

Free Will & Determinism

Introduction

Literature has been infused with stories about events unfolding through ‘fate’ and ‘destiny’ for a greater period of the history. These stories suggest that the development of certain incidents is a result of causal chains beyond the control of human choice. Such a viewpoint about the way events are caused is often termed as ‘Causal Deterministic’.^[1] These viewpoints have often worried Philosophers due to the kinds of consequences they might entail.

In this paper, I will first briefly discuss the metaphysical meaning of freedom and the Principle of Alternate Possibilities. I will discuss some of the implications of Causal Determinism pertaining to the concept of Free Will after describing the Thesis of Determinism. Following that, I will consider the theory of Metaphysical Libertarianism as an appropriate way to solve the problems created by Determinism and attempt to respond to the objections to this theory. In conclusion, I will proceed to evaluate what this theory offers to the debate of free will.

Principle of Alternate Possibilities & Metaphysical Free Will

The Principle of Alternate Possibilities states that an action is free only if the agent - the person doing the thing - could have done otherwise.^[2] This refers not just to an illusion of the ability to choose otherwise, but to a metaphysical possibility of having successfully done something other than what was chosen.

To more express the Principle of Alternate Possibilities more precisely, let us look at a variant of Locke’s Locked Room Illustration.^[3] Consider a woman sitting in a locked room. The woman is not aware that the door is locked. However, she thinks that she is in the room because of her own volition (as she wants to be there) not being aware that she has no other choice but to stay

in the room (as the room is locked), but still thinks that she has made her ‘choice’ freely. In this illustration, the woman is not metaphysically free, as there is no other possible alternative she might choose, even though she chooses the only alternative she was capable of choosing.

From this illustration, we can say that an action cannot be called ‘free’ if the agent does not have any other true choices, even if it appears the action was free. True free will can be defined as the freeness of one’s choice where there are no metaphysical barriers to making a decision different from one that has already been made.

Thesis of Determinism

Causal Determinism, or simply Determinism is an understanding of the functioning of the universe based on the cause-effect relationships in the laws of nature. The Thesis of Determinism states that in a given model or paradigm events are bound by causality in a way that their past states completely determine any future states. This means that any events which have happened in the past completely control the events which will happen following them.^[1]

In other words, at a specific instant in time at time t_n , given the laws of physics and the states (position, velocity, mass, etc) of all particles in the universe, with enough computational power, the states of all these particles can be predicted for any time t_{n+1} . Moreover, since the contents of the universe are physical and based upon these same particles, this would be the same as predicting everything that will ever happen in the future.^[4]

Regardless of whether we have a sufficient understanding of the laws of physics or enough computational power to ever be able to try to predict the future in such a way, if determinism is true, it would mean that every event that has ever occurred or will ever occur was determined right from the time the universe came into being - who will be the 100th President of the United States, what I ate for breakfast on my 11th birthday or what you are thinking as you read this paper.

However, it is still important to note that determinism can only be true if the laws of nature are at their core deterministic too. That is, they are such that the state of a system at any time may

only lead to one possible state in a time following it. There is currently considerable debate on whether the laws of nature are deterministic or not.^[5]

Implications of Determinism

If determinism is true, it appears that we do not have free will - any choices that we make were bound to be made by us as they were predetermined by previous events that have happened in the universe. While some might argue that if it seems to us that we have free will, the metaphysical aspect of it does not make much of a difference, the absence of a completely free will presents us with a critical problem. When we hold someone morally responsible for having taken any action, or when we hold them accountable for something that they have done, we presuppose that the choices they have made have been out of their own volition and free will.^{[2][4]}

Seeing the implications of the thesis of determinism, every choice a person makes is not entirely free - either the choice is not of their own accord or they could not have possibly done otherwise. So should a person own up to the responsibility of an action they have taken? Moreover, if the actions taken by an agent are morally or legally wrong, should they be punished for such actions, when they did not even really have another choice? Similarly, should a person who does something good or morally right be rewarded?

Determinism indeed has horrible consequences - all choice is illusory. It makes it look like we're not really responsible for any thing or action we partake in, none of the rewards or punishments we get as a result of our actions are justified - and yet, we are forced to bear them anyway.^[4]

Metaphysical Libertarianism

When an agent acts freely - when she exercises her free will - it is up to her to choose what to do in a certain situation. Thus, there are metaphysically possible alternatives available to her which she might have chosen to pursue instead, and when she chooses she is completely responsible for what

she pursues. Incompatibilist theories are a group of responses to the problem of free will and determinism, which hold that we act freely in this sense only if determinism is false.^{[2][7]}

Libertarianism (or Metaphysical Libertarianism) is a philosophical standpoint that maintains that most agents have free will, at least in certain conditions. It is a form of incompatibilism, meaning that it believes that determinism and free will are not compatible with each other, and that, therefore, determinism is false.^[7]

One of the most prominent arguments for libertarianism is the scientific argument, which arises from the developments in and our understanding of modern physics. Although classical domains of physics seemed to be fairly deterministic, the conception of the universally accepted theory of Quantum mechanics in the mid-1900s led to the realisation that most basic laws of nature are at their core probabilistic. These laws have an element of indeterminacy. This means that Quantum events are not entirely fixed and can occur without any previous defining causes. This leads to a falsity of traditional causal determinism.^[8] Subsequently, it can be argued that due to the falsity of determinism, choices made by an agent are in most cases of their own volition.

While there are several other arguments for libertarianism, I will also like to discuss the ones provided by Robert Kane and Robert Nozick. Kane argues that for an agent to exercise free will:^[7]

1. It is necessary for the presence of metaphysically plausible alternative possibilities
2. Determinism is false, and not compatible with alternative possibilities
3. An agent must be sufficiently responsible for an event occurring

An alternate possibility can be called metaphysically plausible if the laws of the universe do not rule the possibility out (and if the laws of the universe were deterministic, they'd rule out all but one possibility). For example, it is possible for me to attend a conference which is scheduled in Boston in two hours if I'm currently in New York, but it would not be physically possible for me to attend the same conference if I'm in Beijing.

What allows for Kane's picture of Libertarianism is what he refers to as self-forming actions. Self-forming actions, according to Kane, are undetermined voluntary actions which are results of being sufficiently caused by the agent in situations where the agent experienced conflicting wills - leading to an influence on himself. Kane calls these decisions, ones which originate entirely due to an agent's cognition, Ultimate Responsibilities. Kane's picture of Libertarianism - Ultimate Responsibility - does not require that all actions be undetermined, it just requires only that a few of our actions - Self-Forming Actions - be undetermined (where we could have chosen otherwise). These actions form the character of the agent thereby having a consequential effect on the future choices.^[7]

Nozick combines the indeterminacy that stems from Quantum Mechanics and the process of self-definition of an agent through choices to his own view of Metaphysical Libertarianism. He argues that the lifelong process of self-forming is in itself indeterministic, and thus, leads to undetermined actions.^[9] He compares assigning weights to choices in a deterministic sense to the standard Copenhagen Interpretation of Quantum Mechanics in an analogy - a person before a decision has reasons without fixed weights: he is in a superposition of making either decision. The process of making the decision reduces him to a particular state which causes the actions.^{[9][10]}

Criticisms of Libertarianism

One of the most widely recognised criticisms of Free Will as an implication of the Quantum Model comes from the Puppet Metaphor. The Puppet Metaphor considers two types of puppets - one whose strings are pulled such that its movement is completely determined and one whose strings are pulled randomly. From the point of view of free will, it seems that neither can actually exhibit freeness of will. This leads to the objection that the mere falsity of determinism does not solve the problem of free will.^[8]

The puppet metaphor, in my opinion, is inadequate for comparison to a thinking mind. Unlike the puppets, most actors or agents can exercise their free will to induce changes to their

situations. Just the randomness or determinism in the laws of nature do not actually imply that the notion of free will cannot be conceived. For example, it is clearly possible for matter to be manipulated in certain ways by natural processes - such as digestion of food, change of emotions due to hormonal imbalance, and even the process of thinking. It seems that we are perfectly capable of manipulating the matter within our own selves to achieve tasks and take actions out of our own volition. As a result, it is completely possible that actions taken by an agent are entirely new causal chains instead of arising from predetermined causes.

The Scientific Argument for Libertarianism accounts for this further - quantum events can occur from no previously existing causes. Moreover, Kane's and Nozick's views of Libertarianism guarantee that conditions can be undetermined just because of the availability of possibilities to one's own actions. Surely, if free will is incompatible with both deterministic and nondeterministic universes, there is something intrinsically wrong about the notion of free will itself.^{[1][8][10]}

A frequent criticism of Kane's depiction of free will comes from Randolph Clarke. According to Clarke, Kane's depiction is not truly libertarian, but rather a form of Compatibilism. He asserts that even though the outcomes of the Self-Forming Actions are not entirely determined, the time leading up to the event where that action must be taken is - and as an extension, so is the Self-Forming Action.^[11]

In response to this objection, I would stress that Kane's Ultimate Responsibility model assures that the sufficient conditions for the determination of one's actions cannot exist before one's own birth, as they are outcomes self-defining actions.

Examining Libertarianism - Is the Problem of Determinism Solved?

Libertarian theories offer a great degree of room for the concept of free will, each in its different ways. As a result of this freeness of one's will, we can assert that in any case where a person might have a reasonable alternative possibility, they can utilise their free will to make a decision as per their own accords. This would mean that a person is indeed responsible and

completely accountable for the decisions they freely make, and thus that they are to bear whatever reward or punishment there is from their actions.

While there are certainly instances where people have other metaphysical alternatives, sometimes it is the case that these alternatives do not seem reasonable to them. For example, if a person A is forced to rob a bank by the people who abducted his wife and threatened to kill him if he did not, it appears that the only reasonable choice for him would be to go ahead with the bank robbery.^{[4][8]} However, it can still be argued that since his decision was coerced by external factors, it was not entirely free. In such cases, I think it is best to not determine the moral responsibility of a person in his actions solely on the accord of the metaphysical freeness of his/her choice.

It stills seems, though, that the debate of free will & determinism is far from solved, despite the great utility of Libertarianism in solving some of the problems created by a deterministic viewpoint. This is perhaps because there is not any strong evidence relating the actual nature of the laws of the universe to being either deterministic or random. Is it really possible that free will isn't compatible with either of them? If not, there is probably a lot wrong with the notion of free will we have.^{[7][8]} Some lines of argument also talk of events which can be caused by human actions which are neither deterministic nor random - are such events even conceptually valid?^[8] Indeed, it seems that there is a piece missing in the puzzle - be it the incompleteness of the laws of physics or our very notion of free will.

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