

# Is free will possible?

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To say that an action is free is to say, roughly, that it was up to you whether or not you performed it; that it was in some sense open to you to do otherwise; that the action was genuinely your own. Saying that an act is free is closely related to saying that you are responsible for the action.

Today we're interested in the questions: do human beings have free will? What would the world have to be like in order for human beings to have free will?

## 1 Free will and determinism

### 1.1 *The thesis of determinism*

Determinism says that the state of a world at one time, in conjunction with the laws of nature, determines the state of the world at every future time. That is, given a specification of the state of the world at some time  $t$  and the laws of nature, it is impossible for the future course of the world to diverge from the unique future implied by the laws. A good way to imagine this is that if you set the world up with the same initial conditions and the same laws of nature, you'd get the exact same future history of the world every time.

Somewhat confusingly, Sider explains determinism as the thesis that every event has a cause. This is fine, as long as we understand the cause/effect relation to imply that if the cause happens, it is impossible that the effect not also happen. (Many cause/effect

relations which you might think of are not like this, so it is important to keep this in mind; consider, for example, your turning the key of your car and the car starting. We'd say that the former causes the latter, but it is clearly not *impossible* for the former to happen without the latter also happening.)

### 1.2 The consequence argument

To many people, it seems intuitively clear that, if our world is deterministic, no one has free will. This intuition can be turned into an argument called the *consequence argument*. The consequence argument relies on the idea that arguments of the following form seem to be valid:

1. It is true that  $p$ , and I have no control over the fact that it is true that  $p$ .
2. It is true that if  $p$  then  $q$ , and I have no control over the fact that it is true that if  $p$ , then  $q$ .

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- C. It is true that  $q$ , and I have no control over the fact that it is true that  $q$ .

To say that this form of argument is valid is to say that, whatever sentences you put in for ' $p$ ' and ' $q$ ', if so doing makes the premises true, it must also make the conclusion true.

But let ' $q$ ' be a description of some action of yours, which you think was a free action. Then let ' $p$ ' be the state of the universe at some time prior to your birth; this will make the first premise true, since you have no control about anything that went on prior to your birth.

Is the second premise true? If determinism is true, then it seems that the second premise will be true. After all, you have no control over what the laws of nature are, and, if the world is deterministic, the laws of nature guarantee that if the state of the universe was as specified by ' $p$ ', then you performed the action specified by ' $q$ '.

It seems to follow that you have no control over the fact that you performed the action specified in ' $q$ ', in which case it seems clear that the action was not, as it seemed free. Since this kind of reasoning seems to apply to every action, it seems that this sort of argument shows that if determinism is true, no action is ever free.

(Sider gives an informal description of the intuitions behind this argument on pp. 116-117.)

## 2 Libertarian freedom

What this seems to show is that if we have free will, the thesis of determinism must be false: we must live in an indeterministic world. Let's explore this possibility, which Sider calls *libertarianism*. It is sometimes also called 'incompatibilist free will', to stand for the combination of views that we have free will, and that our possession of this free will is

incompatible with determinism. Many people think that libertarianism is the obviously correct view.

### *2.1 Knowledge of free will and knowledge of determinism*

However, it encounters some difficulties. Suppose that you think that you know that you have free will, and that you think that the above argument gives you knowledge that if you have free will, then determinism must be false. It does not seem as though you had to do any sort of complex scientific experiments to arrive at either piece of knowledge; so just on the basis of philosophical reflection and common sense, you know the following two claims:

I have free will.

If I have free will, then determinism is false.

But in general if you know one proposition ‘ $p$ ’, and another proposition ‘if  $p$  then  $q$ ’, you can know without doing any further investigation the proposition ‘ $q$ .’ But then we can know just on the basis of philosophical reflection and common sense that the law governing the physical world are indeterministic.

But is this really the kind of thing that you can know without complicated investigations into the way the physical world works? Isn’t this the kind of thing that physicists debate on the basis of experiments? For example, if Newtonian physics were true, the world would be deterministic, whereas on most interpretations of quantum mechanics, the truth of the theory implies that the world is not deterministic. Does this mean that we could have known that Newtonian physics was false without having performed any of the experiments that historically led to the rejection of the theory?

### *2.2 Probabilities and freedom*

Sider makes a further complaint about libertarian freedom: he says that it involves a certain kind of rejection of science. Science, you might think, finds causes for events in terms of the laws of nature; doesn’t that mean that if we think that human actions cannot always be predicted via the laws of the nature, we are committed to thinking that human beings are somehow outside the scope of science? And is this plausible?

Suppose that the libertarian responds by saying that science — at least in its quantum mechanical form — only makes predictions about probabilities, and that there’s no conflict between the idea that the laws of nature assign probabilities to those actions and those actions being free. The conflict is only with the idea that the laws of nature ‘pick’ in advance one action that you will perform. So there’s no conflict between libertarian free will and contemporary physics.

Sider’s objection to this idea is that it makes free will ‘a slave to quantum mechanical probabilities’ (124). How is this objection supposed to work? Suppose that science says that if you are confronted with the chance to cheat on a given test, given certain prior

conditions, you will cheat 20% of the time. Suppose that if we set up 100 such occasions with duplicates of you, around 80 always refrain from cheating, and around 20 always cheat. Would this make your action unfree?

Are our actions governed by probabilistic laws of this sort? Suppose that every year almost exactly 93% of incoming Notre Dame freshmen decide to join Facebook. Does that make their decision whether to join Facebook unfree? If it really were free choice, does that make you expect that the probabilities would vary more from year to year?

### *2.3 Indeterminism and randomness*

But what many philosophers find to be most problematic with libertarian free will is its seeming assimilation of free acts to random ones. According to the libertarian, a free action is always one which is such that the conditions existing prior to the act do not determine whether the act takes place, or not. So that means that those conditions could be exactly the same even though the act was *not* performed. Doesn't that mean that the act was uncaused — and, in turn, doesn't that mean that the act was in some sense random? But surely random actions cannot be free.

A different way to develop the same point focuses on the agent's desires and intentions as causes of their actions. It seems essential to free action that the agent's intention to act be among the causes of the action. But should we think of that intention (along with other background factors) as determining the action? What should the libertarian say?

## **3 A world without free will?**

At this point we have arguments that free will is incompatible with determinism, and with indeterminism. If both sets of arguments were sound, this would show that free will was impossible, and that our sense that we have free will is an illusion. Is this a possibility which we should take seriously?

Would this show that no one is ever morally responsible for any of their actions?

Does this make you think that the view Sider calls 'Soft Determinism' might be true, and hence that there might be something wrong with the consequence argument?