

General Philosophy: Free Will

Determinism

Here's the definition of *Laplacian determinism*:

The total state of the universe at some particular time, together with the laws of nature, fixes the state of the universe at all other times.

The idea is that, in a deterministic universe, one can 'roll forward' or 'roll backwards' the given state of the universe, to discover the (unique) state of the universe at any other time. The above is the notion of determinism which I will invoke in the following.¹

Freedom of indifference and freedom of spontaneity

It is useful to follow Hume, Locke, and other early modern philosophers, in distinguishing the *freedom of indifference* from the *freedom of spontaneity*:

Freedom of indifference: Freedom to act so as to realise one of a range of different possibilities.

Freedom of spontaneity: Freedom to act based upon one's choice.

How do we decide what is the more significant notion of freedom? People often invoke notions of *moral responsibility*: because this seems to be related to freedom of spontaneity, some would claim that it is upon this latter notion of freedom that we should focus.

¹This definition is pretty similar to that given by van Inwagen at [3, p. 186].

The Free Will Argument

It is often said that free will is incompatible with determinism. Here's how the argument is supposed to go (this is a variant on van Inwagen's *consequence argument*):

P1 Determinism is true.

P2 If determinism is true, then nobody could have done otherwise than they actually did.

C1 Nobody could have done otherwise than they actually did.

P3 One acts freely only if one could have done otherwise.

C Nobody acts freely.

Here, from the premise of determinism, one reasons to the conclusion that nobody acts freely (i.e., that free will is impossible). The argument is logically valid—formalised in \mathcal{L}_1 , it takes the form:

P1 P

P2 $P \rightarrow \neg Q$

C1 $\neg Q$ (By *modus ponens*, from **P1** and **P2**.)

P3 $R \rightarrow Q$

C $\neg R$ (By *modus tollens*, from **C1** and **P3**.)

Since the argument is logically valid, if we want to resist its force, we have to deny (at least one of) the premises. It's useful to situate various views in the free will debate with respect to whether they would accept the above (valid) argument as sound, or reject one (or more) of the premises:

- **Hard determinists** accept **C**.
- **Libertarians** reject **P1**.
- **Compatibilists** reject either **P2** or **P3**.

Frankfurt and the Principle of Alternate Possibilities

Frankfurt labels **P3** the *principle of alternate possibilities* (PAP). He rejects this premise—while it is true (by definition) if one is understanding ‘freedom’ *à la* freedom of indifference, it is *false* if one is understanding ‘freedom’ *à la* freedom of spontaneity—for consider ‘Frankfurt cases’ such as the following:

Black is a committed Democrat, and intends to vote Democrat in the next election. He enters the polling booth, votes Dem, and leaves. Unbeknownst to him, Black has had a chip inserted into his brain by rogue Democrats, such that if he *were* to decide to vote Republican, the chip would activate and make him vote Democrat anyway. In this case, Black *could not have done otherwise* but have voted Democrat—but nevertheless, we think he made the *free choice* to vote Democrat.

The point is that, if one thinks the relevant notion of freedom is the freedom of spontaneity (perhaps, as discussed above, because this is the notion of freedom which seems to be connected to moral responsibility), then one can act freely without the ability to do otherwise—in which case, **P3** is false.

In denying **P3**/PAP, Frankfurt is denying that the ability to do otherwise is *necessary* for freedom (of spontaneity). That is, he is denying:

If one acts freely, then one could have done otherwise.

(To repeat, though: for the freedom of indifference, the above is true by definition.)

The sufficiency of acting otherwise for freedom

Is the ability to act otherwise sufficient for freedom? That is, is the following true?:

If one is able to do otherwise, then one acts freely.

Again, it depends on one's definition of freedom—whether one is interested in the freedom of spontaneity, or the freedom of responsibility:

- Cases of coercion suggest that the above is not true for freedom of spontaneity. (There might be many options available in principle, but an addict or one coerced is not necessarily free to choose.)
- As before, the above is definitionally true on the freedom of indifference.

Conclusions on freedom and the ability to do otherwise

Whether the ability to act otherwise is necessary/sufficient for freedom is a function of one's definition of freedom:

- For the freedom of indifference, it is by definition true that the ability to act otherwise is necessary and sufficient for freedom—so on this understanding of freedom, **P3** must be true.
- For the freedom of spontaneity, Frankfurt cases lead one to question whether the ability to act otherwise is necessary for freedom; cases of coercion lead one to question whether the ability to act otherwise is sufficient for freedom.
- Insofar as one thinks that its (apparent) connection with moral responsibility makes freedom of spontaneity the *relevant* notion of freedom, one should answer that the ability to act otherwise is neither necessary nor sufficient for freedom, *simpliciter*.

Libertarianism

Let's return to the Free Will Argument. Suppose that one denies **P1**. Although this opens the *logical* possibility to also deny **C**, does it necessarily make this plausible as it stands? If the universe isn't deterministic, it could be random. But how is there any more room for freedom in a random universe than in a deterministic one? Thus, it's not obviously plain sailing for the libertarian (i.e., she who denies **P1**).

Branching determinism

Suppose that one thinks that the universe is deterministic, but has branching structure (as in *Everettian quantum mechanics*—which might well be true!). In that case, arguably, one would have the ability to do otherwise (for there's some other branch of the universe in which one does something else), even though the universe is deterministic! So: this gives one a way of denying **P2**. Insofar as one is interested in freedom of indifference, this affords a means to reconcile determinism and freedom.

References

- [1] David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, §8.
- [2] A. J. Ayer, "Freedom and Necessity", in his *Philosophical Essays*, London: Macmillan, 1954. Reprinted in G. Watson (ed.), *Free Will*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982.
- [3] Peter van Inwagen, "The Incompatibility of Free Will and Determinism", *Philosophical Studies* 27, pp. 185-199, 1975. Reprinted in G. Watson (ed.), *Free Will*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982.
- [4] Harry Frankfurt, "Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility", *Journal of Philosophy* 66, pp. 829-839, 1969. Reprinted in G. Watson (ed.), *Free Will*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982.