about 'the entire state of the universe' is not what we mean by 'other things being equal'.

If this is right, our idea of causation doesn't commit us to causal necessity - and so to determinism - in every case. Instead, we can argue that causal necessity is a commitment in scientific investigation - if there is a different effect, we continue looking for the difference in the cause. We can then argue that while this commitment is appropriate for natural science, it is inappropriate for other types of (causal) explanation, e.g. in social science, psychology, and accounts of what people do. These explanations don't look for or need exceptionless laws to work. When we explain why someone did something, we don't need to say that anyone in the same situation would do exactly the same thing.

So when doing natural science, we are committed to determinism, including causal necessity. When understanding and explaining people, we are not committed in this way, so we can allow that they have free will.