

Abstract

This paper examines the metaphysical nature of free will under David Lewis' view of the business of philosophy as stated in Counterfactuals. Using Peter Van Inwagen's definition of determinism from An Essay on Free Will, this paper discusses the compatibility of free will and determinism in an attempt to answer the question, "Can we provide a valid account of free will in a deterministic world?" A specific response to Daniel Dennett's compatibility argument from Elbow Room exposes his position as being incompatibility in disguise. Similarly this paper discusses the compatibility of free will and indeterminism. It is shown that free will is incompatible with both determinism and indeterminism, and thus the very notion of free will is incoherent. Given such a conclusion, this paper address the concept of moral responsibility in an attempt to answer the question, "Can we provide a valid account of moral responsibility in a world that is absent of free will?" Utilizing Dennett's discussion of moral responsibility as a strong foundation, it is ultimately concluded that such an account does exist.

The Illusion of Choice

“There are two primary choices in life: to accept conditions as they exist, or accept the responsibility for changing them.” –Denis Waitley, American Motivational Speaker

Introduction

The question of free will is one that has plagued humanity for centuries; we all live our lives as though we have the freedom to make choices that affect us. The above quote from Denis Waitley, an American motivational speaker and author of several self-help books, perfectly characterizes the average person’s conception of free will. It suggests that we intuitively assume that it is within our power to make decisions that affect the outcome of situations, and also that one’s ability to make choices is somehow tied to moral responsibility.

Modern philosophy has not revolved around the question of whether we do or do not have free will, but rather the question, “Is free will compatible with determinism?” That is, can we provide a valid account of free will in a deterministic world? The widely accepted definition of determinism is as follows: the position which holds that the state of the world at some time, in conjunction with the laws of nature at that time, entails the state of the world at some later time (Van Inwagen). There are a few reasons why philosophers are less interested in free will itself than the issue of compatibility or incompatibility with determinism. First, it is the job of empirical science, not philosophy, to discover the truth or falsity of determinism. Second, Newtonian physics was until recently the most accepted scientific position, and seems to conclude that we are in a deterministic world. Given that, philosophers knew that they must either discard free will

as a possibility or find a way to reconcile free will with determinism. Third, the birth of quantum physics has caused science to rethink Newtonian physics, and by extension the truth or falsity of determinism. Thus until science has conclusive evidence that we either are or are not in a deterministic world, philosophers ought to continue examining free will only as a conditional statement in relation to determinism, i.e. “If determinism is true, then free will is ...”.

I will be addressing the metaphysical nature of free will, and arguing for a position known as hard incompatibilism, which states that free will is incompatible with both determinism and indeterminism. In other words, I will be arguing that the notion of free will itself is incoherent. This paper will also respond directly to Daniel Dennett’s defense of the compatibility position, as presented in “Could Have Done Otherwise” from his book Elbow Room. Finally I will discuss what the incoherence of free will means for humanity, and consequently what we are to do with the idea of moral responsibility. My argument will be divided into four sections:

1. Do nondeterministic computing algorithms disprove determinism?
2. Central Thesis
 - a. Recognizing intuitions and our pre-philosophical beliefs
 - b. ‘Genuine choice’ is necessary for free will
 - c. Free will is an incoherent notion
3. Dennett’s idea of moral responsibility
4. The illusion of choice

I will then draw some general conclusions about the entire discussion of the compatibility or incompatibility of free will and determinism.

Section 1:

Do nondeterministic computing algorithms disprove determinism?

Before I delve into a discussion of the compatibility or incompatibility of free will and determinism, it seems pertinent to discuss the relatively recent ‘proof’ of indeterminate outcomes that has been provided by the various sciences, and specifically computer science. It was brought to my attention in response to my work with determinism that the world of computer science has developed nondeterministic computing algorithms; algorithms which, to the best of my knowledge, could take the same algorithm and run it in two computers simultaneously with absolutely no change in the parameters whatsoever, yet the algorithm in one instance will output ‘true’ while the other ‘false.’ In other words, computer science seems to claim that they have proven that a single event has two possible outcomes, clearly given by the presence of both ‘true’ and ‘false’ as an output for the same event. Note that this is not an instance of Schrödinger’s cat, whereby we could merely think of the event’s outcome as being both ‘true’ and ‘false’, but rather the outcome *really is* simultaneously both ‘true’ and ‘false’.

Upon cursory research, however, I have found that this proclaimed indeterminism is merely simulated indeterminism on deterministic machines (Cohen 1). The algorithms work on the principle of ‘choice points’, wherein the algorithm will take any one of a number of different options and follow that route until another choice point, repeat the process and so on. In other words, there is no way of predicting which path the algorithm will take to arrive at an end result, or which possible end result that will be. The fact that the same algorithm may run simultaneously in two machines and arrive at different

results is, in my mind, no more impressive than running the same random number generator simultaneously in two machines and receiving two different numbers. Non-deterministic computing algorithms do not disprove determinism; disproving determinism in this case dictates that it must be shown that the result of a single algorithm could or might be different even if everything in the universe, in conjunction with the laws of nature, has been exactly the same up until the moment of the result (more on indeterminism in section 2.C). The ‘proof’ of indeterminate outcomes offered by these algorithms requires multiple instances of the same algorithm to be running either simultaneously or one after another, neither of which is proof that the exact same algorithm in the exact same situation would might produce different results. Since these non-deterministic algorithms have disproved determinism, I will proceed into a discussion of my central thesis.

Section 2:

Central Thesis

A) Recognizing intuitions and our pre-philosophical beliefs

It would do well to begin a discussion of free will with a very brief mention of the pre-philosophical beliefs we hold about what it means to be free. We shall do so in the manner that David Lewis suggested in 4.1 of Counterfactuals:

One comes to philosophy already endowed with a stock of opinions. It is not the business of philosophy either to undermine or to justify these preexisting opinions, to any great extent, but only to try to discover ways of expanding them into an orderly system...It succeeds to the extent that 1) it is systematic, and 2) it respects those of our pre-philosophical opinions to which we are firmly attached. Insofar as it does both better than any alternative we have thought of, we give it credence.

In other words, philosophy ought to take into account our pre-philosophical beliefs, common opinions, and natural intuitions about the world, and do so in such a way that systematizes and respects that which we truly hold dear. I would wager that the idea of freedom is one of the most dearly held pre-philosophical beliefs; the entire human race operates under the presumption that our actions are free. It is also my claim that the intuitive definition of free will, one that would be provided by the overwhelming majority of non-philosophers, could be expressed in the classic manner, “*One has acted freely if one could have done otherwise,*” which is referred to as the ‘could have done otherwise’ principle. The ‘could have done otherwise’ principle will play an important role in Section 4. For now, let us proceed bearing in mind Lewis’ model of the business of philosophy.

B) ‘Genuine choice’ is necessary for free will

In order to discuss free will, we must first define ‘free will’, and therein lays one of the fundamental problems in the entire compatibility versus incompatibility debate: there are a multitude of definitions for free will. The argument in this paper will not be based on any one particular definition of free will; rather it will be based on one specific criterion that any and all definitions of free will must require in order to be meaningful in the metaphysical sense. So what is it that we are all talking about when we talk about free will? Upon asking many different non-philosophers to provide me with their personal definition of free will, there was one commonality among all such intuitive definitions: we must be able to make choices if we are to be considered free. In the spirit of respecting our pre-philosophical beliefs, it is thus my position that any meaningful

definition of free will must include the presence of choice. Based on the intuitive definitions I received and my experience talking to people about free will, I will take ‘choice’ to be defined as such: a decision between multiple options that influences the outcome of an event. (Note: A decision does not necessarily influence the outcome of an event. A choice then is a special kind of decision, one that influences the outcome of an event).¹ Even upon defining choice, however, there is a certain amount of ambiguity in the word. In order to make it absolutely clear what we are talking about, allow me to suggest a thought experiment:

A mother tells her son that he will either be eating cake or liver for dinner. She writes ‘cake’ on one small piece of paper and ‘liver’ on another. She puts the two pieces of paper behind her back, one in each hand, brings her hands around front and asks her son to choose between hands. Unbeknownst to the son, when the mother put her hands behind her back, she switched out the ‘cake’ paper for another ‘liver’ paper in her back pocket. Consequently the son ends up ‘choosing’ to eat liver for dinner.

What has happened here? Clearly the son has been swindled out of cake; that is for darn sure. Here is a break down of the scenario into the context of our discussion: I have described a purely deterministic situation in which there is only one outcome of the event: liver for dinner. But if we were to ask the son if he made a choice, chances are good that he would say ‘yes.’ Even more important for our discussion, there is a good chance that he might drawn conclusions based on his observation of what already

¹ Let us suppose that I decide I am going to walk five feet to the left. Then I turn to the left, take one step and run straight into an invisible force field spanning infinitely in all directions. I certainly made a decision to walk to the left, but I had no influence on the outcome; thus I made a decision while having no choice. We may think of determinism as a sort of invisible force field, locking us in to only one path of outcomes.

happened in order to potentially fare better in similar situations in the future, and yet if the mother should continue to employ similar acts of trickery, his conclusions will never make a difference. So even though the boy believes he has a choice and makes decisions to potentially improve his results in the future, he will never have a genuine choice.

This thought experiment has brought forth a distinction between a choice that is real and a choice that is unreal, yet perceived. In light of this distinction, I will now define the term ‘genuine choice’ as such: a choice that actually exists and not one that merely appears to exist to the acting agent. Thus my position is modified: any and all meaningful definitions of free will must include the presence of genuine choice.

C) Free will is an incoherent notion

Given that any meaningful definition of free will, one that respects our pre-philosophical beliefs in the sense that Lewis suggested, must include the presence of genuine choice, we can conclude that free will is incompatible with determinism. To recap, the argument is succinctly this: since a choice is a decision between multiple options that influences the outcome of an event, and this choice must actually exist and not merely appear to exist to the acting agent, then such a genuine choice cannot be reconciled with a deterministic world in which no acting agent can influence the outcome of an event. Therefore free will is incompatible with determinism.

Interestingly enough, it turns out that free will is incompatible with indeterminism as well. Indeterminism comes in two forms: 1) some events may be uncaused, or 2) some event could or might be different even if everything in the universe, in conjunction with the laws of nature, has been exactly the same up until the moment of the event. My

argument that free will is incompatible with both of these definitions for indeterminism is as follows: 1) If an event is uncaused, then there is no acting agent that had any influence on the outcome of the event, as clearly implied by the term ‘uncaused’, and therefore there can be no genuine choices; 2) if some event can be different even if everything in the universe, in conjunction with the laws of nature, has been exactly the same up until the moment of the event, then in order to influence the outcome of said event, the acting agent must alter the laws of nature in order to change the outcome. Since it may be held true that one cannot alter the laws of nature, unless some extremely convincing argument comes along which shows otherwise, then the ‘choosing’ process between possible indeterminate outcomes must belong to some other force that is beyond us, and not to any acting agent, and therefore there can be no genuine choice.

To conclude my central thesis, it is my position that free will is incompatible with both determinism and indeterminism. We now have ourselves in a bit of a predicament: I constructed this discussion under Lewis’ model of the business of philosophy; we began with an intuitive notion of free will and noted that freedom is a dearly held belief because the entirety of the human race operates under the presumption of freedom. So what are we to do now that we have showed that one of our dearly held intuitive beliefs simply makes no sense? Furthermore, what are we to do with the idea of moral responsibility? Free will is usually cited as one of the necessary criteria for moral responsibility, so now we have another pressing question, “Can we provide a valid account of moral responsibility in a world that is absent of free will?”

In order to round out my argument, I shall introduce the term ‘illusion of choice’. The illusion of choice is merely our perception of choice from within a reality that does

not allow for genuine choice. It is the kind of choice that the boy held in the thought experiment in Section 2.B, and the kind of choice that compatibilists find compatible with determinism. What, then, are the consequences of the illusion of choice for the humanity? Daniel Dennett, a compatibilist, provides us with a good starting point for examining such consequences in “Could Have Done Otherwise”.

Section 3:

Dennett’s idea of moral responsibility

Daniel Dennett makes his case for the compatibility of free will and determinism by arguing, “‘*Could have done otherwise*’ does not mean what it seems at first to mean; the sense of the phrase denied by determinism is irrelevant to the sense required for freedom (Dennett 131).” As previously noted in this paper, the ‘could have done otherwise’ principle states that one has acted freely if one could have done otherwise. Dennett’s argument, and that of many compatibilists who argue from the moral responsibility definition of free will, is that whether or not someone “could have done otherwise” is not what matters for moral responsibility. To that point, I completely agree with Dennett. First, the notion of possibility in the past is as incoherent as it is useless; to say that an event could have gone multiple different ways, when it clearly went only one way, is simply nonsense. Second, this paper has already showed that free will is an incoherent notion regardless of past, present, or future.

I also agree with Dennett when he concludes that what really matters when we talk about free will is that something has happened that we wish to interpret, “*Does [some event that has already happened] suggest a criticism of the agent that might, if*

presented properly, lead the agent to improve his ways in some regard (Dennett 142)?”

In other words, what matters to us is to ask such questions as, “If I had been thinking differently, would I have made a different choice?” or “Would I make a different choice in similar situations in the future?” Dennett interprets these kinds of questions as the basis for providing a meaningful account of moral responsibility in a deterministic world, or in my terms, a world that does not allow for genuine choice.

It is important to note that while I essentially agree with Dennett’s idea of moral responsibility, I reject his conclusion that free will is compatible with determinism. His argument actually recognizes that free will is incompatible with determinism, but then he justifies his belief in compatibility by suggesting that what we really mean when we talk about free will is not genuine choice but rather the illusion of choice. That is precisely where I have a problem: while the illusion of choice may be what matters to us, it is *not* what the overwhelming majority of people *actually mean* when they talk about free will. The intuitive belief of free will that most people hold is a belief in genuine choice, as expressed by the ‘could have done otherwise’ principle. To deny that this is what people really mean when they speak of free will is ridiculous.

To provide perhaps a silly analogy, suppose an audience attends a magic show and witnesses the magician perform some feat of solid-through-solid. While no one would deny that what really matters to the audience is the illusion of solid-through-solid, the audience shall have no grounds to then rewrite the laws of physics based on such an illusion. Similarly in Dennett’s argument, one simply cannot recognize that people hold an intuitive belief in genuine choice as a criterion for free will, proceed to provide an argument that concludes that only an illusion of choice exists, and then rewrite the

original intuitive definition for free will based on that illusion. Rather, Dennett must simply recognize that free will and determinism are incompatible in the sense that it respects our intuitive pre-philosophical beliefs.

Where Dennett seems to have gone wrong is that he approached the issue as though he were arguing within the context of metaphysics, and yet his argument does not speak to metaphysics at all. He has provided no insight whatsoever into the metaphysical nature of free will; what he has done is provided a possible account of moral responsibility in a world that is absent of free will, *not* an account of free will in a deterministic world. Dennett's interpretation of moral responsibility, like mine, is based on the perception of choice rather than genuine choice, and I will discuss the implications of such an interpretation of moral responsibility in the following section.

Section 4:

The illusion of choice

In the thought experiment that I described at the end of Section 2.B, the way in which the acting agent (son) would go on living his life would not have changed in any way, which makes one wonder, do we really care if free will exists? If we were provided with conclusive evidence that we do not in fact have free will, would that change the way the human race operated? Surely there would be a few days or a week, maybe a few weeks during which crime would spike due to all those who would immediately recognize that we could not be held genuinely morally responsible for our actions (this idea is admittedly confusing, because it must have been a product of determinism that such events would take place), but then what? Chances are good that the illusion of

choice would take over; the masses would lock up all those criminals and resume business as usual. Why? Because this reality is the only reality that we have, whether or not we have freedom or merely perceived freedom.

This particular issue of perception versus reality is one that has not only been discussed at length in the philosophic community, but also in the media and various forms of art. One great example is in the 1999 science-fiction-martial-arts-action film The Matrix. In the story, the character Cypher decides he wants to leave the ‘real world’ and be reinserted into the Matrix, a computer generated illusion of reality controlled by machines. Cypher’s rationale is simple: he is sick of Morpheus, commander of the ship that Cypher works on in the ‘real world’, telling him what to do all the time, *“You call this free? All I do is what he tells me to do. If I have to choose between that and the Matrix, I choose the Matrix.”* Does Cypher believe that he will be any more free in the Matrix than in the ‘real world’ taking orders from Morpheus? Of course not, in fact he fully recognizes the lack of freedom that exists in both of these options. However, *“At least in the Matrix, it won’t seem as if anyone is giving him orders (Irving 88).”* So is the ability to make genuine choices really that important? It follows that the answer is no; what matters is only our perception that choices exist.

Conclusion

While it may be a wonderful philosophical exercise to debate about the compatibility or incompatibility of free will and determinism, it is not a discussion with any practical ramifications of any kind. If my argument is somehow wrong and we actually have free will, then everything continues just as it always has. If my argument is

right and we do not have free will, then there is nothing we can do about it. Perhaps there really is something profound about the age-old expression, "Ignorance is bliss."

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