Incompatibilism Essay, Research Paper

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Philosophy Paper 3

Incompatibilism: The Only Way to Go

Is man free? If everything is determined by antecedent conditions, how can we consider man?s actions to be free? Is the belief that everything is determined incompatible with the concept of freedom? If all actions are determined, how can one be held morally responsible? The three possible positions, which may be taken in regard to these question, libertarianism, compatibilism (soft determinism), incompatibilism (hard determinism) lead to very different notions of moral responsibility. It is my belief that the incompatibilist argument as described by Van Inwagen defeats the compatibilist?s notion of freedom. Incompatibilism is the most convincing of the three theories proposed regarding the relationship between free will and determinism.

Determinism is the idea that at any instant exactly one possible future exists. Determinism is a thesis about propositions, and by definition a proposition has a certain truth-value which we can express. The belief that I am walking has at its core the proposition that I am walking. In opposition to determinism, the indeterminist stases that not all events are the result of prior conditions, there is perhaps one tenth of one percent of our actions that can be truly spontaneous. This incompatibilist philosopher?s hold is enough to justify indeterminism. Libertarianism, in contrast, is the denial of the belief that all human actions are caused by an individual?s character. It holds that a free act is not an uncaused act as determinism believes it to be, but rather an act caused ?by the self as distinct from the character of an individual?. (Campbell)

Free will is perhaps best defined as the possibility of being capable of doing more than one action. We say someone has free will if, when presented with two distinct paths, of which they can only choose one, they are equally capable of acting in either way. For example, a man is offered a drink and can drink the beverage, or alternatively can not drink the beverage, if we hold this to be true and the man is in situations similar to this on a regular basis we say he has ?free will?. In contrast to determinism free will is a thesis about agents. I shall argue therefor that free will is incompatible with determinism.

Incompatibilist philosophers hold that because the world is determined we are incapable of having free will. Van Inwagen?s argument for determinism is still the most convincing of arguments in the debate of free will.

• P, all facts about universe before people were present.

• Neither I nor anyone else had any choice about control over P.

• If P then necessarily Q so only one possible future is conceivable.

• Necessarily Q must have come about and no one had any control over Q.

So incompatibilism holds that our voluntary actions are based on our character, thus we do not really have free will as our character is controlled by our past.

Incompatibilist philosophers easily defeat the idea of indeterminism. If John could be described as a calm, thoughtful, and a peaceful man but one night goes out has a few beers and gets in a fight, we might initially say that the tendency to fight is not a trait of his. All determinists agree that we need to have deeper analysis of John?s personality. There is perhaps something in his persona that leads him to this seemingly uncharacteristic action. Put simply determinist thinkers including incompatibilists maintain that just because we have not discovered the cause of a particular event does not mean it has no cause. In fact if we look back through history our knowledge of determined events increases as scientific knowledge increases. Therefor we have disproved the idea of indeterminism, as we cannot say an event has no cause, only that we have not found the cause of that particular event. It is always conceivable that under further inquiry we will reveal that an event was actually caused.

The libertarian argument is also a rather weak one when compared to incompatibilism. Campbell who is the foremost libertarian of the twentieth century claims that we are on occasion exercising free will. ?Freedom exists only in those situations of moral temptation where the self decides to act in accordance with our concept of duty or to follow our inclinations?. He bases his concept of freedom in the distinction between man?s ?self? and his character. Libertarians believe that our character determines our desires, but our character does not determine the decision itself when we must decide between following our inclinations or acting in accordance with our sense of duty (Campbell). This act of decision can oppose and transcend one?s formed character. Therefor character and the self are not identical. The determinist response to the libertarian distinction of character and ?self? is rather simple. A man?s character is composed of all his beliefs, values, and attitudes. All mental processes, including the decision to change his character, are part of his character. In this sense the character encompasses the ?self?. There is no reason for libertarianists to create a separate ?self? to explain how we can have second order thinking about our decisions. The idea of libertarians finds no support or justification as it is can be easily explained within a determinist framework.

Compatibilist philosophers believe that determinism is compatible with freedom because freedom is merely voluntary action in accordance with the beliefs and desires that arise from a person?s character. In this way compatibilist philosophers have changed the dilemma of free will to a definitional problem. Compatibilist say that given event D we will come to decision Y, but we are capable of choosing either X or Z. They go on further to say that we will never choose X or Z because it is not in keeping with our character. The redefinition of freedom leads to an idea that is too weak to stand up to incompatibilist criticisms.

The problem is that our character has been determined for us through our interaction with our environment and society from the earliest years. Before we are capable of thinking of such notions as free will, we have been set on a certain path.

Our behavior although voluntary is due to certain unconscious forces that make it inevitable that we behave in certain manners. Take the example of the gambler that Hospers uses, a man is addicted to gambling, spends all his money, sells his property, neglects his children, and sells drugs all in order to get money for the sole purpose of gambling. This man may deliberate about these acts and think he is acting freely, since he consciously decides the course of his own acts. The gambler is thus unaware of the unconscious factors that cause him to gamble. He is a victim of character and thus fails to exhibit free will.

One of the arguments that critics of incompatibilism raise is that ?the principle that no one has any choice about the occurrence of an undetermined event? (Van Inwagen). The idea here is that:

• For any time, t, and any undetermined event occurring at t: it is not possible for it to have been in anyone?s power to determine whether that event or some alternative event instead would have occurred.

• So it follows that for any time t and any undetermined action occurring at t: it is not possible for it to have been in the agent?s power to determine whether that action or some alternative action instead would occur at t.

• Therefor, it is not possible for a free action to be undetermined.

It is impossible for this conclusion and incompatibilism both to be true. The above argument being valid means that either incompatibilism is wrong or there is a fault in the arguments’ premise. The fault of this argument comes from the idea that it is within a person?s power to determine whether undetermined event X occurs as opposed to some alternative undetermined event. The notion that the persons? intentions, desires and beliefs can influence a free action explains in terms of reason why the person takes the undetermined action X. The fault is the assumption that only a determined event can have such an explanation, this is true of all events.

The second argument against incompatibilism, to which I will respond, does not assume that reasons and explanations are deterministic but claims that where we have an undetermined action we do not have an agent in control of determining what his action is to be. We do not have an action that the agent chooses, freely or otherwise. Ayer and Smart both argue against incompatibilism in this fashion. They both hold that:

• Incompatibilism entails that an action can?t be both free and determined.

• If an action is not determined by the state of the world then it has no explanation in terms of causal relationships.

• But some free actions do have explanations in terms of their history.

• Therefor incompatibilism is wrong.

This argument assumes that if an action is not a purely chance or random event, if it is influenced by or has an explanation in terms of the agent?s reasons or motives for doing it, then it is determined. A.J. Ayer (1946) put this argument in the following form:

Either it is an accident that I chose to act as I do or it is not. If it is an accident, then it is merely a matter of chance that I did not choose to do otherwise; and if it is merely a matter of chance that I did not choose otherwise, it is surely irrational to hold me morally responsible for choosing as I did. But if it is not an accident, then presumably there is some causal explanation of my choice: and in that case we are led back to determinism.

If we look back on the bulleted argument above premises 1 and 3 are beyond doubt as the first is merely a definition of incompatibilism, while the third must be true when we examine our experiences. We regularly give explanations of our own actions, ?I am doing this paper because it counts for a grade and I hope for an A?. It is the second premise in this argument that is faulty. Ayer incorrectly assumes that either an action is determined or it is a purely chance event.

Van Inwagen in his response to compatibilist theory say that their definition of freedom is imply a poor analysis and should be rejected. Incompatibilism is the strongest position to hold on the deterministic and free will dilemma. It is the only complete argument that has a strong analytically formatted argument. Compatibilism has support in numbers but philosophers have never given a strong support for its belief. Free will can simply not be acceptable if we also say that the world is determined.