

On Free Will and Determinism

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Abstract

R.E. Hobart argues that free will is “inconceivable” without some form of determinism. I will examine what he means about this remark and the free will/determinism issue in the context of the essays by Hobart, Chisholm, van Inwagen and O’Connor. Do we have “free will”? Is it explicable or a “mystery” (as van Inwagen suggests)? How does the issue of causation (in particular, agent causation) tie in?

1 Introduction

The problem of free will has been discussed in philosophical, sociological, religious, and even physical circles. The question arises from the fact of whether we are forced to act, or if we are free to act as we choose. The sciences have debated this issue, coming up with a rather unclear answer: we are free to a certain extent. This seems to be a “having your cake, and eating it too” conclusion. Objections can (and have been made by Timothy O’Connor) to refute even this conclusion. While Peter Van Inwagen has stated that we cannot demystify this question because both roads lead us towards a dead end of counter-arguments, and counter-counter arguments etc.

Roderick Chisholm, for example, illustrated this point by stating that either determinism or indeterminism are both inconsistent with free will. Chisholm and O’Connor both introduce the Agent as the unmoved mover within all persons to

circumvent free will's incompatibility with either options (of deterministic free will or indeterministic free will.) Let us first analyse these arguments to see if we can arrive at some clarity revolving the subject. Because, as Chisholm puts it, it is not possible to say anything significant about this issue, which has not already been stated before.

2 Determinism

R.E. Hobart argues that free will and determinism are not in conflict with each other; there can be deterministic free will. The qualification he makes is that determinism is true, insofar as we have free will. One's actions ought to be viewed as a complex decision involving a system of parts working together in a complex process.[2, p. 344]

Hobart places forth an analogy; A certain enlightened pastor who introduced the railway in Germany. He painstakingly in plain English explained exactly the intricate details of how a locomotive engine operates. He was pleased to see nods of acknowledgement as he went through the explanations. At the end of the lecture however, he was asked by one of the villagers, "yes, but there is a horse inside, isn't there?" Hobart makes the point that they could not *realize* the analysis because they were lacking the analytical imagination. In this way, he argues, the non-conflict between determinism and free will is only analysable if the different issues are taken all together, and realised jointly.

Hobart begins on this first issue by citing that the indeterminist's physical act is not simply the result of character and circumstances. The self feels motives, but the act is not determined by them. When someone commits a crime, they may reproach themselves by saying, "that was stupid of me". This means that you had some characteristic at that point which lead you to act morally incorrect. Further, he distinguishes free will from determinism in that determinism is the passive voice of free will. In free will, one is inclined to say: "I produce my volitions." While in a determinist point of view, one says: "my volitions are produced by me." [2, p. 347] Ardent indeterminists, Hobart argues, solve the inconsistencies of free will with indeterminism, by going to the "little man inside." There is an infinite regression of small agents to produce the "first" action.

Further, Hobart goes into the word 'can' such that it denotes ability. He equates this with 'power', defining it as the setting of the actor in an appropriate manner to produce a certain set of events that do, indeed, follow. As such, freedom then implies that nothing can stand in one's way to prevent the *ability* to

exercise one's *power*. Chisholm however, argues that this is a conflation of two separate terms.

Chisholm puts forth the following dilemma:[1, p. 358] **(a)** He could have done otherwise; **(b)** If he would have chosen to do otherwise, he would have done it. These two stipulations are often equated with each other such that, if (b) is compatible with determinism, then (a) is also. The conclusion is not sound in that the premises are being misinterpreted. If (b) could be true, then (a) could still be false. If a person decided otherwise, he still may not have been *able* to do otherwise. We cannot be justified in asserting (a) without also **(c)** he could have chosen to do otherwise. Hence if we must reject (c) and accept (b), we are still not justified in asserting (a)'s truthfulness. As a result, the ascription of responsibility conflicts with the deterministic view.

Chisholm also argues that indeterminism is inconsistent with free will and responsibility. If the man was responsible then he cause the act and it was entirely made up; he also could not have acted based on his will. The problem arises when desires and beliefs enter the picture. A weak-willed man may give in to the flood of desires, in which case he did not cause the act. The question then becomes: is the man responsible since there is nothing he can do against the flood of desires? Conversely, if a man was of a good character, then he would be responsible for the things he did do. However, he would be unable to do anything but the good, because being of a good character, he will always choose the good. Extending the analogy a bit further (with religious implications) if God is the ultimate agent of cause, then God *forced* the sinner to commit the sin. Hence, the sinner is not responsible.

3 Agents in Free Will

With the failure of both determinism, and indeterminism, we should not say it's caused by something else, nor is it caused by nothing - rather Chisholm argues, it is caused of the conscious Agent. Each one of us is the prime mover, or the unmoved mover, Chisholm states. A similar argument is put forth by O'Connor, who argues that the two are wrong, but we can modify determinism towards a "loose-fit" argument. This loose fit is turned into a causal indeterminism theory involving agents.

Causal indeterminism, as an argument, has the following premises:

1. I have reason to act in accordance with a set of ranges as options.

2. My having these relations gives me an objective (probabilistic) tendency to act accordingly.
3. Whatever the probabilities, each of them is *possible*.
4. My having these relations to act in such and such a way, will have been *among* the causal factors.

While O'Connor believes that this is not *true* freedom, the indeterministic tendencies arising from my reasons for being a causal factor, lead towards a *kind* of control which is too probabilistic to allow the imposition of responsibility for my actions. To make use of an analogy, let us presume that I want to touch the Eiffel Tower. Based on my physical location in Philadelphia, I cannot reach over to touch the tower as I would the keyboard I am typing on. However, I can, *if I really wanted to*, board a plane towards Paris, and walk to the tower and touch it. In other words the range of the operation of my hand is not limited insofar as I can be moved, or can move myself, towards the tower. In a similar manner, O'Connor argues that the agent's range of operation is not limited; he influences the direction of what is *already* going on within him: a structured dynamic situation open to some possibilities by not others (open to my being able to travel to Paris, but not by just extending my arm if I am in Philadelphia.)[5, p. 378]

4 Mysterious Solutions

Van Inwagen takes the view that the solution to the free will of humans as a mystery. While all of the above arguments can be sensible, they leave us with a "wretched subterfuge", as Van Inwagen quotes Kant. There are several reasons why Van Inwagen takes this view, and they are outlined below.

Many of us have conflated the use of the word "can" with others such as "will". It does not follow, as Hobart argued, that the absence of all obstacles to the performance of an action is sufficient for one's being *able* to perform that action. This leads towards an argument for why determinism is incompatible with freedom. Namely that the laws of nature and past events determine a unique future. We are free to do what we in fact do. Thus, metaphysical freedom are not just negative concepts because the laws of nature and the past are not impediments to one's will.

Yet the outcome of the previous argument leads us towards an argument against indeterminism being compatible with metaphysical freedom. Namely that if God,

for example, would turn back time, things would either happen again, or not: be deterministic or indeterministic.

Hence, there is something wrong with one argument or the other and we do not know (for sure) which is at fault, so van Inwagen leaves it as a mystery for now.

5 Free will in *A Clockwork Orange*

Throughout my writings on this subject, I often returned to remember one of the main themes in the Stanley Kubrick film *Clockwork Orange*. This film revolved around a character of the utmost evil who was “cured” from his evil ways by a drug that invoked a Pavlovian reaction against violence. The priest in the movie argued that the scientists have taken away the very thing that made him a pious human: the ability to exercise moral judgement of free will. Whenever the protagonist even considered acting violently, he would get extremely physically ill. The desire to ease the pain was greater than his desire to make another the object of this violence.

One may say here that he was “weak willed” such that he could not act otherwise. So if he is “forced” into being a pacifist, then he ought not receive praise for his acts of non-violence; he was not responsible for his acts of non-violence. Is this really a cure? No this is not a cure. Instead what the scientists have done, is forced the individual to act in a particular way with conditioning. Without the conditioning, he will still, based on the complex processes of his mental makeup, be a violent person.

The question of free will as determinate or indeterminate is still unanswered and unanswerable. It may be a mystery as Van Inwagen suggests; however, if this mystery is unravelled, it still has no bearing on one’s actions. Let us say that free will was found (definitively through some scientific apparatus) to be deterministic. The effects of this discovery would lead one to believe that they cannot alter their ultimate fate. It would be more detrimental to us (as sentient beings) than it would help. Further, some people would extremely refute, or not believe this, just as people now believe in particular forms of religion, while science continues to “disprove” religious doctrine. If, however, it is found that free will is indeterminate, then this would lead to no changes in our daily life. At best, this question is left for mere child’s play, in that it can be played with by philosophers, but a real answer is not forthcoming. I doubt whether any human (as we know them now) will be able to answer this question as it is beyond our comprehension as a

species, in that we need to *believe* that we have free will in order to survive as a society and race of beings.

References

- [1] Chisholm, Roderick M. "Human Freedom and The Self". Van Inwagen 356-65.
- [2] Hobart, R.E. "Free Will as Involving Determination and Inconceivable without It". Van Inwagen 343-55.
- [3] Van Inwagen, Peter and Dean W. Zimmerman ed. *Metaphysics: The Big Questions*. Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 1998.
- [4] Van Inwagen, "The Mystery of Metaphysical Freedom". Van Inwagen 365-74.
- [5] O'Connor, Timothy. "The Agent as Cause". Van Inwagen 374-80.