

Introduction to Free Will

Are we truly free to make the choices that we do? When I go to a restaurant or into Dorking to buy my lunch, is this done of my own free will (did I have a genuine choice not to do it)? Or was I always going to do it no matter what I thought? Is the idea of freedom of choice an illusion?

Most people wouldn't question the idea of whether I have choices; indeed, much of the way we live seems to be governed by the belief that we do.¹ You do decide (choose) where to go for dinner and what you're going to eat; the location often being determined by the kind of food that you desire. I choose to write these summaries because I want you to get the most out of the classes. In both of these scenarios, like so many others we encounter every day, there are choices to make. We make good choices and bad choices and are sometimes reprimanded for making wrong choices. But are we really making these choices? Are they choices?

There are three positions that we will be examining:

1. **Determinism**
2. **Compatibilism**
3. **Libertarianism**

Determinism: given the laws of nature, every state of the world can be known from a previous state of the world (sometimes known as 'hard' determinism)

Compatibilism (Hobbes): Free will and determinism are compatible (compatibilism is sometimes thought of as 'soft' determinism).

Libertarianism: Free will is logically incompatible with a deterministic universe. People have free will, therefore, determinism is false.

Both determinism and libertarianism are 'incompatibilist' theories. Determinism in its purest 'hard' form is incompatible with free will; libertarianism is incompatible with determinism.

We will start with determinism and work our way from there. Let's return to the questions I raised at the start and the thought that we do not give the idea that we have choices a second thought. – Everyday we choose. But is this all illusory? Most of us (with the exception of certain forms of religious positions such as creationism) believe scientific claims about the causal laws of the universe. Thus, it becomes obvious that there is a fundamental link between determinism and causality. None of us, I think, would deny that one event causes another event; indeed, if we did deny this – or if it was generally accepted that certain things just happened without causes – then science would not be possible. As it is, when we do perceive an event that apparently has no cause, we try to find out what might have caused it in order to provide an explanation. Put another

way: we need the power to explain things in causal terms for science to be possible even if, like the philosopher David Hume argued, we think that causation is just a matter of regularity between two events. Nonetheless, most of us would argue that there is more to causation than regularity even if the idea that every event having a cause is one that cannot be empirically discovered.

Think about advances in neuroscience: it is known that the brain is a physical organ within which certain electrical processes that organise information from the eyes, ears, nose etc., take place. These processes are associated with thinking; different neurological patterns are associated with different forms of perception and thought. Accepting that these are physical processes, they will be as much answerable to the causal laws of the universe as the process of a lighted match causing spilled petrol to ignite.

It seems then, as though whatever we think we're freely choosing is in fact already determined for us. Previous circumstances have led to the way we act in the present. I might be hungry and thus try to find food (hungry = cause; searching for food = effect). But, surely, what I choose to eat (assuming there is plenty of choice) is still up to me (Thai or Chinese, for instance)? The determinist would argue that this is not so: what I choose in this respect is subject to similar causal circumstances as the hunger > searching for food causal relation. In this case however, it is a matter of motivation – for example, what I generally like to eat. Since others do not like the same things I do, it could be argued that this shows that I have free will and that such free will is what furnishes me with my individuality. The determinist would be quick to reject this by pointing out that, firstly, we all have unique biographies and that, as a consequence, our preceding causal circumstances are necessarily individually unique and, secondly, that – in any case – we are all physically different and, thus, it follows that the physical processes in our brains will reflect that.

Moreover the ways in which we speak about events reflects our understanding and ability to explain them. Instead of saying "the lighted match ignited the petrol", I could say "if the match had not been alight, the petrol would not have ignited". Thus the explanation "the lighted match ignited the petrol" can be explained in universal causal terms as follows: "if the match had not been alight, the petrol would not have ignited". The idea being that under any identical or similar set of circumstances, the same thing would have happened. This is known as a *counterfactual theory* of causation: the meaning of a singular causal claim of the form 'Event *c* caused event *e*' can be explained in terms of counterfactual conditionals of the form 'If *c* had not occurred, *e* would not have occurred' and was developed by the philosopher David Lewis. Causes of the same type will always cause effects of the same/similar types. Thus, we explain particular events in terms of universal causal circumstances; many scientific theories are based on universalizing causal circumstances.

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Free Will & Determinism

To sum up: determinism challenges the idea of free will as follows. Actions are events that, like any events in nature, cause other events. Given the causes (and causal circumstances) from which subsequent actions are the effects, it follows that no other action is possible other than the one we actually do. If we cannot do any actions other than the ones we actually do, then free will is not possible. Remember, that our choices are also actions/events.

Key Points:

1. Determinism makes two claims:
2. Every event has a cause (universal causation)
3. Given the total sets of conditions under which the cause occurs, only one effect is possible (causal necessity)
4. These claims cannot be empirically verified but are, nonetheless, necessary for the practice of science
5. If we understand our actions and choices as events, then they must have causes. (Unless we're going to say that such events do not have causes).
6. Determinism argues that human action is subject to natural laws. The laws of physics and psychology, for instance.
7. Although we cannot always predict what happens, but that is just because we do not know all the sets of conditions involved that surround an event.
8. If we did know/understand those conditions then we could make decent predictions.

Next Class: Exploring Compatibilism and Libertarianism.