

Free Will

Causal Determinism

Our argument against free will relies on two claims, one a general claim that applies to all events in the universe, a second a claim about what free will would require of us.

Causal determinism: : Given a specified way things are at a time t , everything which happens at a time later than t is fixed as a matter of natural law.

Consider a rock falling down a side of a mountain on Mars this morning. That rock was set in motion by some preceding event, perhaps a rover hit and dislodged it. Causal determinism says that the entire state of the universe this morning, including that rock falling down the mountain, was completely determined by the state of the universe at any time before this morning plus the laws governing motion, gravity, etc. This might seem far-fetched. But that's exactly what our scientific laws are; they determine how things will be in the future given how things are in the past. Suppose, then, there was a God like scientist. By knowing the state of the universe 1000 years ago plus all the rules governing our universe, our God-like scientist would know for certain that the rock was going to fall this morning.

The problem is that Causal determinism seems to jar with a fairly ordinary sense of free-will.

Free Will: : An agent, S, freely chooses to do F at time $t1$ if and only if it was S's power at time $t1$ to bring either F or not F about.

Suppose Mike Tyson force feeds me some cake. No-one would claim that I ate that cake freely. Since it was not in my power to not eat the cake, the eating was not in my power at all. Similarly, if you were forced to take a job, or forced to take a course, and it was not in your power to do otherwise, you would not be taking that job or pursuing that course of your own free will. If you don't have the power to do otherwise, then it was never in your power in the first place. The problem is that Causal Determinism seems to say that it is never in our power to do otherwise:

Argument Against Free-Will

1. If a person acts of her own free will, then she could have done otherwise.

2. If determinism is true, no one can do otherwise than one actually does.
3. Therefore, if determinism is true, no one acts of her own free will.

The key premise is 2. Recall that Causal Determinism says that states of the universe, including what you are doing at any particular time, are completely determined by how the universe was in the past, even the far far past, plus the laws of nature. If that's true, then my eating the cake was causally determined, it is already set in stone. In that case, I had no power to not eat the cake. Causal Determinism constrains my actions as much as Mike Tyson can constrain my actions.

Philosophers have been concerned with determining, first, whether Causal Determinism is really true, and, second, whether free-will can be found compatible with Causal Determinism:

	Free Will is Not Possible	Free Will is Possible
Causal Determinism is true	Hard Determinism	Compatibilism
Causal Determinism is false	Hard Indeterminism	Libertarianism

Compatibilism

Compatibilists accept Causal Determinism but they claim that humans are still morally responsible for their behavior and deserving of blame and punishment. If a person is morally responsible for their behavior, then they must have control over their own conduct. Compatibilists offer an alternative account of Free Will that they hope is a) compatible with Causal Determinism, and b) sufficient for moral responsibility.

Forking Path view of Free Will (rejected by compatibilists)

- An agent has control over her conduct at a moment in time if she has the ability to select among, or choose between, alternative courses of action, i.e., choose between alternative future paths.

This forking path view of freedom jars with causal determinism. The Compatibilist denies, though, that freedom should be understood along these lines. They instead offer the following account of freedom:

Source of Action

- An agent freely does F if 1) F arises from her internal states and character, and 2) are not forced by external conditions or agents.

Suppose that I have a very sweet tooth. My having a sweet tooth will cause me to eat the cake. So that action, my eating the cake, is in some strong sense

comes from me and not the outside; it's because of how I am that I ate the cake. The compatibilist claims that this is all that is required for an action to be free—it arises from inside of you, from your personality, and is not caused by external pressure.

Our personality is made up a variety of different traits like honesty, courage, greed, etc. Some people are honest and courageous. Some are honest, but cowardly. Traits are complex dispositions to notice, construe, think, desire, and act in characteristic ways. To be generous, for instance, is to be disposed to notice occasions for giving, to construe ambiguous social cues charitably, to desire to give people things they want, need, or would appreciate, to deliberate well about what they want, need, or would appreciate, and to act on the basis of such deliberation.

Character traits are normally characterized with these three claims:

1. Robustness Claim: an individual with a particular character trait will exhibit trait-relevant behavior across a broad spectrum of trait-relevant situations. Such traits are said to be “robust” traits, e.g., an honest person will tend to tell the truth to friends, family members, co-workers, students, etc.
2. Stability Claim: traits are relatively stable over time. A soldier who behaves courageously for a significant period of time is courageous. A soldier who behaves non-courageously for a significant period of time is not courageous. A soldier will not become or cease to be courageous overnight.
3. Integrity Claim: there is a correlation between having one trait and having another, e.g., a person who is temperate with regard to the pleasures derived from food is likely to also be temperate with regard to the pleasures derived from sexual intercourse. Likewise, an individual with a particular vice is likely to possess other vices.

The compatibilist is committed to the claim that we have character traits that are robust, stable, and integrated with one another. They believe that an action is our own just when it arises from our unique set of traits; if my character traits makes me eat the cake, then eating the cake, according to the compatibilist, is free.

Objections

Here are two puzzling features of the compatibilist's view. I'll raise a stronger objection below.

1. Note the distinction between freely *acting* a certain way and freely *choosing* to act a certain way. Compatibilists are claiming you act freely when your

actions arise from your character. You do not freely choose to act. But can your actions be free if they you did not freely choose them?

2. Since the Compatibilist accepts Causal Determinism, they accept that your character is determined by the past. If your character is shaped by circumstances outside your control, are the actions that arise from your character free?

Situationism

The compatibilist is committed to the claim that we have character traits that are robust, stable, and integrated with one another. But there is strong evidence that there is no such traits at all.

Psychologists have been concerned to decide when the features of the situation we are in rather than our character traits cause our behavior. Some have argued that all our behavior is caused by external factors. On this view, there are no character traits whatsoever:

“... modern experimental psychology has discovered that circumstance has surprisingly more to do with how people behave than traditional images of character and virtue allow (John Doris 2002, ix).”

Gilbert Harman expresses this idea as follows:

In trying to characterize and explain a distinctive action, ordinary thinking tends to hypothesize a corresponding distinctive characteristic of the agent and tends to overlook the relevant details of the agent's perceived situation. . . . Ordinary attributions of character traits to people are often deeply misguided and it may even be the case that there. . . [are] no ordinary traits of the sort people think there are (Harman 1999, 315f).

The strongest version of the view is called Situationism, which can be understood as comprised of three central claims:

1. Non-robustness Claim: moral character traits are not robust—that is, they are not consistent across a wide spectrum of trait-relevant situations. Whatever moral character traits an individual has are situation-specific.
2. Consistency Claim: while a person's moral character traits are relatively stable over time, this should be understood as consistency of situation specific traits, rather than robust traits.

3. Fragmentation Claim: a person's moral character traits do not have the evaluative integrity suggested by the Integrity Claim. There may be considerable disunity in a person's moral character among her situation-specific character traits.

There is empirical evidence, the situationist claims, for each of their claims:

- Hugh Hartshorne and M. A. May's study of the trait of honesty among school children found no cross-situational correlation. A child may be consistently honest with his friends, but not with his parents or teachers. From this and other studies, Hartshorne and May concluded that character traits are not robust but rather "specific functions of life situations" (Hartshorne and May 1928, 379f).
- By-stander effect:

Other studies further call into question the Integrity Claim of the Traditional View. For example, in one experiment persons who found a dime in a phone booth were far more likely to help a confederate who dropped some papers than were those who did not find a dime. Another experiment involved seminary students who agreed to give a talk on the importance of helping those in need. On the way to the building where their talks were to be given, they encountered a confederate slumped over and groaning. Those who were told they were already late were much less likely to help than those who were told they had time to spare. These experiments are taken to show that minor factors without moral significance (finding a dime, being in a hurry) are strongly correlated with people's helping behavior.

Perhaps most damning for the robust view of character are the results of the experiments conducted by Stanley Milgram in the 1960s. In these experiments the great majority of subjects, when politely though firmly requested by an experimenter, were willing to administer what they thought were increasingly severe electric shocks to a screaming "victim." These experiments are taken to show that if subjects did have compassionate tendencies, these tendencies cannot have been of the type that robust traits require.

See one such experiment [here](#)

Yoga: The Freedom of Surrender

"The Supreme Lord is situated in everyone's heart, O Arjuna, and is directing the wanderings of all living entities, who are seated as on a machine, made of the material energy."