

Second Writing Assignment for Freedom & Determinism

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Question 1:

The conditional analysis of “could have done otherwise” statements is that statements to the effect that “person P could have done otherwise than action A” are equivalent to counterfactual statements to the effect that “P would have done otherwise than A if P had chosen to do otherwise than A”. This is supposed to establish compatibilism because the doctrine of free will is considered to be true if and only if people can, at least sometimes, do otherwise than what they actually do; and as this analysis of “could have done otherwise” statements is compatible with determinism (since it speaks only of counterfactual truths and not of whether or not anything is determined), if it is correct then it follows that the doctrine of free will is compatible with determinism.

A proposed counterexample to this analysis is the case of a man, call him Smith, who has an iron resolve, that is, he always carries through on his chosen actions; and yet, because of a phobia of blood-colored things, he cannot bring himself to eat from a bowl of blood-red candies available to him. In this counterexample, the counterfactual conditional is supposedly true — if Smith were to choose to eat the candies, then he certainly would, because he is such a resolute person. But the “could have done otherwise” claim is false, because despite the supposed truth of the above counterfactual, Smith is unable to choose to eat the candies. Thus, since there are circumstances where the analysis is true and the analysand false, the analysis must not capture all of the necessary and sufficient conditions of the analysand, i.e. it is an incorrect analysis.

The usual compatibilist’s response to this counterexample is to modify the analysis to “P would have done otherwise than A if P had chosen to do otherwise than A; *and, P could have chosen otherwise*”; in which case both analysis and analysand are false in the case of Smith, as it

should be if the analysis is correct. However, as “could have” is being analyzed in terms of such counterfactuals, that analysis can itself be further analyzed as “P would have done otherwise than A if P had chosen to do otherwise than A, and P would have chosen otherwise than A if P had chosen to choose otherwise than A, and P could have chosen to choose otherwise than A.” Yet there is still a “could have” term in the analysis, so this modification seems to lead simply to an infinite regress, ultimately explaining nothing.

I myself find this a very poor response on the compatibilist’s part, and would instead say that in the Smith case, Smith is indeed not free, as he could not do otherwise, even if he had chosen otherwise; but that he is not free precisely because he would not have done otherwise even if he had chosen otherwise. It seems to me that the Smith case is somewhat incoherent as presented. We are told that he has this indomitable, resolute willpower, such that any act he chooses to perform, he in fact performs. The only way I can see to analyze this claim is that Smith does not have any irrational psychological traits which inhibit his choices (which I understand to mean rational decisions) from becoming effective; such that if he thinks a matter over and decides that he will do something, no weakness of will, compulsion, or other such problem will interfere with him doing as he decided. And yet, we are presented with an exception to this feature of Smith: he is irrationally afraid of blood-colored things, and so cannot bring himself to eat blood-colored candies, no matter how hard he tries. So to say that Smith always does whatever he chooses to do, and yet he has this strange psychological problem inhibiting him from doing so in some cases, is incoherent; Smith logically cannot be so universally resolved and yet also have such a compulsive disorder. So I would say that Smith can still choose to eat blood-colored candies (say, if he were offered large sums of money just for doing so); his choice is simply kept from becoming effective due to this compulsive aversion of his. Thus, the analysand (that Smith could have eaten the candies) is false, and the analysis (that Smith would have eaten the candies if he had chosen to do so) is also false, and the analysis remains sound.

Question 2:

The Davidsonian model of human action is that not all bodily behavior is action; in particular, those movements which are not caused by people's choices do not count as actions. Examples of such bodily movements are reflex motions, epileptic seizures, and so on; any situation in which the body is moving, and yet the person is not consciously willing that movement from a belief that it can get him something he desires. This model would seem to require that free acts, being a type of action, must be determined; however, as an incompatibilist, Van Inwagen holds that wholly determined action cannot be free, and thus there must be indeterminism somewhere in the process of a person deliberating on what to do, choosing to do something, and then doing it. As he also believes that people really can perform free acts, Van Inwagen must believe that there is in fact indeterminism somewhere in that sequence, and the particular place where he believes indeterminism enters the picture is between choice and action; a person did some act freely if performing that act was not determined (or, in other words, necessitated) by that person making the choice to do that action.

Thus on the surface one would expect Van Inwagen to want to reject the Davidsonian model of human action, as it appears to require that any sort of act, free or not, be determined by a person's choice, which is incompatible with Van Inwagen's beliefs that free acts occur and such acts cannot be determined by a person's choices. But Van Inwagen manages to reconcile his beliefs with the Davidsonian model by rejecting the connection between causation and necessitation. According to Van Inwagen, Davidson is right, and to be an action, a body movement must be caused by a person's choice; yet for such an action to be free, the causation must be non-necessitarian. That is, the person's choice must somehow cause, and yet not necessitate or determine, that the person will act in such a way.

Question 3:

The indeterministic light-flashing machine is a hypothetical machine in which the pushing of a button causes the initiation of some indeterministic process which may or may not end up causing a red light to flash. That is, you push the button, and then either the light flashes, or it doesn't, and this outcome is completely independent of any outside factors. It seems then, intuitively, that nobody has any choice about whether pushing the button will cause the light to flash; you can push the button and the light will flash or not regardless of your intentions toward it, and nothing you can do can ensure that the light will flash.

This is relevant to the claim that nobody has any choice about whether their belief-desire pairs “kicking in” (call this event “DB”) will cause their intended action (call this action “R”) — roughly put, that nobody has any control over their own actions, and thus, it would seem, nobody has any free will — because on Van Inwagen’s model the causation between DB and R is exactly as indeterministic as the light-flashing machine. A person can have a DB-type event, and through some indeterministic process maybe wind up causing themselves to act, or maybe not. All a person can do is make a choice, but that choice does necessitate the person’s actions. Thus, while it’s possible that DB causes R, nobody (not even the person in whose mind DB is occurring) has any choice over whether it does, any more than they have a choice about pushing the button on the machine causing the light to flash. It would seem, then, that such indeterminism in the causal chain of action would impair free will, rather than grant it. Van Inwagen’s solution, as above, is that just because a DB-type event does not determine any particular action, does not mean that such DB-type events do not cause action; the causation is merely non-necessitarian.