

Feeling Free in a Determined Reality

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PHIL 780: Freaks, Geeks, and Psychopaths

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May 30, 2019

The idea of humans possessing a free will has been an ongoing debate since Ancient Greece and likely even earlier. The two extremes of the argument are metaphysical libertarianism (libertarian free will) and incompatibilist determinism (incompatibilism or hard determinism). Proponents of the former believe that we can act freely; that is, we can produce an effect without something to cause it. Conversely, proponents of the latter believe that everything, including our minds and decision-making processes, is subject to causality. The most common view rests somewhere in the middle of the two extremes dubbed compatibilism (soft determinism). According to the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, “compatibilism is the thesis that free will is compatible with determinism” and that it is possible to believe in both without being logically contradictory.¹ In this paper, I will take a hard determinist position and argue that we have no free will because our actions are wholly predetermined. Our mental, biological processes are so complex and intricate that we all deceptively feel free.

Before delving into what each stance on free will entails, I will shape what philosophers mean by “free will.” American philosopher Harry Frankfurt notes that having desires alone does not constitute free will, for all living entities have desires.² Plants desire sunlight and will grow towards it. Animals desire food and will hunt for it. Frankfurt argues that what makes humans unique among other living beings is that we possess what he calls “second-order desires.”³ The preceding examples are all first-order desires because they follow the “A wants to X” syntax. Second-order desires follow the “A wants to want to X” syntax. We as humans have a

¹ McKenna, Michael, and D. Justin Coates. 2018. *Compatibilism*. Edited by Edward N. Zalta. Vers. Winter 2018. Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University. Accessed May 4, 2019. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/compatibilism/>.

² Frankfurt, Harry G. 1971. "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person." *Journal of Philosophy* (Journal of Philosophy, Inc.) 68 (1): 6. Accessed May 1, 2019. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2024717>.

³ Ibid.

seemingly-unique ability to form second-order desires, but that is still not enough to know if a person's will is free. Frankfurt notes that the question is not whether a person can translate their desires into actions because that solely answers whether the person is free to do as they please. The question, instead, is within the desires themselves. We need to understand if a person is free to will what they want to will or to have the will they want.⁴

Incompatibilist determinism is based on the theory of universal causation, which is the belief that all events are caused by prior events. As such, nothing other than what does occur can occur. Scottish philosopher David Hume believed that since everything is causally determined, the future is theoretically predictable if we could model every cause and effect. Although Hume was more so a soft determinist, he made contributions to the ideology of hard determinism by commenting that patterns in the physical world are also found in the decisions we make. French-German philosopher Baron d'Holbach was among one of the first to argue that existence is merely an unbroken chain of causal relationships.⁵ Incompatibilist determinism is based upon materialism, a form of monism which is the view that matter is the only building block in nature, and that all things (including consciousness) are only results of physical interactions. If materialism is true, the physical world and the physical laws that govern it bound our minds. Following a reductionist approach, we can, in theory, trace back (reduce) all parts of the world, including our experiences and behavior, to one singular thing: mental states are brain states, which are a type of biological state, which is a type of physical state that can be determined by observing straightforward cause and effect relationships.

⁴ Frankfurt, Harry G. 1971. "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person." *Journal of Philosophy* (Journal of Philosophy, Inc.) 68 (1): 15. Accessed May 1, 2019. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2024717>.

⁵ d'Holbach, Baron. 1820. *The System of Nature or, the Laws of the Moral and Physical World*. Translated by M. DE Mirabaud. Duke Street, West Smithfield: Thomas Davidson. Accessed May 4, 2019.

To use a contemporary example, incompatibilist determinists believe that our brains work like computer algorithms. We combine a belief, a first- or second-order desire, and our temperament to generate an action. Changing any of the three variables will lead to a different outcome. If I chose to eat pasta for lunch, that decision was the direct result of my belief that pasta is nutritious, my desire for healthy nourishment, and my temperament that predisposes me to enjoy warm, carbohydrate-rich comfort foods. Although it is impossible with current technological advancements to pinpoint what factors led to any action on a day-to-day basis, we could, in theory, isolate them if we knew enough about the beliefs, desires, and temperaments that factored into our decisions. Given how complex our brains are, our ignorance about what determines our actions lead us to believe that they have no cause at all. American neuroscientist Sam Harris and others discuss this phenomenon, known as the illusion of moral choice.⁶

English philosopher John Locke proposed the sleeping man situation to demonstrate the illusion of moral choice.⁷ A sleeping man is locked in a dark room. Upon awakening, he decides that he will remain in the room while utterly unaware of the fact that the room is locked from the outside. He has no freedom to choose and could not get out of the room even if he wanted to. However, the ignorance of his actual condition has led him to believe that he is freely choosing to remain in the room. Through this analogy, Locke is suggesting that we make decisions regularly thinking that our choices are free when they are determined for us.

Many philosophers have criticized incompatibilist determinism. If it is true that we have no free will, we must also not have ethical accountability, for external forces prescribe all our

⁶ Harris, Sam. 2017. The Illusion of Free Will. Sam Harris. December 4. Accessed May 6, 2019. <https://samharris.org/the-illusion-of-free-will/>.

⁷ Rickless, Samuel, and John Locke. 2016. Locke On Freedom. Edited by Edward N Zalta. Vers. Winter 2016. Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University. Accessed May 7, 2019. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/locke-freedom/>.

choices—concerning morals or otherwise. Thus, under hard determinism, we cannot be held morally responsible for our actions, since they are all causally determined and, therefore, not a result of our own moral choices. We must now remove our right to punish “guilty” criminals since they cannot be held accountable for their actions. In this regard, punishment “is reduced to a failed attempt at tackling the problem of injustice in the world.”⁸ This situation seems impossible, for we need some form of ethical accountability to be a productive and functioning society, surely. In an Aeon essay, Gregg Caruso famously advocates for this argument, claiming that we have no accountability for our actions, while Daniel Dennett argues that we do.⁹ I agree with Dennett’s various arguments because without ethical accountability; our society could not function. However, I am not so quick to dismiss incompatibilist determinism on these grounds so quickly. Even though everything is determined under this ideology, we still hold people responsible for social wrongdoings. We aim to use punishment to educate people on what they are and are not allowed to do. Since external factors including education cause peoples’ actions, we can cause people to behave in specific ways by educating them. If a person is uneducated or disobeys the social expectation, we punish them to teach them and others.

Scientific theories also challenge incompatibilist determinism, namely chaos theory coupled with Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle. The uncertainty principle states that it is not possible to measure both the position and speed of a particle simultaneously because photons have a significant effect on the subject particles at the subatomic level. The theory suggests that there is no indeterminacy in nature because we cannot accurately measure how these particles

⁸ Riley, Jim. 2015. Free Will and Determinism. Tutor2u Limited. March 1. Accessed May 1, 2019. <https://www.tutor2u.net/religious-studies/blog/free-will-and-determinism>.

⁹ Dennett, Daniel C, and Gregg D Caruso. 2018. On free will: Daniel Dennett and Gregg Caruso go head to head. Edited by Nigel Warburton. Aeon Media Group Ltd. October 4. Accessed May 6, 2019. <https://aeon.co/essays/on-free-will-daniel-dennett-and-gregg-caruso-go-head-to-head>.

interact and behave with each other.¹⁰ Nonetheless, just because it is impossible to measure both does necessitate that they cannot both be known. We have been able to successfully use mathematical models to demonstrate how subatomic particles behave—all based on causality.¹¹

The scientific community has widely accepted chaos theory, which is the belief that events at the most fundamental level of the material world occur randomly and by chance. Chaos theory suggests that a quantum event at this level can ultimately cause a large-scale event. This theory is known colloquially as the “butterfly effect,” since it suggests that even the slightest movement of a butterfly’s wings in Beijing could cause a hurricane in New York sometime later.¹² Even if subatomic activity is genuinely random, its activity still causes other activities to occur in cause-and-effect fashion. Although the hurricane in New York might appear random, it was caused—at least in part—by a butterfly flapping its wings. Our ignorance combined with our present lack of sophisticated technology likely prevents us from understanding how the tiniest pieces of matter interact. I do not believe the uncertainty principle, nor chaos theory can adequately refute incompatible determinism for these reasons.

With my arguments for incompatibilist determinism on the table, I will now analyze competing ideologies starting with fatalism. According to an Ancient Greek legend, Oedipus was born destined to kill his father and marry his mother. No matter what happens during his life, Oedipus will complete his destiny. An oracle alerts Oedipus’s father and King of Thebes, Laius, about his destiny. Precautionarily, Laius ties baby Oedipus up and leaves him on a mountainside to die. A shepherd rescues the stranded baby and brings him to the King of Corinth, who raises

¹⁰ Riley, Jim. 2015. Free Will and Determinism. Tutor2u Limited. March 1. Accessed May 1, 2019. <https://www.tutor2u.net/religious-studies/blog/free-will-and-determinism>.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

Oedipus. Some point after reaching manhood, Oedipus meets an old man at a crossroads who is attended by five servants. He gets into a heated argument with the man and promptly kills him and his servants. The old man, however, is his father, Laius. The first part of the prophecy has come true. Now having a deceased husband, Oedipus's mother is a single woman and begins looking for a new husband. Unbeknownst to him, Oedipus eventually ends up marrying his mother. Despite all choices Oedipus and others made during his lifetime, the prophecy rang true: Oedipus killed his father and married his mother.

In this legend, it does not matter what Oedipus's first- or second-order desires are because he was destined by the oracle to marry his mother and kill his father regardless. Fatalism requires submission to fate (destiny) and stresses the acceptance of future events as inevitable. Fatalists believe that some—if not, all—aspects of the future are entirely inescapable. However, they do not necessarily believe that this phenomenon is due to the causal chain of prior events, as determinists believe. As such, fatalism tends to be a looser term than determinism. Many contemporary religions incorporate a flavor of fatalism.

Fatalism has its criticisms, namely the “idle argument” described by Aristotle, Origen of Alexandria, and Marcus Tullius Cicero. The argument goes as follows using illness as an example. If you are fated to recover from an illness, then you will recover regardless of whether you seek treatment. Likewise, if fate wills you to not to recover, you will not recover regardless of whether you seek treatment. However, either it is fated that you will recover *or* that you will not. Therefore, it is futile to seek treatment. If fatalism is correct, everything that will happen is going to happen regardless of whether an agent¹³ acts. There would be no reason to do anything because whatever is destined to happen will happen automatically. Fatalism implies an

¹³ When I use the term “agent” in this paper, I am referring to any being that is propelled by a mind.

existential “autopilot” that does not require anyone to do anything for action to take place. I believe this argument refutes fatalism since, in the case of Oedipus, he could have just sat and withered away without taking any action at all.

Conversely, metaphysical libertarianism is the belief that we all act freely. That is, an action is only free if the agent could have done otherwise but chose not to. This ideology counters the causal nature of our material reality, so proponents of the thesis distinguish event and agent causation. The former means that no physical event can occur without having been caused by a previous physical event; the physical world itself is deterministic. The latter means that an agent can start a chain of causality that was not caused by anything else; the agents are, in a sense, unmoved movers. My decision to kick a ball exemplifies agent causation while the ball moving from my foot is event causation. Metaphysical libertarians believe that our behavior is likely partially influenced by external factors, but we ultimately have the freedom to choose our actions. Note that the belief in this ideology necessitates a belief in a philosophical dualism, which is the belief that some components of mental phenomena are non-physical or that the mind and body are distinct and separable. Dualism opposes the materialist view from incompatibilist determinism.

Two types of liberties stem from metaphysical libertarianism. The liberty of indifference is genuine freedom to act according to independent choices. This type of liberty is only in part determined by external constraints like heredity, cultural background, and education.¹⁴ The liberty of spontaneity is the freedom to act according to an agent’s nature and is the ability for

¹⁴ Riley, Jim. 2015. Free Will and Determinism. Tutor2u Limited. March 1. Accessed May 1, 2019. <https://www.tutor2u.net/religious-studies/blog/free-will-and-determinism>.

them to do what they wish to do. However, what they wish is determined by their nature, which, in turn, is shaped by external constraints like heredity, cultural background, and education.¹⁵

Metaphysical libertarianism lends itself well to punishment, for free will is fundamental to its objective. In the words of Riley, “we do not punish inanimate objects when they fail to perform,” but we do punish people because we believe that they possess moral agency and are genuinely responsible for their actions.¹⁶ Punishment is especially logical under this ideology because we assume that the person could have acted morally but freely chose not to.

If an agent is genuinely an unmoved mover and can act freely, one big question remains: “what would cause an agent to act?” Is it random or are there factors compelling an agent to act one way versus another? The best answer metaphysical libertarians have is that we all merely *feel* free and, since we all generally share this free feeling, it might be best to operate under the assumption that we are. If dualism exists and the mind and body are definitively separable, this theory would hold. However, we do not know if the metaphysical components of the mind exist. Everything in our reality appears to obey material properties, and I do not believe there is enough evidence to suggest that the matter composing our brains is uniquely special or different than matter found elsewhere.

Philosophers Thomas Hobbes, David Hume, and François-Marie Arouet Voltaire originally proposed the compatibilist approach to free will. American philosopher William James coined the term “compatibilism” in his essay “The Dilemma of Determinism” (1884). It is the view that human freedom and moral responsibility are not only compatible with determinism but also that determinism is incomprehensible without free will. Note that holding a compatibilist

¹⁵ Riley, Jim. 2015. Free Will and Determinism. Tutor2u Limited. March 1. Accessed May 1, 2019. <https://www.tutor2u.net/religious-studies/blog/free-will-and-determinism>.

¹⁶ Ibid.

view of free will does not commit you to a position on whether determinism is indeed true.¹⁷

Instead, compatibilism and incompatibilism are merely theses about whether the two claims of determinism and free will are logically compatible and neither requires a commitment to the truth of either.¹⁸

According to compatibilist determinists, when we say, “an agent acted freely,” we mean they did not act under compulsion or external pressure. In other words, we act freely when we act on our desires.¹⁹ Although an agent could be free to act according to a motive, the nature of that motive is still determined. As such, compatibilists define freedom as the liberty of spontaneity²⁰ in that we act according to our nature which is determined by external factors. Compatibilists argue that the misconception that free will and determinism are incompatible comes from confusion over how we define “free.” Writer Jim Riley explains, “freedom is incompatible with fatalism, but not with determinism.”²¹

Riley continues by breaking down our wholly-determined human behavior and actions into two types of causal events: internal and external causes. The former leads to voluntary actions of free will and are the results of an agent’s wishes or desires; for example, if you leave your job freely because you desire to work elsewhere. The latter leads to involuntary actions of compulsion or external pressures and is contrary to an agent’s wishes or desires; for example, if

¹⁷ Anderson, James N. 2014. Determinism: Soft or Hard? James N. Anderson. July 16. Accessed May 2, 2019. <https://www.proginosko.com/2014/07/determinism-soft-or-hard/>.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Frankfurt, Harry G. 1971. "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person." *Journal of Philosophy* (Journal of Philosophy, Inc.) 68 (1): 5-10. Accessed May 1, 2019. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2024717>.

²⁰ I defined this term earlier in this paper while talking about metaphysical libertarianism.

²¹ Riley, Jim. 2015. Free Will and Determinism. Tutor2u Limited. March 1. Accessed May 1, 2019. <https://www.tutor2u.net/religious-studies/blog/free-will-and-determinism>.

you leave your job because you are fired. The distinction between internal and external causality highlights why compatibilism requires free will. For an agent to have acted freely, they must have done so through internal causes: namely, having the will they want.²²

Compatibilism offers a narrative for moral responsibility, too, if an agent's wishes and desires factor into the causes of their actions. If an agent could not have acted otherwise because of external causes, then the agent is not morally responsible for their actions. However, if they could not have acted otherwise because of internal causes, the action would be a result of their character, and they are responsible for said actions.

Challenges plague compatibilism just like the other ideologies. Sometimes referred to as the "consequence argument," an agent's nature (internal causes) are still determined by external factors. If the desires, decisions, and volitions (acts of will) that govern our actions are factually ours, then it is reasonable to say that we are in control and hence acting freely.²³ However, our desires, decisions, and volitions—our entire characters—are ultimately determined by other factors that are equally outside our control.²⁴ These external factors include genetic predispositions, upbringing, environment, and education. For these reasons, we still do not ultimately have any control over (or responsibility for) our actions.

I have examined incompatibilist determinism, fatalism, metaphysical libertarianism, and compatibilist determinism as they each relate to free will. I have evaluated the logic and reasoning that governs each ideology while noting their strong and weak points. Fatalism is the

²² Frankfurt, Harry G. 1971. "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person." *Journal of Philosophy* (Journal of Philosophy, Inc.) 68 (1): 5-10. Accessed May 1, 2019. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2024717>.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Westacott, Emrys G. 2019. *Soft Determinism Explained: Trying to reconcile free will and determinism*. Dotdash. February 22. Accessed May 2, 2019. <https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-soft-determinism-2670666>.

belief that our actions are fated which falls short to the idle argument. Metaphysical libertarianism is the view that we do have a free will that can make decisions without needing an underlying cause. However, for this argument to hold, it requires a belief in dualism, which is that the mind and body operate on separate planes of existence. To our knowledge, the causal laws of physics govern our reality, and we have no logical reason to believe that our brains are somehow different than all other matter. Compatibilist determinism is the belief that determinism and free will are inherently compatible with each other and that the answer to the problem of free will is a mixture of both. While a tempting position to hold, it still falls short in that we still act by our “nature,” which is entirely influenced by our environments.

The only ideology that respects the causal laws of the material world is incompatibilist determinism, which is the belief that past events cause all present events. This theory means that our minds work like algorithms: they combine our beliefs, desires, and temperament into an action. Scientific theories of chaos and uncertainty seek to poke holes in this view, but even the most random subatomic events operate on probabilities. The cause of any particle movement is a list of probabilities that always has a measurable outcome. Our reality is bounded by physical laws of nature that cannot change when it comes to human thought. Given any possible decision, there is a range of possible actions we can make. Our beliefs, desires, and temperament dictate the specific action we take.

However, it is impossible to deny the overwhelming feeling of having full control over the actions we take. In a determined reality, how can we feel so free? I believe all the evidence points to our ignorance. The algorithms running through our neurons are so complex that it is impossible to be consciously aware of the biological processes that take place at lightning speeds. We form decisions in split-seconds based on the wiring of our brains, which has all been

determined since the beginning of our development in the womb. Since our brains are capable of being molded and changed based on external factors and the very processes we use to internalize those forms of stimulus, I believe that we can be held accountable for our actions as moral agents because of the education and social training we receive throughout life. Therefore, I believe that our actions are wholly determined, but we can also feel free: and that feeling is all that matters in the end.

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