

### **Question 9: Determinism and Free Will**

At first glance, the question as to whether human actions are freely performed elicits an obvious and emphatic answer: yes. The issue is complicated, however, when we consider the doctrine of determinism, which holds that all events are caused by previous conditions in the world and the laws of nature. Incompatibilists interpret this doctrine to mean that, if determinism is true, then free will is a mere illusion. Compatibilists, on the other hand, maintain that free will is perfectly concordant with the doctrine of determinism. An analysis of arguments from both perspectives will lend credence to the compatibilist position, on the grounds that it raises fewer and less consequential objections. However, the problem of compatibility can be avoided altogether if an argument is based on the pragmatic conception of belief.

In order to comprehend and assess the incompatibilist argument, it is first necessary to define determinism and evaluate its claims. Determinism is the view that all events, acts, and choices are caused by previous conditions of the world and the laws of nature. While Newtonian physics has traditionally been cited as a justification for determinism, quantum mechanics now suggests that the world is in fact indeterminate. Determinism may still hold, however, if randomness is accounted for in the laws of nature. Yet the most convincing evidence for determinism comes from empirical studies in psychology and neurobiology, which suggest that all mental events (e.g. decisions) are correlated with, if not caused by, brain events (e.g. neural activity). As it is known that brain events are caused by physical events, it is believed that physical events influence or even cause all mental events. If this were true, then all decisions and subsequent actions could be attributed to causes external to the agent. Empirical evidence therefore supports deterministic claims.

As with determinism, it is necessary to clarify the concept of free will in order to evaluate the incompatibilist argument. An agent (A) is said to have performed an action (X) freely provided that there was some alternative to X that A could have chosen and that, if chosen, would have been performed. For instance, consider a driver at a T-junction with the option of turning left or right. The driver weighs his options and eventually turns right. This scenario satisfies the requirements of free will, as the driver's decision to turn right entailed the alternative of turning left, which certainly would have occurred, had the driver so desired. However, if construction prevented the driver from turning left, or if the driver had decided to turn right but was forced left by a malfunction of the steering mechanism, then the driver would not be considered a free agent. Thus, free will requires the availability of a viable alternative to a given action.

Incompatibilists argue that free will and determinism are incompatible. If determinism is true, they argue, it must be the case that there is never a viable alternative to the action in question. Recall the example of the driver who stopped at a T-junction and decided to turn right. Determinists would claim that the driver could not have done anything other than turn right, given the past condition of the world and the laws of nature. While turning left seemed like a viable option to the driver, this feeling of freedom is merely an illusion in the eyes of a determinist. The alleged incompatibility of determinism and free will is especially troubling if determinism is taken as fact, as it is widely accepted that moral responsibility requires free will. Thus, the hard determinist believes that moral responsibility is impossible, given that determinism is true and incompatible with the notion of free will.

Roderick Chisholm, a notable libertarian, agrees that determinism and free choice are incompatible, yet denies the determinist conclusion by rejecting the doctrine of determinism.

According to Chisholm, there are two possible types of causation: transeunt causation and immanent causation (Chisholm, 440). Transeunt causation, which is consistent with determinism, refers to instances in which one event causes another, as when the wind blows a tree across the road. Immanent causation, which contradicts determinism, refers to instances in which an agent causes an event or state of affairs. Chisholm argues that in these instances the agent is the sole cause of a given action by subconsciously triggering a brain event that ultimately leads to an observable action. (Chisholm, 441) This notion directly contradicts the determinist idea that all events are caused by previous events in conjunction with the laws of nature. Chisholm is therefore able to argue that individuals are able to act freely in instances of immanent causation and can be held responsible for their actions in these situations.

There are two serious objections to Chisholm's argument. The first objection holds that, if individuals were able to subconsciously cause brain events, then we would expect to see brain events occurring independently of physical events (Charlow, 2008). Critics contend that this contradicts our best understanding of the brain based on empirical studies in psychology and neurobiology. Furthermore, the existence of immanent causation contradicts the doctrine of the causal closure of the physical, a methodological cornerstone of scientific inquiry that holds that every physical event is caused by some other physical event (Charlow, 2008). Finally, in order to maintain our causal agency, Chisholm's argument requires that our decisions are made independently of our beliefs and desires. This seems counterintuitive and suggests that our "free" choices are made randomly (Charlow, 2008). Thus, Chisholm's argument may prove unsatisfactory to many philosophical and scientific scholars.

In contrast to Chisholm, Ayer argues that free will and determinism are compatible when the correct definition of freedom is employed. Rather than contrasting freedom with causality,

Ayer believes that an action is free provided that it is unconstrained. An agent (A) is said to be unconstrained when neither of the following conditions hold: 1) a second agent (B) compels A to perform an action (X) by creating a situation in which the consequences of choosing an alternative to X are such that no reasonable person would be expected to disobey B; 2) A is deprived of the power of choice (Ayer, 417). Ayer argues that causes do not inherently constrain, from which it follows that actions may be simultaneously caused and freely performed (Ayer, 418). If freedom is contrasted with constraint, and Ayer's definition of constraint is utilized, then free will and determinism are in fact compatible.

A hard determinist may object to Ayer's premise that causes do not inherently constrain. Consider a petty thief stealing candy bars from a convenience store. According to Ayer, the thief is a free agent because he chose to steal free of external compulsion. The determinist, however, maintains that, in deciding whether or not to steal, the past conditions of the world and the laws of nature were such that the thief could not have done anything other than steal in the situation at hand. If this is true, then it seems that the thief was deprived of the power of choice, meaning that he was constrained as per Ayer's definition of constraint, and thus not acting freely. Here, Ayer would respond that the determinist has misunderstood the nature of causality, which is in actuality a concomitance between two classes of events that does not entail any compulsion or constraint (Ayer, 418). In this case, the weight of the incompatibilist objection depends on which definitions of freedom and causality are taken to be true.

If the plausibility of an argument is evaluated by the number and severity of objections it raises, then Ayer's argument must be considered more convincing than Chisholm's. Chisholm's argument contradicts empirical evidence and requires a serious revision of the concepts of freedom and the causal closure of the physical. The main objection to Ayer's argument, on the

other hand, concerns the accuracy of his definitions of freedom, constraint, and causality, which are at worst very close to our experience of the concepts they represent. Thus, Ayer's argument is more plausible than Chisholm's.

However, the problem of compatibility can be avoided entirely if an argument is made based on the pragmatic conception of belief. Compatibilists and incompatibilists alike rely on an epistemic conception of belief, which concerns the truth of our beliefs regarding free will and determinism, as well as their justification in light of the known facts. The pragmatic conception of belief, on the other hand, maintains that an agent holds a belief if and only if he is inclined to act in accordance with his belief. There is no doubt that people behave as though they were free and morally responsible for their actions, and that people would behave differently if they believed otherwise. Thus, people should be treated as if they were free and morally responsible, regardless of the truth and compatibility of determinism and free will.

Of course, there are serious objections to this argument as well. It has often been the case that people have behaved in deplorable ways due to false beliefs that were widely accepted at the time. In the United States, for instance, whites justified the practice of slavery on the false belief that blacks were inferior to whites. The epistemic conception of belief would not allow the practice of slavery, as it requires the rejection of false beliefs. Thus, arguing for a particular belief based on the pragmatic conception of belief may lead to dangerous consequences. While the issue of compatibility can be swept under the carpet by employing pragmatic principles, it is a question that deserves epistemic exploration. Fortunately, the best arguments support the compatibility of free will and determinism, which allow the current systems of moral responsibility and scientific inquiry to remain intact.