

Introduction to Philosophy II // Spring 2017

Handout 11

Freedom II: van Inwagen

COMPATIBILISM AND CLOSURE. Van Inwagen argues that compatibilism is committed to the rejection of the closure principle. Consider the following three states:

A : [Today Sandy wears a yellow shirt]

B : [The universe was in a state ϕ one million years ago]

C : [If the universe was in a state ϕ one million years ago, then today Sandy wears a yellow shirt].

A seems to be a touchable state, if anything is. On the other hand, *B* is an untouchable state. What about the state *C*? Since we assume determinism, then we have to say that even wearing a yellow shirt is determined—determined, that is, given the laws of nature and antecedent conditions. If so, then the conditional state is also untouchable. Applying the closure principle, we obtain the implausible result (rejected at the outset) that *A* is untouchable. Obviously any other plausible candidate for touchable state will similarly be declared untouchable.

What is going on? The issue is not that compatibilism is forced to reject *some* kind of principle we have cooked up. The closure principle expresses the very basic idea that, if certain links are determined, you cannot do anything about them. So if every link is determined, you cannot anything about anything. Think again of the role the compatibilist assigns to criminal law. It is supposed to change habits. But what right does he have talking about change? There can be no real change, as everything has already been determined.

CHOICE AND CHANCE. A very intuitive idea for asserting the reality of free will is to reject determinism. But how can we do it? By affirming *chance*. Events (or some events) simply happen. They are not part of a causal chain, they in principle cannot be predicted by a natural law, and they cannot be foreseen even by God. And this, we say, is the case with free actions. A free agent in freely choosing upon the course of his action is not subject to natural laws.

But there is a glitch. All actions (we believe) originate in the body. If the body is still governed by laws, then so are my actions. Thus it should be that the bodily motions responsible for my free actions are not subject to laws. But if they simply happen, by chance, and generate my actions, why do I believe that *I* am choosing to act?

Example 1. Suppose I am deliberating whether to raise my hand. This, I claim, is a matter of my free choice. But deliberation is taking place in my brain (which will send signals to my arm). If my brain processes are determined, like planetary motion, then the game is up. I claim they are not determined. Forks occur there, and which way the processes develop is chancy. But, if they are chancy, how can I claim that their development *depends* on me? It should not depend on any factor: for if there were such dependence, there would have been a regularity, and if there were a regularity, the processes would not have been chancy.

AGENT-CAUSATION? We have to find a way to say that the agent determines his actions in an indeterministic world. One idea is to distinguish agent-causation from event-causation. But the way our author describes agent-causation makes it look fairly unintelligible. I am not sure whether it really is so and whether his presentation is charitable. But I would also like to mention another, related but unfashionable, alternative.

Dualism The world is dualistic iff it contains two fundamental substances, mind and matter. Both are deterministic, but their laws are different. Mental processes obey mental laws, material processes obey physical laws.

Question 2. Is dualism a version of incompatibilism? How can dualism safeguard the reality of free will?

Question 3. What sort of objections does dualism face?

NO FREE WILL? Our author finally addresses the possibility of having no free will. He thinks it is not a genuine possibility, or at least, it is a very implausible possibility (hence we still ought to conclude that it is not genuine). He gives two main reasons. (1) If there is no free will, we would not be able to even *try* to decide what to do. (2) If there is no free will, then morality is an illusion.

Let us look at the first reason. Suppose I am in a room deliberating whether to leave. I hear a click telling me that the door is locked. Our author says that in this case I stop deliberating, since it is evident to me that I cannot leave. That is, I stop even trying to decide whether to leave. Well, if only every situation were as clear-cut, then fair enough. The analogy would be that, if I had a complete picture of the world and knew what happens when, then I should have ceased deliberating. But I have no such picture, so it is sensible for me to keep deliberating.

What van Inwagen claims, I think, is that someone who does not believe in free will should become a fatalist. But who is a fatalist? I think the fatalist says (1) that my future fate is sealed now. OK, this is determinism. But he also says (2) that no matter what I do today, the events tomorrow should happen regardless. So I can stay or not stay in bed, but tomorrow would not change. You can see that this is absurd: it contradicts the assumption of determinism. What the fatalist could say is that every deliberation and decision is accompanied by a feeling, or belief, that I am the decision maker. And he could infer that, once this feeling is taken away from me, I will not go on deliberating. I think this latter claim is in any case weak and probably false as well.

Question 4. Why could this claim be false?

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