

### Incompatibilism: d'Holbach

**D'HOLBACH AGAINST FREEDOM.** D'Holbach's views are usually classified as 'hard determinism', but in fact he has several independent arguments, only some of them having to do anything with determinism. Though d'Holbach's writing is wordy, it's easy to isolate in it and formalise different lines of thought.

**THE SOUL ARGUMENT.** Why to believe in the reality of free will? Some believed that, because they also believed in the existence of immaterial soul which could 'regulate' itself and initiate the person's actions. But the body is wholly material. All intellectual and moral qualities may be explained in a 'physical and natural' way. The man is a being 'purely physical'.

88.1

88.2

So we have:

*Argument from the non-existence of soul.*

- (i) The belief in free will is plausible only if free will is a property of soul.
- (ii) But there aren't any souls.
- (iii) Hence, the belief in free will is implausible.

But as we can see from d'Holbach's formulations, there is another, more general argument too:

*Naturalist argument*

- (i) The belief in free will is plausible only if free will may be associated with some non-natural quality of a person.
- (ii) But there are no non-natural qualities (or at least, people have no such qualities).
- (iii) Hence, the belief in free will is implausible.

**ARGUMENT FROM IRRELEVANCE.** Here the question is, what theoretical good the free will would serve.

88.2

- (i) If free will exists, it must help explain either behaviour, or motivation, or both.
- (ii) Motives explain human behaviour.
- (iii) The presence of particular motives is explained by the presence of antecedent motives.
- (iv) So, free will has no explanatory role to play.
- (v) So, free will doesn't exist.

Or in other words, if the belief in free will is acceptable, it must have an explanatory value. But since apparently it doesn't have any, no point in accepting it.

How, then, do we explain purposeful, voluntary actions? Motives are just modifications of the brain, d'Holbach suggests. A man acts on 'impulse' produced either by a motive, an external object, or some 'idea' in his brain. When it seems that he can choose to ignore a particular motive and not act on the impulse it generated, that's possible because of some other impulse generated from another source.

89.2

90.1ff

**IMPOSSIBILISM?** The previous arguments address the issue whether free will exists in our world. But apparently, d'Holbach also asks under what conditions free will *could* exist. That is, under what hypothetical conditions would we say the free will would exist? We may impute to d'Holbach this kind of argument:

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- (i) A creature endowed with free will must have non-natural motives (be 'out of this nature').
- (ii) But humans are necessarily part of the natural world.
- (iii) So in order to have free will, humans must 'lose their essences'.
- (iv) But it's not possible for humans to lose their essences (because then they won't be human).
- (v) So it's not possible for humans to have free will.

Some comments: The argument obviously echoes the soul argument. Note too that we are not proving that free will is itself impossible. We are only claiming that free will and humans don't go together. And also note that, of course, d'Holbach doesn't explicitly engage in modal reasoning, though the idiom of 'essence' is interesting.

**HARD DETERMINISM.** Rather misleadingly, d'Holbach inserts various mentions of determinism into his discussion, and this perhaps is why his views are often reduced to the claim that determinism is incompatible with free will. And he certainly *is* committed to this claim which may be put thus:

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- (i) Nature is governed by necessary laws.
- (ii) Man is part of nature.
- (iii) So man is governed by necessary laws.
- (iv) But free will requires action without motives or resistance to those motives.
- (v) Thus free will doesn't exist (in our deterministic world).

92.2

Though his general drift can easily be guessed, it is still interesting to see how d'Holbach substantiates (iii). The objector says that we can resist our desires following rational deliberation. Even if our desires are unusually strong, our rational will can resist them. But, d'Holbach asks, where did we get the power of resistance from? Isn't it from our early upbringing, from the examples we have been exposed to? And if it is asked, where we got our ability to learn from examples and receive education, this in turn was given to us by our still earlier history.

94.1

**THE DISAPPEARING SELF.** From some of the remarks on determinism we can extract another argument (certainly not something that d'Holbach himself formulated explicitly):

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- (i) Free will requires that 'I' choose and decide.
- (ii) But 'I' (my self) am a complex bundle of causally determined properties—or maybe just a brain, an element of the physical world.
- (iii) So, from the two previous claims, my free actions/choices are determined outside of *my self*.
- (iv) But this is nonsense.
- (v) So, free will doesn't exist.

96.1

This argument stresses the paradoxical link between free will and self. The more I reflect on free will, the more I am convinced that it is *me* who is freely acting. But the more I reflect on the self, the more I am convinced that its actions are determined by material causes.

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