

Adrian Brockless

Handout 9

Free Will & Determinism

Compatibilism

Compatibilism is the idea that free will and determinism are compatible. Compatibilism is also thought of as ‘soft’ determinism. In essence, compatibilism accepts the reality of causal relations (and, as such, the requirement to explain the world in causal terms) but postulates that there is, nevertheless, the possibility of choice within it.

Part of what motivates the argument for compatibilism is the problems that hard determinism raises for moral responsibility. You will remember that one of the less palatable consequences of hard determinism is that it does not allow room for moral responsibility. We were always going to do what we were going to do, so we cannot be held responsible for it!

There are three big names that argue for compatibilism: Hobbes, Hume and Kant. I shall proceed in chronological order and start with Hobbes (1588-1679).

Like all compatibilists, Hobbes took the view that freedom is not to be understood as freedom from causal necessity. According to Hobbes, to will or to want something is to be inclined to move towards it. Thus, if my movement towards something is unimpeded, then I am acting freely. If my movement is restricted or prevented in some way, then I am not able to act freely. Put another way: external barriers are restrictions on my freedom. This seems to be a much more common sense approach than that taken by Hard Determinism.

Hobbes draws a distinction between obstacles that prevent me from acting freely (external impediments) and natural incapacities. So, for example, I am useless at hurdles because I’m not very good at running and leaping simultaneously. This, according to Hobbes is a natural lack of ability in me. Hobbes actually uses the example of flowing water (I’m not sure hurdles had been invented as a sport in his day). Water descends freely in a channel in which there is no blockage but water cannot naturally ascend because it is not in its nature.¹ We do not say, as a result of this, that the water is not free to ascend. – Put another way: we have a natural range of abilities and we are free provided we can exercise them unimpeded. This, you will note, is a carefully crafted definition of freedom.

Here are some initial difficulties for you to think about (you don’t have to agree with what I’m saying; develop your own thoughts!). Are we sure about this definition of freedom? Our intuition makes us say: this is only an appearance of freedom. Being free and thinking that you are free are not the same thing; they may go together or they may not. By analogy: it’s not enough to think that you are not HIV+; the real issue is whether or not you in fact are HIV+, whatever you think. In other words, real freedom occurs only when real options are really open, and when we as agents are the

¹ Similarly, it is not in my nature to be an Olympic standard hurdles athlete.

only responsible factor for taking one option rather than the other.

Now for Hume (1711–1777):

*“For what is meant by liberty, when applied to voluntary actions? We cannot surely mean that actions have so little connexion with motives, inclinations, and circumstances, that one does not follow with a certain degree of uniformity from the other, and that one affords no inference by which we can conclude the existence of the other. For these are plain and acknowledged matters of fact. By liberty, then, we can only mean a **power of acting or not acting, according to the determinations of the will; this is, if we choose to remain at rest, we may; if we choose to move, we also may.** Now this hypothetical liberty is universally allowed to belong to every one who is not a prisoner and in chains. Here, then, is no subject of dispute.”*
Hume, *Enquiry* VIII.i

Hume, then, disagrees with those who say that a free action is one that “could have been otherwise” in the given situation: for an action to be *my* action, it must “follow with a certain degree of uniformity” from my “motives, inclinations, and circumstances”. Elsewhere (in the *Treatise on Human Nature*) Hume puts this point by saying that, for an action to be *my* action it must be *caused* by my desires and circumstances – which is as good as saying that any action of mine must be *necessitated* by my desires and circumstances. In other words, our reasons for acting cause our actions. Is this reasonable? Do our reasons cause our actions?

Hume’s proposed alternative definition of “liberty” or “Free Will” needs some explanation. He describes freedom as “a power of acting or not acting, according to the determinations of the will”. By this he emphatically does *not* mean that in every situation there must be a possibility either that we will do something or that we will not do it; he means only that we are free so long as we have the power to do what we want to do. So we are free to stand up, because this is something it is in our power to do if we want to. Of course, if hard determinism is true, then what we want to do (and what we actually do) is fixed in advance. But that doesn’t stop us from being free in Hume’s sense: according to him it doesn’t matter that our desires are fixed in advance by circumstances outside our control; all that matters is that there is nothing preventing us from acting *according to* our desires. We will revisit this point when we cover Existentialism.

For Hume, the difference between a “free” or “voluntary” action and an involuntary one is the *type of cause* from which it issues: voluntary actions are those that are caused by my desires and beliefs, while involuntary actions are those which are caused by something else. If my action of kicking the doctor in the face was caused by a reflex action as he struck my patellar tendon with a hammer, then my action was involuntary; however, if my action was caused by my deep personal dislike of the doctor and my desire to hurt him, then my action was voluntary. The crucial point here is that *both* involuntary and voluntary actions are caused, and hence necessitated; the difference

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between them is merely *what* they are caused by. So Hume thinks of Free Will as *causally determined and yet distinguishable from psychologically or physically constrained action*: an action which is causally determined by my desires is voluntary and “free”, while an action which is “constrained” or restricted by physical circumstances or some psychological problem (such as the inability to act on my desires through depression or extreme terror) is involuntary and hence not free in Hume’s sense.

Finally, Hume has been criticized on the grounds that his account of the distinction between voluntary and involuntary action is not sophisticated enough, and is vulnerable to **counter-examples**. Hume suggests that an action should be counted as voluntary (and so “free”) if it is **caused** by the desires and choices of the agent (in Hume’s phrase, if the agent acts “according to the determinations of his will”); however, two kinds of counter-example threaten. One is where someone is subject to, and acts upon, desires which are compulsive and out of control – for example, in drug addiction or kleptomania. According to Hume’s definition, such people act voluntarily and freely, even though we might want to say that they are not fully in control of their actions in the way a truly free agent would be.

Immanuel Kant 1724-1804

Every event has a cause – Kant thinks this is necessary to make sense of the world. There is a difference between how I order my perceptions by choosing to look around the room in a particular way and when things in the external world act on them causing my perceptions to be ordered in a particular way beyond my control. Thus, explanations of events must be understood in terms of what gave rise to them (determinist science argument).

Nonetheless, Kant thought that reason played a special role. It allows for decisions!

This is a basic summary of the argument:

1. That we acknowledge a natural causality but at the same time think (but do not know) that freedom is somehow possible, is borne out by our everyday practices. This is part of the way the universe is!
2. For any action that I claim to have chosen freely, there is always an explanation in terms of a natural causality of the movements that accomplish it. No account of the action that ignores the possibility of an explanation in terms of natural causality is objectively acceptable (tooth fairy leaving teeth under pillows, for example).
3. At the same time the action itself is understood by reference to the intentions relating to it. We think of the action as being performed because of certain reasons although we do not deny that the movements required by it are in accordance with natural causality.
4. Reason is a law of its own kind that separates human (or rational) beings from all other things in the universe. However, we cannot ever know when, or if, it is reason rather than natural causality that determines an action.

In this way, Kant argues that we have genuine moral choice, for example. However, given that he admits that we cannot

know when (or if) it is reason rather than natural causality that determines an action, it seems optimistic to suggest we are genuinely free on such grounds.