

Handout 7

Mystery: van Inwagen

FREE CHOICE. Van Inwagen begins with the idea of time conceived by analogy to the garden of forking paths (branching time). We imagine that time splits into branches, so that the (actual) present only sits on one of the branches. 253

Definition 1. One *has free will* if sometimes more than one possible future is ‘open’ to one. One *lacks free will* if on every occasion of decision only one possible future is ‘open’ to one.

Example 2. A prisoner, though able to contemplate different courses of action, has no free will: he has only one possible future (staying in prison).

That free choice is relevant for morality may be shown by a series of implications:

(7-1) [The judgement that you shouldn’t have done X] \Rightarrow [you were able to do something else] \Rightarrow [you have free will]. 254

DETERMINISM. We now move on to examine the relationship between free will and determinism.

Definition 3. The universe is *deterministic* if and only if only one continuation of the state of things at a given moment is consistent with the laws of nature. 254

Of course the universe could *appear* to us not deterministic even if in reality it is. We think we have a choice of what to do (more than one future is open to us), but, unbeknownst to us, events in our biography and facts of our environment conspire to determine just one possible outcome.

COMPATIBILISM. We distinguish between the futures that are open to us, the futures that are physically possible, and the futures that are internally physically possible. 257

Definition 4. The future is internally physically possible iff this future, when taken in isolation, does not violate the laws of nature.

Definition 5. The future is physically possible iff it is internally physically possible and can be connected to the present without violating the laws of nature.

Determinism claims that there is only one physically possible future, but it does not have to deny that there is more than one internally physically possible future.

Definition 6. The future is open to the agent X iff were X actually to choose that future, it would have come to pass.

It follows that, even according to determinism, there is more than one internally possible future open to an agent.

Example 7. It is open to me to leave the room. It is, however, not open to me to climb the walls like a Spider-Man. Hence, I can say that I am freely choosing to stay in the room (but not that I am freely choosing not to climb the walls). 258

This position is pretty much Hobbes’ position we saw earlier. Some compatibilists—again, like Hobbes—claim that the purpose of law is to modify people’s choices and their behaviour. Such a purpose can only be served on the assumption of multiple open futures. And, compatibilists argue, the fact that a choice could not actually occur would not detract from the usefulness of assigning responsibility and subsequent punishment.

But the following question should be asked: in what way, and how, can one’s behaviour be modified if determinism is true? And in what way can one then freely choose to behave in that particular way and be held responsible for it? Van Inwagen refines and develops this concern, the ‘mystery’ that compatibilists aim to sweep under the carpet. 259

UNTOUCHABLE STATES. There are states of affairs I can or could (presumably) bring about or change in some way. Other states of affairs I cannot and could not. Call the first kind ‘untouchable’ states. The rest are ‘touchable’. 260

Example 8. The states [$2 + 2 = 4$] and [Julius Caesar was assassinated] are untouchable. [I win the New Year lottery] and [I am appointed Apple CEO] are touchable.

Question 9. Explain why the last two states are touchable.

Now we can also endorse the following principle:

Untouchability closure If P is untouchable, and $P \rightarrow Q$ is untouchable, then Q is untouchable. 260

Example 10. Suppose it is untouchable that Caesar was murdered long before I was born. And suppose it is untouchable that, if Caesar was murdered long before I was born, then I have never seen Caesar. Then it is also untouchable that I have never seen Caesar.

Question 11. Explain why the conditional of the Example 10 is untouchable.

COMPATIBILISM AND CLOSURE. Van Inwagen argues that compatibilism is committed to the rejection of the closure principle. Consider the following three states: 262

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 a touchable state will, by the closure principle, be similarly declared untouchable.

What is going on? The issue is not that the compatibilist 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. 263

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? 264

Example 12. 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 motions, 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 a dependence, there would have been a regularity. But 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 13. Is dualism a version of incompatibilism? How can dualism safeguard the reality of free will?

Question 14. What sort of objections does dualism face?

The upshot of the discussion so far is that free will is incompatible both with determinism and with indeterminism.

NO FREE WILL? Van Inwagen 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. Van Inwagen 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? Perhaps 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 instead 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 15. Why could this claim be false?