

General Philosophy

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Lecture 7: Free Will



The Problem of Free Will

- We think of people as *morally responsible* for what they do “freely”.
 - But we don’t blame them for what they are *forced* to do. Then we say they’re not *free*, and *have no choice* in the matter.
- Suppose that what I do is *caused*, or *causally determined*.
 - So it was *causally necessary* that I did what I did. How, then, can I properly be blamed?

Determinism

- Determinism is the thesis that all events are “determined” by prior causes. So for any event E , given the causal laws that govern the universe, and the prior state of the world, E was inevitable.
 - “[It is agreed that] matter, in all its operations, is actuated by a necessary force, and that every natural effect is so precisely determined by the energy of its cause, that no other effect, in such particular circumstances, could possibly have resulted from it. ...” (Hume, *Enquiry*, 8.4).
 - Hume thought this also true of human actions.

Taxonomy of Positions

- Is the thesis that we have genuine free will compatible with determinism?
 - NO: Then at most one of them can be true ...
 - We have free will; determinism is false
= Libertarianism
 - We do not have free will; determinism is true
= Hard determinism
 - YES: They are compatible = Compatibilism
 - We have free will; and determinism is true
= Soft determinism

The Consequence Argument

- If determinism is true, then all human actions are causally determined consequences of the laws of nature and prior conditions.
- Hence I cannot do otherwise than I actually do, except by falsifying the laws of nature or changing past conditions.
- But clearly I can't do either of these.
- If I cannot do otherwise than I actually do, then I do not have free will.
- So if determinism is true, we lack free will.

“I Could (Not) Do Otherwise”

- The traditional way of opposing the consequence argument is to interpret “I could do otherwise” differently. Instead of the incompatibilist’s reading:
 - “It is causally possible, in that exact situation, for me to do otherwise”,the compatibilist will prefer something like:
 - “It would be possible for me to do otherwise in a similar (but not identical) situation in which I chose to do so”. So I can do as I choose.

Frankfurt Cases

- Harry Frankfurt has argued that freedom doesn't really require the possibility of doing otherwise (in either sense).
- Suppose that I choose to go through door *A* rather than door *B*, and accordingly do so.
 - This is a free action, even if it happens that (unbeknown to me) door *B* is actually locked, so I would have had to go through door *A* anyway.
- This illustrates that what makes an action inevitable doesn't always bring it about.

Choice and “Could Do Otherwise”

- Freedom seems very closely connected with the concept of choice, and this may lie behind the “could do otherwise” intuition.
 - In the Frankfurt cases, I do make a choice, though in a sense I don’t have a choice.
- But the notion of choice is quite slippery:
 - Suppose someone holds a gun to my head and asks for my mobile phone: do I have a choice?
 - Suppose a clever neuropsychologist can predict that I’m going to hit you: do I have a choice?

“I had no choice”

- We must be very careful to distinguish:
 - What happened was in no way dependent on my decisions or actions.
 - My actions were physically forced upon me.
 - My actions were predetermined in some way by non-rational factors (e.g. drugs, brainwashing).
 - My actions were predetermined by my own desires and consequent reasoning.
 - It was blindingly obvious what I should do (so “I had no choice” is rather like “it was no contest”).

The Paradigm Case Argument

- We learn the meaning of the word “choice” from early childhood. To make a choice is, standardly, to be presented with a range of alternatives – say between ice cream, cake, and fruit – and then to select one according to our own preferences.
- This is a paradigm of what we mean by a choice. So it’s abusing words to deny that it’s a choice just because it’s determined.
- Of course settling our use of words doesn’t decide the important issues of determinism and moral responsibility, though it can remove confusions.

Hobbes' Compatibilism

- Hobbes argues for compatibilism in a similar spirit, defining freedom in a very common-sense way that is entirely compatible with determinism:

“LIBERTY, or FREEDOME, signifieth (properly) the absence of Opposition (by Opposition, I mean externall Impediments of motion;) ... A FREEMAN, *is he, that in those things, which by his strength and wit he is able to do, is not hindred to doe what he has a will to.*”

The Contrastive Argument

- “Free” implies a contrast between acts that are not free, and those that are free.
- However the libertarian is mistaken to see this as the contrast between acts that are *caused* and those that are *uncaused*.
- Instead, the relevant contrast is between those that are *coerced*, *compelled*, or *constrained*, and those that are “free” of such influences.

Freedom and Responsibility

- The Contrastive Argument seems quite persuasive, because it aims to link free will with *moral responsibility*.
- It seems plausible that I can be absolved of responsibility for something if:
 - I didn't do it at all.
 - I was compelled to do it.
 - I was coerced into doing it.

in short, if I didn't do it freely

Ayer and Hume

- Ayer, like Hobbes, uses the Contrastive Argument:

“For it is not, I think, causality that freedom is to be contrasted with, but constraint”

(“Freedom and Necessity”, in Watson, p. 21)

- Hume is often thought to use the argument also, but in fact he does not.

(His *Treatise* contrasts “liberty of indifference” with “liberty of spontaneity”, and this has misled many commentators.)

Hume's Notion of "Liberty"

- Hume's definition is in fact significantly different from those of Hobbes and Ayer:

“By liberty, then, we can only mean *a power of acting or not acting, according to the determinations of the will*; that 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.” (*E* 8.23)

Three Concepts of Freedom

- 1. Contra-causal, libertarian free will (opposed to determinism).
- 2. Intentional agency; that in virtue of which a person is an agent in respect of what he or she does.
- 3. The absence of unwelcome restrictions affecting choice of action (e.g. coercion, compulsion, or an influence that is resented by the agent).

“Give Me the Money, Or Else!”

- If I work in a bank, and someone takes my family hostage and threatens to murder them unless I open the safe, I am acting under coercion but still acting from choice.
 - I choose to open the safe given this situation.
- So I am morally responsible for what I do, but what I do is the right thing (in that situation). I do not need to plead diminished responsibility to avoid blame.

Four Ways to Leave a Lecture

- Contrast four possible situations:
 - Someone forcibly binds me, and carries me out of the lecture theatre (I am like Hume’s “prisoner and in chains”).
 - Someone threatens to shoot me unless I abandon the lecture, so I obey.
 - I have a blind panic at the thought of giving the lecture, and run out in confusion.
 - I realise my lecture is going really badly, so I pretend I’m ill and leave early.

Clarifying the Options

- In the first case (bound and carried), my leaving the lecture is not even an action of mine; it is something that is done to me.
- In the second case, I leave of my own choice, and this is the *right* thing to do.
- In the third case, I have done something *wrong* (abandoning the lecture), but there are mitigating circumstances.
- In the fourth case, I am fully responsible for leaving, and significantly at fault.

Hume's Distinctive Contribution

- If “liberty” is a matter of our actions’ following our will, then we do have such liberty, even if our will itself is causally determined.
- So Hume’s definition of “liberty” makes it *compatible* with determinism.
- Hume’s most distinctive contribution is to provide a novel argument for the determinism of human actions, appealing to the understanding of “necessity” reached in *Enquiry* Section VII.

Applying the “Definitions of Cause”

- “Our idea ... of necessity and causation arises entirely from the uniformity, observable in the operations of nature ... Beyond the constant *conjunction* of similar objects, and the consequent *inference* from one to the other, we have no notion of any necessity, or connexion.” (E 8.5)
- “If these circumstances form, in reality, the whole of that necessity, which we conceive in matter, and if these circumstances be also universally acknowledged to take place in the operations of the mind, the dispute is at an end.” (E 8.22)

Satisfying the Two Definitions

- To prove his case, Hume must show that human actions satisfy the two “definitions of cause”. So most of Section VIII Part i is devoted to arguing:
 - that human actions manifest such uniformity;
 - that they are generally recognised as doing so;
 - that people standardly draw inductive inferences accordingly, just as they do about physical things.
- Hence “all mankind ... have ... acknowledged the doctrine of necessity, in their whole practice and reasoning”, even while “profess[ing] the contrary opinion” (*E* 8.21).

Why Is Determinism Denied?

- People deny the determinism of human actions in part because they have

“a strong propensity to believe, that they penetrate farther into the powers of nature, and perceive something like a necessary connexion between the cause and the effect” (*E* 8.21).

- On Hume’s account such penetration is just a seductive illusion. And in learning that the necessity of *physical* operations amounts to no more than constant conjunction and consequent inference, we come to see that *human* actions too are subject to the same necessity.

Morality requires Determinism?

- Hume then goes on to argue (*E* 8.28-30) that viewing human behaviour as causally determined, so far from being *contrary* to morality, is actually *essential* to it, since blame and punishment are useful and appropriate only where actions are caused by the agent's durable character and disposition.
- Requiring complete determinism may be going too far, but the argument has a point: it's hard to see how "free will" can be morally relevant if it simply involves an element of *randomness*.

Is Free Will Incoherent?

- On either account, it can seem hard to spell out a coherent notion of free will:
 - The challenge to the determinist is to explain how I can be genuinely responsible for what I do, if every detail of my behaviour was “pre-ordained” before I was born.
 - The challenge to the libertarian is to make sense of free will in a way that is *neither* determined *nor* merely random. (Some have tried to respond in terms of “agent causation”, though the notion is very obscure.)

Morality as Founded on Sentiment

- Hume's way of squaring determinism with morality is based on his *sentimentalism*:

A man, who is robbed of a considerable sum; does he find his vexation for the loss any wise diminished by these sublime reflections? Why then should his moral resentment against the crime be supposed incompatible with them? (*E* 8.35)

- Morality is founded on *emotions* that naturally arise within us in certain circumstances, so we shouldn't expect these emotions to disappear just because we reflect on the inexorable chain of causation which led to the criminal's action.

Freedom and Autonomy

- Though Hume is able to accommodate morality within his approach, it may seem too crude, in treating freedom as simply a matter of “power to act as we will”.
- There seems to be a significant difference between those who are *autonomous* – able to control their will to some extent – and those (such as drug addicts or obsessives) who are, in a sense, “slaves to their will”.

Higher-Order Desires

- Harry Frankfurt distinguishes between “first-order” desires (e.g. to smoke a cigarette) and “second-order” desires (e.g. to quit smoking, and to cease to desire them).
- If one’s second-order desires are unable to overcome first-order cravings, then one is not fully autonomous and thus less “free”.
- Thus a determinist *can* consistently distinguish various degrees of freedom.

Kane on Indeterminism

■ Robert Kane:

<http://www.ucl.ac.uk/~uctytho/dfw/VariousKane.html>
addresses these issues from an indeterminist perspective. He points out that an element of randomness is compatible with responsibility.

- e.g. suppose that I try to shoot someone, but my aim is unsteady. If I succeed, then I am clearly responsible, despite the element of randomness.
- Likewise, if it is chancy which intentions within my mind will dominate on some occasion, this is quite compatible with responsibility for whichever “wins”.

Why Does Indeterminism Matter?

- Kane argues that through such indeterminist choices over the course of our lives, we forge our own character, and this makes us responsible even for those actions that are fully determined by our formed character.
- The difficulty for Kane is in explaining why indeterminism – an element of genuine *randomness* – makes a difference here:
 - What's so valuable about randomness?
 - If *unpredictability* is what matters, wouldn't deterministic “chaos” do just as well?