

PETER VAN INWAGEN'S 'DEFENSE OF INCOMPATIBILISM' RECONSIDERED

Naheed Saeed

Assistant Professor

Govt. Cooper road Collage, Lahore, Pakistan.

Abstract. Peter van Inwagen, the chief architect of contemporary incompatibilists thesis denies that the laws of nature, the events that happen in the distant past, and their consequences are “up to us”. The incompatibility of “alternate possibilities” with determinism, therefore, rules out Compatibilism. The paper takes account of the Consequence Argument, the Mind Argument and the Origination Argument in order to contrast the positions upheld by the incompatibilists and the compatibilists as are stated in the free will determinism debate. In this regard, the views of Harry Frankfurt, R.E.Hobart, Kadri Vihvelin and Joseph Keim Campbell have been evaluated. Notwithstanding the success or otherwise of the new incompatibilists project, it has, nevertheless, been able to point out the significance of problems concerning the nature of causation, human agency, counterfactuals, and laws of nature. An interesting comparison between a hard determinist, Ted Honderich, a soft determinists John Martin Fischer and a libertarian, Robert Kane has been undertaken to highlight the divert of philosophical views on the issue under discussion. Dennett’s condition for free will that one “Could Have Done Otherwise”, however, comes to a controversial conclusion regarding the moral responsibility for an act if that act was causally undetermined. Hence, the controversy about incompatibility of free will and determinism re-ignited by Peter van Inwagen continues unabated.

Key Words: Alternative possibilities, Hard determinism, Soft determinism, Consequence argument, Mind argument, Origination argument, Strict incompatibilism, Moral responsibility, CDO.

Peter van Inwagen’s defense of incompatibilism, as adumbrated in *An Essay on Free Will*, is arguably the most important argument against

Compatibilism and determinism. On account of this, he has also been credited in recent years with rehabilitating and reinstating incompatibilism in contemporary philosophical debate. His argument is supposed to encompass the intuition underlying the incompatibilists position ruling out any choice about pre existing state of the universe and the laws of nature. The basic line of argument adopted by van Inwagen, in a nutshell, runs like this:

“If determinism is true, then our acts are the consequences of the laws of nature and events in the remote past. But it is not up to us what went on before we were born, and neither is it up to us what the laws of nature are. Therefore, the consequences of these things (including our present acts) are not up to us.”ⁱ

The implication is that if it is not up to us that certain things take place, the consequences of those things can also not be up to us. The no-choice principle entails that not having control over certain things means no control over the consequences of those things either. Having no control over the laws of nature and our past, acting as their consequence leaves us with no control over how we act. Since existence of alternative possibilities is a necessary condition for acting freely, and since determinism is not compatible with alternative possibilities, the logical inference make determinism incompatible with acting freely.

Peter van Inwagen has come up with a new free will position that rejects Compatibilism without making a commitment to the truth or falsity of determinism. The dichotomy between a deterministic universe and the view that people have free will results in what is called incompatibilism. This line of argument is followed in a variety of ways: the libertarian denial of a deterministic universe, the hard determinist's denial of the existence of free will and the incompatibilists denial by the hard indeterminists of both a determined universe and the existence of free will. As against Incompatibilism, Compatibilism rejects determinism / free will dichotomy and maintains free will by defining it as more of a 'freedom to act'. For broad compatibilists, free will, determinism, moral responsibility are compatible, for narrow compatibilists, there is compatibility between moral responsibility and determinism.

The proverbial two horns of the classic dilemma of free will are represented by Inwagen in *Consequence Argument* and *Mind Argument*.

As has been pointed out in the beginning of the paper, the essence of the argument lies in the principle: "If we have no control over certain things, then we don't have control over the consequences of those things, either." Different versions of the consequence argument have since been advanced (van Inwagen 1983, Widerker 1987, Ginet 1990, O'Connor 1993, 2000, and Fischer 1994). The consequence argument makes a basic distinction between the past and the present, and the symmetry involved influences the flow of time and direction of causation. The future is open unlike the past: past being fixed and unalterable. Future, however, can be influenced by volition and subsequent action. The fixed nature of the past and the open nature of the future provide the consequence argument the ground to dub determinism as false. The origination argument supports free will by positing that volitions and the origination emerge from the agent in a peculiar way.

How free will requires an agent as an originator to be the ultimate source of his action is not accepted by Frankfurtⁱⁱ. Ultimate condition does not seem to be relevant in case the agent has sufficient reason to will differently. As implied by the consequence argument, an agent can be free and act differently only if determinism is false. The compatibilists do not countenance such a precondition and visualize the agent as doing otherwise if a different counterfactual condition, i.e., in case either the past or the laws of nature would have been different. Some of the compatibilists think that the agents have the counterfactual power over the past, while for others they have power over the laws of nature. It is suggested by some philosophers that free will must be compatible with determinism otherwise our responsibility for our actions will be ruled out.ⁱⁱⁱ For example, they argued against compatibility between free will and determinism though it is a positive requirement for it, at least insofar as our actions are concerned. This claim seems too strong for what a compatibilists requires. Compatibilists arguments tend to deny the relevance of consequence argument to moral responsibility as it rejects the assumption that moral responsibility requires an ability to do otherwise (Frankfurt, Lewis, Dennett, and Fischer). Granting free will as a requirement of moral responsibility, if moral responsibility is shown as compatible with the truth of determinism, it will implicitly show compatibility between free will and the truth of determinism.

A more serious objection to the consequence argument centers on its inability to establish “strict incompatibilism,” a necessarily true incompatibilism as formulated by Kadri Vihvelin^{iv}

“Incompatibilism is usually understood as the claim that the truth of determinism entails the non-existence of free will: that there is no possible world where determinism is true and someone has free will.”

If incompatibilism makes its concept of determinism contingent upon the premise that our actions are the consequences of the laws of nature and events in the remote past, it cannot, according to Joseph Keim Campbell, do so because the existence of a remote past is a contingent truth and is not essential to the thesis of determinism. Targeting Inwagen’s Third Argument, Campbell illustrates his point by referring to the characters of Adam and Eve in an imaginary world W:

“Consider, for instance, the possible world W. Suppose that W is a determined world such that some adult person exists at every instant. Thus, W has no remote past. At its first moment of existence lived Adam, an adult person with all the knowledge, powers, and abilities necessary for moral responsibility. Shortly after Adam comes Eve, and the rest is history. For each of the propositions that comprise W, someone is such that he has, or had, a choice about whether that proposition is true—at least there is no reason to doubt this claim. The Third Argument is not a general argument for incompatibilism. At most, the Third Argument proves the weaker claim that persons cannot have free will in determined worlds with a remote past.”^v

Since Adam has no past in the imaginary world W, his free will is free of the past, hence the consequence argument does not prove the soundness of incompatibilism. As for the “initial” moment of Adam’s existence, Campbell argues:

“Oscillating Adam: suppose that there is a deterministic world, W, where time is circular. In that world exist oscillating Adam? Oscillating Adam has always existed and will always continue to exist. He is in the grips of an everlasting, eternal recurrence. Oscillating Adam spends his time growing ‘older’ and getting ‘younger’. He begins each cycle with powers comparable with the average 25 years old and eventually develops powers comparable with the average 50 years old. Then he slowly regresses back to the state at which he began, and the cycle starts all over again.”^{vi}

There being no remote past in Adam’s case, it need not necessarily transfer into his future. As a consequence, the consequence argument

cannot support strict incompatibilism because the essential premise used in the argument is contingent. It is obvious that this objection is equally applicable in case of other arguments for strict incompatibilism.

Notwithstanding the success or otherwise of the consequence argument to argue for incompatibilism, it has, nevertheless, been able to point out the significance of problems concerning the nature of causation, human agency, counterfactuals, and laws of nature. By identifying the direction of these complex philosophical issues, it has highlighted the fact that free/determinism debate is primarily a metaphysical concern. Since 17th century, the free will determinism debate has focused two questions: (1) is determinism true? And (2) is free will compatible with or incompatible with determinism? Responses to these questions have divided the debate on two distinct oppositions: (1) determinism and indeterminism, and (2) Compatibilism and incompatibilism.

Determinism philosophically proposes that all events, decisions and actions are causally determined. Since they are part of an unbroken chain of past events, no random events occur. The challenge to the existence of free will inheres in this deterministic stand point. Justification of rational agent's control over his decisions and actions depends upon how we relate causation and freedom as well as our understanding of causally deterministic laws of nature. The ensuing conflict between free will and determinism has led to the emergence of incompatibilism; the thesis that free will and determinism is mutually exclusive. A belief in determinism, as in the case of hard determinists like Ted Honderich, may call for "the truth of a conceptually adequate determinism".^{vii} On the other hand, compatibilists also dubbed as soft determinists like John Martin Fischer may hold the view that the two can be reconciled coherently. A third philosophical position, an incompatibilists one that arises from free will determinism controversy is libertarianism (as opposed to necessitarianism), claims that free will is logically incompatible with a deterministic universe and determinism is false because agents have free will. Robert Kane is the leading exponent of "libertarian freedom" who argued that: (1) "the existence of alternative possibilities is a necessary condition for acting freely", and that (2) "determinism is not compatible with alternative possibilities, it precludes the power to do otherwise".^{viii}

Historically, the philosophical debate concerning free and determinism concerns the “compatibility question” so crucial for both the compatibilists and the incompatibilists to answer. Compatibilists affirm the possibility of free will even if determinism is true while those agreeing with the soft determinist stand point simultaneously believe in the truth of determinism and the existence of free will. On the other hand, the incompatibilists rule out the possibility of free will in a deterministic universe linked to past events and the laws of nature. In this regard, the hard determinists and the libertarians hold contrasting views on admissibility of free will and falsity of determinism. Some of the compatibilists argue that in order to have free will we must be able fulfill the condition of “could-have-done-otherwise” (CDO). It was Dennett^{ix} who used the acronym CDO for the first time arguing that it is not required for free will in many cases. His discussion of the problem of free will and determinism forms part of the Chapter Six on “Could Have Done Otherwise” and comes to a controversial conclusion that the agent is morally responsible for an act only if that act was causally undetermined. Incompatibilists’ stand that argues for the truth of determinism entails that if determinism is true, we can never act other than we in fact act. Peter van Inwagen has rightly noted:

“It seems to be generally agreed that the concept of free will should be understood in terms of *power* and *ability* of agents to act otherwise than they in fact do. To deny that men have free will is to assert that what a man *does* and what he *can* do coincide. And almost all philosophers agree that a necessary condition for holding an agent responsible for an act believes that the agent *could have* refrained from performing that act.”^x

That is the reason why he cryptically remarks that “Dennett’s dogs are barking up the wrong tree^{xi}”. Besides that, the controversial claim about the agent’s moral responsibility for an act is ensured only if that act was causally undetermined is likely to have no bearing on whether the said agent could have done otherwise in the circumstances.

End Notes

ⁱInwagen, Peter van. *An Essay on Free Will*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983, p. 16

ⁱⁱFrankfurt, Harry. "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person", *Journal of Philosophy* 68, 5-21. (1971)

ⁱⁱⁱHobart, R. E. "Free Will as Involving Determination and Inconceivable without It", *Mind* 43, 1-27, (1934)

^{iv}Vihvelin, Kadri. "Compatibilism, Incompatibilism and Impossibilism", *Contemporary Debates in Metaphysics*. Theodore Seder et al. (ed.), New York: Blackwell Publishing, 303–318 (2008): p. 303

^vCampbell, Joseph Keim. "Free will and the necessity of the past", *Analysis* 67: 105–111, (2007): p. 109

^{vi}Campbell, Joseph Keim. "Incompatibilism and fatalism: reply to Loss", *Analysis* 70:71-76. (2010): pp. 72-73

^{vii}Honderich, Ted. *On Determinism and Freedom*, Edinburgh University Press, 2005, p. 6

^{viii}Kane, Robert. Introduction: The contours of contemporary free will debates in Robert Kane (Ed.) *Oxford Handbook of Free Will*, Second Edition, OUP USA, (2011): p. 11

^{ix}Dennett, Daniel C. *Elbow Room: the varieties of free will worth wanting*, Cambridge, Mass.: The M.I.T. Press, 1984.

^xInwagen, Peter van, "The Incompatibility of Free Will and Determinism", *Philosophical Studies*, 27(3), p. 188,(1975)

^{xi}Inwagen, Peter van. Dennett on "Could have done otherwise", *The Journal of Philosophy*, 81(10), 565-567,(1984): p. 567