First Writing Assignment for Freedom & Determinism

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Question 1:

The Once/Always Argument is an argument for fatalism (the position that whatever is going to happen is going to happen no matter what you do, and thus that there is nothing you can do to change the future) which attempts to prove this on purely logical grounds. It is based off of a principle called the "Once/Always" principle which holds that if some (time-indexed) proposition (such as "A is B at t_i") is true at any time, then it is true at all times. The argument goes as follows:

(1)   If any (time-indexed) proposition P is true at one time, it is true at all times.

(2)   Thus, if someone could change the truth-value of P in the future, that person could change the truth-value of P in the past.

(3)   But no one can change facts about the past (such as whether or not P was true).

(4)   Therefore, no one can change the truth of future propositions, i.e. whatever is true in the future is inalterably that way, and there is nothing anyone can do about it.

One possible objection to this argument is to reject the first premise, the "Once/Always" principle itself, and hold that propositions about the future are not yet either true or false, but are at this moment neither true nor false; though as that time comes to be the present, such propositions will then become either true or false. This is to deny that there are any facts about the future at all; in a sense, that it is entirely unwritten. One may still say of people long ago, who made predictions about times that have now come to pass, that what they said was true (or false); but someone adopting this position would have to say that what was said back then was not true (or false) it was said, and has only recently become true (or false).

Another objection to this argument is to reject the inference from 2 and 3 to 4, by saying

that changing future states of affairs, and thus whether things said or thought about those states of affairs in the past were true or not, is not actually changing anything about the past, and thus the premise that we cannot change the past does not properly apply in the way it is used in this argument. One example of a past fact which I can clearly change is this one: my boss was in Delaware 24 hours before I snapped my fingers. At the time of this writing, it is true that 24 hours ago my boss was in Delaware. Also at the time of this writing, it is clearly within my power to snap my fingers (or not). However, in doing so (or not) I would not be magically changing anything about the past. My boss would still have been in Delaware 24 hours ago, and all other facts about the past would likewise remain the same; all that would change is whether certain relations between the past and the present hold or not (namely, whether or not me-snapping-my-fingers occurs in the present, 24 hours after my boss was in Delaware). You could easily rephrase this obvious power of mine as the power to make any statements made 24 hours ago to the effect of "in 24 hours Forrest will snap his fingers" true or false — yet this is clearly not any power to actually change anything about the past.

Question 2:

The doctrine of Determinism is the doctrine that past states of affairs, together with the laws of nature, determine or logically necessitate one unique future. The doctrine of Free Will is the doctrine that people often freely choose to act (or refrain from acting) when they could have done otherwise. Incompatiblism is the position that these doctrines preclude one another: that if the doctrine of determinism is true, then no one ever can do otherwise than they in fact do, and thus the doctrine of free will is false; or conversely, that if the doctrine of free will is true, then people could do otherwise than they will do, and thus that the doctrine of determinism is false.

Van Inwagen gives several arguments for this incompatiblist position. The third of these arguments is based off of two principles, called Alpha and Beta, and involves an operator called

"N". To say that "N(P)" for any proposition P is to say that no one has, or ever had, any choice about whether P obtains. The principle Alpha states that if P $\Box$ (that is, if it is necessarily true that P) then N(P); thus, no one has or ever had any choice about whether any necessary proposition was true. The principle Beta states that N(P) together with N(if P then Q) entails that N(Q); that is, that if no one has or ever had a choice about P, and no one has or ever had a choice about whether it follows from P that Q, then no one has or ever had a choice about Q. A proof of incompatiblism is supposed to follow from these principles as follows:

(1)   If the doctrine of determinism is true, then (if $\Box$ (P& LN) then Q); that is, the state of affairs at some time t_1 ("Q") necessarily follows from the state of affairs at some time t_0 ("P") together with the laws of nature ("LN").

(2)   Thus, from 1 and Alpha, N(if (P&LN) then Q); that is, no one has or ever had any choice about whether the state of affairs at time t_1 follows from the state of affairs at t_0 together with the laws of nature.

(3)   No one has or ever had any choice about the state of affairs that obtained at some time t_0 in the very distant past (e.g. 65 million years ago), and no one has or ever had any choice about the laws of nature; in other words, N(P&LN).

(4)   Therefore, from 2, 3, and Beta, N(Q); no one has or ever has had any choice about the state of affairs at any time t_1 — including times in the present and the future.

Question 3:

The Paradigm Case Argument argues that the term "free" is an example of a paradigm case expression; that is, a term which can only be learned by way of seeing examples and counterexamples labeled as "free" and "not free", respectively. So all it is for an act to be free is to be any of the sorts of acts we do where people are not physically restrained, coerced at gunpoint, etc; acts performed in such circumstances being paradigm cases of unfree acts, and all

others (e.g. my snapping my fingers, or refraining from taking a drink from my soda) being paradigm cases of free acts. The Paradigm Case argument preceeds from this notion of paradigm case expressions to argue in favor of compatiblism as follows:

(1)   "Free" is a paradigm case expression.

(2)   It is possible that the doctrine of determinism may be empirically proven, i.e. scientists may in the future show us that the universe is in fact deterministic.

(3)   We can imagine determinism being thus empirically proven while at the same time there exist paradigm cases of free actions.

(4)   Therefore, free actions could occur in a deterministic universe, i.e. the doctrines of free will and determinism are compatible.

Van Inwagen raises an objection to this line of thinking by suggesting that we could just as well substitute for the empirical discover of determinism's truth a situation where it is empirically discovered that all humans have tiny computer chips of Martian manufacture implanted in our brains, controlling our every action, even those ones which we feel we have decided of our own free will to do. In this case, we still have all these actions which we have been calling paradigm cases of "free" actions, and yet this hypothetical empirical discovery is supposed to show that, rather than free will being compatible with Martian mind control, we were simply wrong all along about our actions having been free.