

Hobbes's Compatibilism

Compatibilism is the idea that some manner of free will is consistent with determinism.

Determinism is the claim that for all events, including human actions, it is determined at any earlier time that those events will occur.

One way of thinking about the physical world is to see it as a series of physical events that exhibit certain regularities, regularities that have always held true in the past, and always will hold true in the future. These regularities are laws of nature. If laws of nature invariably hold true into the future, then we ought to be able to predict, in virtue of the way the world currently is, what will happen in the future. And if that's the case, then it's true at the moment what any given person might do five minutes from now, or five months from now.

If that's the case, then it seems to create a *prima facie* problem for the idea that we have free will. For any action that one of us takes, it was true before it occurred that it would - even before we decide to take any action. This means that our decisions are *causally irrelevant* to what we do. It seems like our decisions do not make a difference one way or another what actions we do.

One problem with this fact is that it is deeply counterintuitive - it certainly seems like the immediate cause of any action is one's decision to perform that action. But the problems run deeper than counterintuitiveness. Determinism seems like it may have troubling *normative* consequences, as well. Two respects in which this is the case:

- Moral responsibility: one standard by which we judge actions as right or wrong is by the intention of the person forming them. What led him or her to act in the way they did? The answer may affect whether we judge that person as morally culpable.
- Rationality: is an action rational or irrational? This depends on what a person's reasons for acting are. For example, it's irrational to *willingly* act contrary to one's best interests, and not necessarily irrational to so act *unwillingly*. But if our actions are going to be carried out regardless of any decision, what difference should my decisions, intentions, etc. make?

For some, these problems seem intractable. Incompatibilists believe that free will cannot exist in a deterministic universe. They maintain that free will just is the capacity to intervene causally in the world. Since in a deterministic world, all the causing seems to get done independently of one's decision-making, free will is ruled out. Libertarians therefore deny determinism. Hobbes's contemporaries, the Cartesians, posited a portion of reality that is not under the domain of

physical causation: our souls exist in a non-physical realm that is (almost entirely) unaffected¹ by the events of the material world. The soul can move the body around as it wills - thereby causing the free actions of the human body that it controls.

The other option for incompatibilists is hard determinism, which says that we simply don't have free will because determinism is true. Determinists seem hard up to explain how we can evaluate behavior as moral or immoral, and rational or irrational. The choice between accepting an immaterial soul and denying the normative aspect of action isn't necessarily appealing, and it would be nice if we could sidestep it. This is what compatibilism tries to do.

How can we make sense of compatibilism? What's required, I believe, is to show where the incompatibilist has gone wrong in reasoning from the truth of determinism to the nonexistence of free will. The assumption that Hobbes seems to me to reject is this: that simply because our actions were determined to occur long before they did occur, our decisions play no role in bringing them about. Rather, our decisions do cause our actions, *as do the events leading up to and causing our decisions*.

Interestingly, Hobbes has independent reason to reject libertarianism. According to the Hobbesian model of decision making, making a decision just means having an appetite strong enough to motivate action. We aren't generally in control of our appetites, though. By way of contrast, Hobbes argues that the libertarian conception of free will is incoherent because it requires that we are able to 'will will', which requires that we will ourselves to will that we will something, and will that as well, ad nauseum. So if we need to causally intervene in events to bring them about willfully, there is an infinite number of willings that need to take place in order to freely perform any action. Whether this is a good argument I'll leave you to decide, but Hobbes takes it as a compelling reason to reject libertarianism regardless of whether determinism is true.

Why do we regard Hobbes as a compatibilist when he denies free will? What Hobbes is denying is that human beings have the capacity to act independently of the way the physical world is determined to pan out. The laws of nature that describe the pattern of events in the world cannot be altered, so the events of the world are already set in stone. The sort of free will that incompatibilists believe in, in which one's decision to act is the *sole cause* of one's action, is ruled out by Hobbes's determinism. But agency, the capacity for voluntary action, remains intact. Perhaps we could regard Hobbes's argument against free will as an argument against thinking of free will *in a certain way*, and his account of voluntary action as a picture of how to think of free will in the *correct* way. This is one way of thinking about Hobbes's account of voluntary action as a compatibilist one, despite his overt denial of the existence of free will.

¹ There is one way physical events affect the soul: the soul has conscious experiences in virtue of the body's sense organs being stimulated.