

Why is the issue of Free Will important?

Well, think about it. Suppose that Jeff bumps into a little old lady and in doing so knocks her over. It is natural to say that if someone else pushed Jeff into the lady, then we should not blame Jeff for knocking the old lady over. After all, it wasn't under Jeff's control whether he bumped into her or not. We don't blame someone for any action unless they had control over what they were doing. In a similar way, we will not praise someone for a particular deed unless we believe that they could have failed to perform that deed. That is, we only praise a person or blame a person for an action if they are responsible for that action. But a person can only be responsible for a particular action if it was ultimately up to them whether they performed that action or not; and if performing that action was ultimately up to them, then they could have refrained from that action. But now we are clearly in the area of free will ... a person performs an action "freely" if, and only if, that person "could have done otherwise". If free will is a mere illusion, then the whole notion of moral responsibility (or any other kind of responsibility) seems to collapse. Furthermore, the issue is interesting in itself. After all, the question of whether humans possess free will is a question about us. We do characteristically think that our deeds are up to us, and that they do not flow forth mechanically as an inevitable result of our genetic heritage and our environment (nature and nurture). To find out whether or not humans possess free will is to discover something important about ourselves.

An Argument for the Non-Existence of Free Will

- (1) Steve has (and had) no control over the state of the world 1000 yrs ago
 - (2) Steve has (and had) no control over the laws of nature
 - (3) The state of the world 1000 yrs ago and the laws of nature together made it inevitable that Steve would write this paper on Free Will
 - (4) If facts over which Steve had no control made it inevitable that he would write this paper on Free Will then Steve had no control over whether he wrote this paper on Free Will
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- (5) So, Steve had no control over whether wrote this paper on Free Will.

Nothing in this argument hinges on it being about my writing this paper, it would work just as well for any action of any person ... including for any action of yours! Note that if the premises (assumptions) of the above argument are all true, then its anti-free-will conclusion must also be true. There is no way that all of the argument's premises could be true, and yet the argument's conclusion false. How then should those of us who believe in free will respond to this argument? One rather ambitious way would be to present a counter-argument whose conclusion is that humans do possess free will. But even if such arguments could be made to work, they would not tell us what – if anything – is wrong with the argument presented above. Perhaps I should explain the argument a little more

before I continue. The argument has two important assumptions: (1) The Control Thesis, and (2) Determinism. The control thesis and determinism together entail the non-existence of free will in the manner explained in the argument presented above.

The Control Thesis

According to the control thesis, if there is some situation or event that makes it inevitable that some other event occur, and if I don't have any control over whether the first event occurs, then I don't have any control over whether the second one occurs either. The point can be illustrated by the above example in which Jeff knocks over the old lady.

Determinism

According to determinism, the state of the world at any given time and the laws of nature are together sufficient to fix the state of the world at any later time. In other words, according to determinism there is only one future course of events that would be consistent with the actual laws of nature and the previous history of the universe. In still other words, given the previous history of the universe and the laws of nature, whatever actually happens in the future could not have failed to happen (and whatever fails to happen could not actually have happened).

Responses to this Argument*Non-Deterministic Laws of Nature*

One obvious way to get out of the argument is to say that there is more than one future course of events that is consistent with the previous history of the universe plus the laws of nature. This would be done by pointing out that (at least some of) the laws of nature are in fact probabilistic: they say not "whenever this happens, that happens" but rather "whenever this happens, there is a probability of (say) 50% that that will happen". The events that such laws predict are predicted only "probabilistically" ... there is an element of chance or randomness involved. If there really are laws of nature like this then given a certain previous history of the universe, the future course of events is to some extent a matter of chance. It follows that such laws (which are endorsed by current science, in Quantum Physics for example) entail the falsehood of determinism and therefore seem to offer a way out of the argument against free will.

There is at least one big problem with this suggestion: although it does help us to avoid determinism (and therefore to avoid the argument outlined above), it only does so at the cost of suggesting another argument against the existence of free will. If the universe really does contain irreducibly random events, and if such randomness is the only room available for free will, then free will is an illusion. Why? Although random events are not fixed by the past, from the fact that it is ultimately down to chance whether or not these events occur it seems to follow that it is NOT ultimately up to me – or anyone else – whether these events occur. But if these events are not up to us, and if such events are the last recourse for the notion of free will, then free will is an illusion.

Compatibilism

Compatibilism rejects the control thesis, and in doing so claims that existence of free will is compatible with the truth of determinism. On the compatibilist understanding of freedom, an action may be free even if we can trace back the causes of that action to factors over which the agent has no control. What matters is that the causal chain that leads to the action “runs through” the person in question. What matters is that the proximate causes of the person’s action are the person’s own desires and intentions. If in addition to this the person is not subject to other causes “from outside” which would have made him pursue that course of action even had he not so desired, then the action is free. On this account what matters then is not the absence of causes, but only that the causes are rightly related to the person in question. The phrase “I could have done otherwise” is thus claimed to be equivalent to something like “If I had desired to do otherwise, then nothing would have prevented this.”

Incompatibilism and Agent Causation

Incompatibilists claim that free will and determinism could not both be true ... that at least one of the two must be false. They typically criticise compatibilists in the following manner: it is all very well to say that you would have been able to do otherwise had you so desired, but could you have so desired – could you have had desires and intentions other than the ones you in fact had? If not, then it is far from clear that the truth of such claims is sufficient for the possession of free will. If an incompatibilist is to accept the idea of free will, then they must deny the truth of determinism ... but this cannot be reduced to the scientific denial examined earlier. Instead of saying that free actions are ones without causes or explanations, these people may say something like this: a free action is not an action without sufficient causes, it is rather an action of which the agent [the person] themselves is the cause ... however, the agent is not “caused to cause” he or she merely causes their actions. These actions may be influenced by the agent’s desires and by various factors in the environment, but these things do not fix what choices the agent will make.

Suppose that humans are merely material creatures – not creatures possessed of an immaterial soul. In that case, it would appear that human actions can ultimately be reduced to the movement of the fundamental physical realities – like atoms, or whatever – and that these movements are completely explicable in terms of the laws of science. These movements would then be either completely deterministic, or else would only fail to be deterministic by being random or chancy. In either case, it is hard to see how this view of the ultimate constituents of human action can be consistent with the view that humans possess the kind of free will just described.

Closing Thought

Suppose that we do not possess free will and therefore do not have any control over whether or not we perform any particular action. In that case neither do we have any control over what beliefs we form. In particular, we do not have any control

over whether we believe in free will or not. This seems to entail that we cannot be blamed for believing in free will ... and that therefore that those who do not believe in free will cannot rationally criticise those that do. Pushing this line of thought a little further ...

But if we do not possess free will then neither do we have any control over whether we accept the assertions of the last paragraph. What is more, if we do not possess free will, we do not have any control over whether we accept the assertion of the last sentence. And again, if we do not possess free will we do not have any control over whether we accept the assertion of sentence just before this one. Moreover, if we do not possess free will ... (you see how it is going to go from here).

For those who enjoy mathematical and logical thinking the reasoning above can be neatly symbolised. First, I need to explain the symbols.

| | | |
|--------|---|--|
| U | = | You |
| F | = | Humans possess free will |
| ~G | = | It is not the case that G |
| Ab(P) | = | Person A believes that P |
| BnC(Q) | = | Person B has no control over whether Q |
| R → S | = | If R then S |

This symbolism allows us to make such statements as the following ...

| | | |
|-----------------|---|---|
| Ub(F) | = | You believe that humans possess free will |
| ~F | = | Humans do not possess free will |
| F → ~UnC(Ub(F)) | = | If humans possess free will then it is not the case that you do not have control over whether you believe that humans possess free will |

The following argument begins with assumption that you believe in free will. Steps from odd numbered to even numbered premises require the additional assumption that if humans do not possess free will then for any belief that you possess, you have no control over whether you possess that belief. Steps from even numbered to odd numbered premises require the further assumption that you accept the claim made in the relevant even numbered premise.

- (1) Ub(F)
 - (2) ~F → UnC(Ub(F))
 - (3) Ub(~F → UnC(Ub(F)))
 - (4) ~F → UnC(Ub(~F → UnC(Ub(F))))
 - (5) Ub(~F → UnC(Ub(~F → UnC(Ub(F))))))
 - (6) ~F → UnC(Ub(~F → UnC(Ub(~F → UnC(Ub(F))))))
 - (7) Ub(~F → UnC(Ub(~F → UnC(Ub(~F → UnC(Ub(F)))))))
 - (8) ~F → UnC(Ub(~F → UnC(Ub(~F → UnC(Ub(~F → UnC(Ub(F)))))))
- ... and so it continues on to infinity