

COMPATIBILITY OF FREE WILL AND CAUSAL NECESSITY

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Abstract. The dilemma of determinism concerns the inevitability, predictability and determination of human action and the challenge posed by the uncertainty principle and the relativity theory. “Necessity is the idea that everything that has ever happened and ever will happen is necessary and is opposed to chance and contingency”: there is no chance in a necessary world. Causal determinism, however, fails to take account of the question raised by Peirce and James “whether man’s nature is at one with the material, causal world, or whether a person can make decisions and choices of his own volition”. The scientific findings of Einstein and Heisenberg as well as the Chaos Theory seem to support the later thesis. There have, indeed, been significant attempts to reconcile the ideas of “causation” and “free will”. Hume, however, thinks that causation was not mere succession of events. The conjunction points to a necessary connection as well as a constant conjunction. His principle of causality says that nothing could arise without a cause and conceived “causal necessity as a “projection” of the functional change onto the objects involved in the causal connection”. The paper concludes with the claim that though latter in his writings Hume tried to make liberty and necessity compatible with one another, hard determinism still rules out this possibility by claiming that human beings are the part of nature and their actions should not be treated as exception from rest of the nature. The whole nature is knitted in one causal chain of necessity.

Key Words: Inevitability, Predictability, Determination, Causal necessity, Necessary connection, Constant conjunction, Chance, Causal determinism, Hard determinism, Causal chain.

What is the dilemma of free will? The dilemma of free will is that if actions are caused deterministically, they are inevitable, and if their cause is determined, they are not free either because then they happen by chance and through the agency of some human being. The

agency thesis is important but is beset with difficulties as far as the relation with the world is concerned. The determinists argue on the basis of the predictability and inevitability drawn from universal laws that all human actions are determined and dictated by the social and the physical world. The advocates of the agency theory, on the other hand, claim that unpredictability of human nature and the randomness of its reactions cannot be accounted for by the mechanics of determinism. Quantum mechanics or the uncertainty principle and the theory of relativity are often cited as proof of randomness posing serious challenge to the deterministic thesis.

The view upheld by the causal determinists is that “everything occurs for a reason and by necessity” and that there were no uncaused events. It makes antecedent events and the laws of nature the ground for countering the idea of randomness and unpredictability. “Necessity is the idea that everything that has ever happened and ever will happen is necessary, and cannot be otherwise”. Since necessity is opposed to chance and contingency, there is no chance in a necessary world. Everything that happens is necessitated. Nothing happens randomly because everything has a reason. Causal determinism, therefore, proposes that “there is nothing uncaused or self-caused in the universe and there is an unbroken chain of prior occurrences stretching back to the origin of the universe”.

If one were to grant that all events are causally determined by prior events, one’s so called “decisions” and “actions” are perforce determined by prior events. There is, indeed, no doubt that if determinism is true, then it was already determined before one was born that one was going to make all of the decisions one has made during one’s life. For example, could one have avoided choosing to sit down and write today? As one was already determined before one was born that one *would* choose to sit down and write today. The compatibility with free will is, thus, ruled out and it cannot be said that one chose to sit down and write of one’s own free will if it was already determined before one was born that one was going to do this. Nevertheless, the question of whether man’s nature is at one with the material, causal world, or whether a person can make decisions and choices of his own volition remains a pressing one requiring further analysis.

During the 20th century some of the above theories have begun to look rather obsolete. First of all, certain results in quantum mechanics

have led many philosophers to eventually reject determinism. Charles Saunders Peirce's acceptance of chance under the influence of Darwin led William James to incorporate "chance in his free will thesis in the *Dilemma of Determinism*" and posit absolute chance as contributing to the alternate possibilities rendering the will free and future open: "The stronghold of the determinist argument is the antipathy to the idea of chance...This notion of alternative possibility, this admission that any one of several things may come to pass is, after all, only a roundabout name for chance."ⁱ

The concept of a causally determined universe that was confirmed by Newtonian gravitational laws was followed by Einstein's theory of relativity and Heisenberg's uncertainty principle implying that "scientific conceptions are not necessarily what really are." Chaos theory maintained that "events occur randomly and by chance at the most fundamental level of the material world and new concepts in physics, brought about by quantum mechanics, opened up a completely new world view".

Over the centuries, many philosophers have also sought ways to reconcile the ideas of "causation" and "free will." They tend to view the basic ideas of Determinism and Libertarianism as compatible, hence they may be called "compatibilists." "Thomas Hobbes and David Hume are outstanding examples of philosophers who sought to solve the issue of free will and determinism by changing the definitions of "free will," "freedom," and "liberty." Whereas the Libertarian view usually holds that an act of free will must be an uncaused action, Hobbes and Hume found other ways to describe the idea of free will so that it is compatible with deterministic causes. Hobbes thought that the cause of the will is not the will itself, but something else: "I hold that ordinary definition of a free agent, namely that a free agent is that which, when all things are present which are needful to produce the effect, can nevertheless not produce it, implies a contradiction and is nonsense."ⁱⁱ

The voluntaristic predilection of Hobbes and David Hume tried to see an identity between freedom and the lack of external causes. "It was freedom of action, not freedom of the will. The determination of the will may be granted as far as the will is one of the causes in the great causal chain" which might suffice to guarantee enough freedom of will

to them. This watered down concept of “free will” for them is compatible even with a complete pre-determinism. Hume explains:

According to determinist thesis, “for any event X there are antecedent causes that ensure the occurrence of X in accordance with impersonal, mechanical causal laws”. Causation being the relation between an event (the cause) and the caused event (the effect) the second event is a consequence of the first. This ordered sequence of events creates a causal chain in which every action including that of human beings is inevitably and necessarily a consequence of the antecedent events. Hume was of the opinion that causation was not mere succession of events.

The conjunction points to a necessary connection:

“Shall we then rest contented with these two relations of contiguity and succession, as affording a complete idea of causation? By no means. An object may be contiguous and prior to another, without being considered as its cause. There is a NECESSARY CONNECTION to be taken into consideration; and that relation is of much greater importance.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Necessity of causality was, for Hume, to be looked for in the human mind. His argument hinges on a peculiar concept of physical necessity. The kind of necessity he visualizes parallels the singularity of cause. He qualifies this necessity by a constant conjunction of objects and determination of mind. When these elements are removed, it results in chance. Hume rules out any middle ground between chance and necessity because the object must either be conjoined or not conjoined. Similarly, the mind, in order to pass from one object to another, must either be determined or not. If this conjunction or determination is weakened in any way, it does not alter the nature of necessity. This is because operation of bodies displays diverse degrees of constancy and force, although it may not produce different kinds of relations.

Hume’s skepticism led him to modify the necessary connection into constant conjunction. His quasi realism, however, persuades him to hold on to the determinist formulation of the principle of causality that nothing could arise without a cause and conceived causal necessity as a “projection” of the functional change onto the objects involved in the causal connection saying that: “Nothing is more usual than to apply to external bodies every internal sensation which they occasion.”^{iv} In “an Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding”, Hume re-defines

free will or liberty and causality and necessity and tries to combine the two categories and makes them compatible with each other. Since all things have a cause and a cause always precedes or comes with an effect, he defines the former in terms of choice, responsibility, and morality. Hard determinism, as is the case with other things, rules out the possibility of compatibility between liberty and necessity. If our present action is seen as part of a causal chain extending back in the past, and since each link in such a chain is seen as determining the next link in the chain, the apparent control over our present action and the mental states cannot be construed as real control. With the lack of real control, moral responsibility for our action cannot therefore be assigned. Granting hard-determinism to be true, therefore, results in a significant challenge to the fundamental task of normative ethics of holding people responsible for their actions.

End Notes

ⁱJames, William, *The Dilemma of Determinism*, Kessinger: Kessinger Publishing LLC, (1884,1956):P.153.

ⁱⁱHobbes, Thomas & Bramhall, *Hobbes and Bramhall on Liberty and Necessity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, (1999), P. 385.

ⁱⁱⁱHume, David, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Clarendon: Oxford University Press,(1978):P. 56.

^{iv}Hume, David, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, New York: Oxford University Press,(1978), P.167.