

Lecture Seven

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## Do I Have Free Will? Part I: The Challenge from Determinism

### 1. Free will and responsibility

To say that we have *free will* is to say that what we do is in some sense “up to us”. What this means is itself a source of debate, but it means something like this:

- Various alternative options are *open to us* (alternative possibilities)
- We can choose among them in accordance with our intentions, desires, etc. (control).
- What we do *originates* in us, and not in external causes (origin).

Why does it matter whether or not we have free will?

Free will seems to be a necessary condition for *moral responsibility*. If we don't have free will—if our actions are never up to us—then we seem to be excused responsibility for everything we do, and deserve neither reward nor punishment, praise nor blame.

### 2. The challenge from determinism

Premise 1 (*determinism*): Our actions are determined by facts beyond our control.

Premise 2 (*incompatibilism*): If our actions are determined by facts beyond our control, then we do not have free will.

Conclusion: We do not have free will.

Your reaction to this valid argument defines your position in the traditional free will debate.

Reject Premise 1 → you are a '*libertarian*'

Accept Premise 1 but reject Premise 2 → you are a '*compatibilist*' or '*soft determinist*'

Accept both premises and the conclusion → you are a '*hard determinist*'

### 3. Why believe determinism?

*Physical determinism*: The initial conditions of the universe and the laws of physics determine everything that happens.

Physical determinism, when combined with the claim that the initial conditions of the universe and the laws of physics are *beyond our control*, entails determinism in the sense that challenges free will (Premise 1, above). For a long time, Newtonian physics was widely seen to have vindicated physical determinism.

*Laplace's Demon*: “We may regard the present state of the universe as the effect of its past and the cause of its future. An intellect which at a certain moment would know all forces that set nature in motion, and all positions of all items of which nature is composed, if this intellect were also vast enough to submit these data to analysis, it would embrace in a single formula the movements of the greatest bodies of the universe and those of the tiniest atoms; for such an intellect nothing would be uncertain and the future just like the past would be present before its eyes.”

**Q:** But what about quantum physics? Isn't quantum physics *indeterministic*?

Quantum physics (on the most common interpretations) rejects physical determinism. However, if physical events are not fully determined by prior histories, the scientifically respectable alternative is that they are determined by prior histories plus random 'collapse' events—and the outcomes of these random 'collapse' events are not controlled by agents. So, although quantum physics does lead to a certain kind of 'openness' of the future given the past, it's not the right kind for free will.

#### 4. Why believe incompatibilism?

The *consequence argument* sharply formulates the challenge to free will from physical determinism. The basic idea is simple:

Assuming physical determinism, my actions are logical consequences of facts beyond my control. But if my actions are logical consequences of facts beyond my control, then my actions themselves are beyond my control—so I don't have free will.

Here is a simplified reconstruction of the argument:

$P$  = Complete specification of the initial condition of the universe

$L$  = Complete specification of the laws of physics

1 (Assumption of physical determinism)  $P$  &  $L$  entails that I do action  $A$  at time  $t$ .

2 (Premise)  $P$  &  $L$  is beyond my control.

3 (From 1-2) The fact that I do  $A$  at  $t$  is beyond my control.

4 (Premise) If the fact that I do  $A$  at  $t$  is beyond my control, then I do not have free will.

5 (From 3 and 4) I do not have free will.

**Next time:** Compatibilist escape routes... and the challenge from neuroscience

#### Primary reading:

Beebe, Helen. 2013. *Free Will: An Introduction*, Chapter 1.

#### Further reading:

Beebe, Helen. 2013. *Free Will: An Introduction*, later chapters.

Brogaard, Berit and Kristian Marlow. 2012. Sleep driving and sleep killing. *Psychology Today*, December 13, 2012. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-superhuman-mind/201212/sleep-driving-and-sleep-killing>

Frankfurt, Harry G. 1969. Alternate possibilities and moral responsibility. *Journal of Philosophy* 66:829-839.

Rosen, Jeffrey. 2007. The brain on the stand. *New York Times*, March 11, 2007.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/11/magazine/11NeuroLaw.t.html>

van Inwagen, Peter. 1974. The incompatibility of free will and determinism. *Philosophical Studies* 27:185-199.