

Introduction to Human Sciences (HS8.102)

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Free Will

Responsibility

Free will affects our debate on whether one can be held responsible for the consequences of one's action. We can distinguish moral responsibility from causal responsibility, and identify cases where the two do not align (for example, decisions taken under duress, or decisions taken without knowledge of their consequences).

Free Will

Consider a person presented with the choice between chocolate and vanilla ice cream (they have enjoyed each flavour in the past).

If their brain is under the control of a mind-influencing ray operated by an evil scientist, and under this influence, they choose vanilla, have they chosen it out of their own free will?

Alternatively, if the person's choosing vanilla (and all the mental states leading up to this) are fully predetermined by a god or gods, have they chosen it of their free will?

Another perspective holds that the laws of physics are deterministic and pre-determine everything, rather than metaphysical beings or sci-fi devices. Everything is physical and every caused event has a physical cause; everything that happens is unavoidable.

There are two theses of free will – the metaphysical and the ethical. The metaphysical position states that everything is predetermined by the laws of physics, while the epistemic position posits that someone smart enough could, in principle, predict what will happen.

Theism

The characteristics often attributed to God pose a conundrum in the matter of free will. God is often thought to be all-knowing, which means He knows everything that we are going to do in the future (He has *foreknowledge* of our actions). However, if He created us as beings with free will, our actions cannot be predetermined.

Incompatibilism

Incompatibilism is a position that holds that there is a contradiction between moral responsibility and free will. Consider the three premises below:

- If S is morally responsible for A , then S has free will.
- If S has free will, S could have not performed A (S performing A is contingent).
- If determinism is true, then S had to perform A (S performing A is necessary).

From these premises, we can conclude that if determinism is true, then S is not morally responsible for A . In other words, if S is morally responsible for A , then determinism is false.

The contrary stance, compatibilism, states that actions can be both free and causally necessitated by antecedent conditions. No action is uncaused, but agents still choose to act. A compatibilist opposes the third premise in the above argument.

To act freely is not to act under compulsion; it is to have done otherwise if the past had been suitably different.

The Control Principle

The control principle is the principle that free will is necessary to attribute moral responsibility. However, a thought experiment opposes this position.

Consider a person in a room, given the choice to stay in or leave the room. They choose to stay; however, unknown to them, if they had decided to leave, a chip in their brain would have reversed the decision, causing them to decide to stay. Thus they could not have done otherwise than stay in the room; however, clearly they made the choice to stay. Are they responsible for staying?