The Incoherence of Compatibilism

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Abstract

The perennial philosophical problem of freedom and determinism seems to have a solution through the widely known philosophical doctrine called Compatibilism. The Compatibilist philosophers contend that our freedom of action is compatible with causal determinism whenever we are conscious of having acted as wanted. However, the proponents of this view seem to avoid certain crucial questions. Is our freedom just a matter of having acted as wanted, despite the causal nexus involved? In other words, is it sufficient to believe that freedom lies where wants do not necessitate actions? For, though we may be free to do what we want but are we free to want what we want? The alleged absence of causal necessity in want-action relation appears as merely a feeling of freedom rather than genuine freedom. Traditionally, genuine freedom of action meant the possibility of an antecedently uncaused action, entirely dependent upon an agent's choice. This, however, was held as impossible in a deterministic universe. Nevertheless, doubting freedom meant erosion of individual's accountability, while denying causal determinism entailed lawlessness of nature and thus impossibility of knowledge. Compatibilism emerged to resolve this contradiction. However, if compatibilism is a coherent thesis, it cannot avoid the most embarrassing question whether we can act otherwise than what we want!

Keywords: Freedom, Determinism, Compatibilism, Incompatibilism, Necessity.

Introduction

Compatibilism has emerged as a philosophical solution to the age old dilemma of freedom and determinism involving human actions. Determinism implies that nature is a causal nexus such that nothing can happen without antecedent causal conditions. Physical determinism is distinguished from the psychological determinism in that the later

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projects internal mental causation as the antecedent determinant of all mental events and mental acts ensuing in overt actions. Nevertheless, both kinds of determinisms reject the possibility of uncaused events. When the causality of mental events and mental acts requires explanation, determinism of any kind explains these as caused by the neural events or brain processes inside the brain. The internal brain processes are then claimed to be causally connected with the external physical environmental conditions that are accounted for as antecedent causal conditions giving rise to both internal mental events and overt bodily actions.

Sophisticated compatibilism advocates the view that our freedom is compatible with physiological determinism, but incompatible with psychological determinism. We are free to do what we want, if we are not constrained or compelled to do so normally. We are free in the sense that what we want to do is not what we necessarily do. Rather, it is a matter of choice for us to do or not to do what we want. If wants are taken as reasons for actions of a conscious agent, compatibilism entails that the agent is free as far as he acts on his reasons without necessarily doing so.

Necessity and Contingency

It might be objected that freedom does not consists merely in the possibility of acting on reasons. If there is some other incompatible reason, as a conflicting want, accountable for not doing what one originally wanted, it shows that reason-action relation is not as contingent as claimed. Rather, one always acts or refrains to act on certain reasons. This seems to weaken the claim that one is free because of the absence of causal necessity. The absence of causal necessity seems relative to the presence of a logical necessity in the form of some other reasons. Richard Brandt and Jaegwon Kim argue likewise. They state:

> *"In deliberative actions, the relation between wanting and doing is relatively indirect and complex. It is obvious that very often, when a person in fact wants p and believes that doing A will lead to p; he does not do A for any one of several reasons. First, obviously, doing A may be expected to lead to other consequences he doesn't want, as well as p: or there may be some conflicting act that he thinks will lead to results he wants more than p. Second, when a person is making a serious decision, he will usually pay no attention to the fact that doing A will lead to p, despite his wanting p, unless he know that he wants p. (Conversely, if a person sincerely*

> *but wrongly believes that he wants p, this fact is apt to be a relevant factor in his deliberative process.) In making a decision, a person will often line up the pro points and the con points, but unless he recognizes that he wants p he may not count it as a pro point for A that doing A will lead to p; in the case the fact that he really want p will not influence his decision in so far as his decision is "rational." Again, a person may know that he wants p but thinks it a bad thing that he does and refrain from doing what he thinks will lead to p on that account. Similarly, he may count it as a pro point for doing A that it will lead to p, although p is something he does not think of himself as wanting but rather as something he ought to want- such as the public good or conformity to some moral standard. A person need not always do what he does because he wants it or its consequences in our sense of 'want', or even because he thinks he does. The implications of these facts is this; When action is deliberative, it is one thing to want p; it is quite another to choose, decide to do, or do A. The one does not necessarily lead to the other. So far, then, wants do not yet fully explain actions. For the purpose of explanation, if we are to follow the standard pattern of explanation in science, we need and empirical law… or something like an empirical law."*[1]

Thus, the difference is merely apparent. Explanation of commonsense statements would reveal some kind of necessity modeled on the scientific explanation of events. The apparent absence of necessity in want-action relation faces the question why one did not do what one wanted to do. Answer must be some other *unconscious want* in conflict with the conscious one. And thus, *psychological determinism* cannot be easily ruled out.

In the above context, the compatibilists think every day common-sense explanations are different from theoretical explanations in science. However, Brandt and Kim think otherwise:

> *"…everyday common-sense explanations whether of deliberative or non-deliberative actions, on the basis of wants, presuppose and derive their explanatory force from an everyday common-sense scheme of psychological knowledge of people in general or of the preference scale (etc.) of a given agent in particular,*

> *which can be unpacked in more or less precise statements."*[2]

Comparing ordinary statements like, for instance, 'He stopped walking *because* he was tired and wanted to sit and relax', and 'The car stopped *because* there was no fuel in it', Brandt and Kim state:

> *"Trivial and obvious as they seem, these explanations are not fundamentally different in logical and methodological requirements from their counterparts in natural science. Truly deductive explanations of actions may be difficult and even impossible to attain, but we must remember that even in physical science deductively complete explanations are often found only among theoretical explanations of laws and theories and seldom among explanations of specific events and states."*[3]

Thus it follows that the compatibilist's refutation of psycho-physical determinism, on the grounds of absence of causal necessity between reasons and actions is questionable upon further requirement of explanation of the same. When explanation of the apparent contingency of practical reasoning is brought under some kind of scientific requirements of explanations, we lose this apparent sense of our freedom.

Given the objections raised in this section, it becomes clear that the apparent defeasibility of practical reasoning must be accountable in terms of some antecedent causes. For, obviously, determinism of any sort cannot be true if those antecedents are denied, even in some cases like the agent's indecision or inaction. Not only this, it must also be true that the antecedents of any decision to follow or not to follow the wants must be consistent with the so-called compatibilist freedom of action.

Compatibilism

The problem is that for the compatibilist freedom means the ability or the power to do what one wants without necessarily doing whatever one wants, within a deterministic universe. As shown earlier compatibilism allows the agent this power, despite his wants being caused by antecedent physiological or neuro-physiological factors. Thus not doing necessarily what one wants may appear as the agent's ability to act otherwise. But it is clear that this inaction has antecedent determining causes in the form of some other wants. For, after all, there must be an explanation as to why the agent decided not to follows his conscious want. This explanation, as it turns out, posits a conscious or unconscious conflict in the agent's mind. The conflict is then explained as a mental

state of indecision, caused by, or necessitated by some other antecedent factor.

Thus, it is difficult to see in what sense, then, the antecedents do not necessitate the agent's decisions or action. Some other antecedent might have necessitated the inaction or the decision not to follow what one wanted! As John O' Leary-Howthorne and Philip Pettit pointed out:

> *"The notion of freedom…springs from the idea that if someone does something freely then it must be the case that they could have done otherwise: at the time of acting, the future was somehow open. Let it be granted that the things people do have antecedents: law-like, and no doubt causal, antecedents. If it is going to be possible for an agent who is to have done otherwise, then it must be that these antecedents are consistent with the agent's not doing. But how is that going to be possible in the sort of [deterministic] universe which the compatibilist takes for granted?*
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> *One way in which it may be taken to be possible is by postulating that while the universe is [deterministic], while it conforms to patterns of [law-like regularities], these laws are fundamentally probabilistic rather than [strictly] deterministic. In particular, these are probabilistic in such a way that for anything an agent freely does, the antecedents of the choice do not necessitate it: consistently with those antecedents being what they are, a different choice might have eventuated. But compatibilists generally allow for a freedom in a world that is [physically] deterministic…. So how can they proceed under this assumption? Taken as a whole, the antecedents of any choice will necessitate that choice under a deterministic picture and compatibilists of this stripe must take the relative antecedents to be a subset f the totality. But which subset?*"[4]

This makes it clear that any account of practical reasoning that allows the agent the possibility to have acted otherwise than what he wanted to do is incompatible with the overall deterministic picture of the universe. For, it cannot be the case that neuro-physiological antecedents necessitate the wants in all cases; yet the agent does not act necessarily in some cases in a deterministic universe. Not doing necessarily what one wants must have been necessitated by some other neuro-physiological or psycho-physical antecedents, causing other wants to conflict with the given

wants. This entails that any provision for compatibilist freedom is not possible in a deterministic universe. Thus, one is bound to look for freedom in an incompatibilist version, which takes its stand on its point of departure from determinism.

In my view self-consciousness is that point of departure. This, however, requires that the compatibilist's notion of self-consciousness must be examined first.

Self-consciousness and Compatiblism

Kenny offers an account of consciousness and self consciousness that seems to be compatible with the compatibilism. Kenny states:

> *"There are at least two sharply distinct things which may be [said about consciousness]. The first is the consciousness which is the exercise of our capacity for perception. The awareness of, and ability to respond to, changes in the environment, which is given by the senses like hearing, seeing, smelling and tasting. The second is self-consciousness: the knowledge of what one is doing and why. In human beings self-consciousness presupposes sense-consciousness but is not identical with it. Self-consciousness presupposes also, I should maintain, the possession of language, one cannot know how to talk about oneself without knowing how to talk, one cannot think about oneself without being able to talk about oneself."* [5]

Moreover, for David Hume, perception is reducible to the impression of senses. One wonders how consciousness could be distinguished from the objects of consciousness! And in Kenny, naming consciousness a capacity is ambiguous. How one kind of capacity called consciousness can be distinguished from other kinds of capacities in general?

G.E. Moore suggests that consciousness of blue and consciousness of red do not imply that at one time consciousness is blue and at other time consciousness is red. Moore thinks that it is the same consciousness, which is of blue at one time and of red at other times. Moore states:

> *"Whether or not, when I have the sensation of blue, my consciousness or awareness is thus blue, my introspection does not enable me to decide with certainty: I only see no reason for thinking that it is. But whether it is or not, the point is unimportant, for introspection does enable me to decide that something*

> *else is true: namely that I am aware of blue, and by this I mean, that my awareness has to blue a quite different and distinct relation. It is possible, I admit, that my awareness is blue as well as being of blue: but what I am quite sure of is that it is of blue; that it has to blue the simple and unique relation the existence of which alone justifies us in distinguishing knowledge of a thing from the thing known, indeed in distinguishing mind from matter."* [6]

Moore's view above implies that consciousness must be distinguishable from the objects of consciousness. Kenny's categorization of consciousness as presupposing sense-consciousness entails that Cartesian Doubt is impossible. How can one even imagine, or suppose, that one has no senses while remaining conscious of self? At least Descartes claimed he can!

This, however, leads us to consider the status of self-consciousness in the problem of freedom from another perspective. Kenny contends that,

> *"If I am right that self-consciousness is intimately connected with language, then I can take account of the tradition that regards self-consciousness as closely linked with mentality without mentioning it specially in my definition. On the other hand by distinguishing between mentality and sense-consciousness I am able to do justice both to my admiration for Descartes and my affection for my dog. I can agree with the former that animals do not have minds while according to the later a full measure of non-mechanical consciousness."*[7]

It is difficult to see what this intimate connection of self-consciousness with language amounts to. For, use of language by itself cannot warrant the existence of self- consciousness or vice versa. Artificial intelligence mechanisms use language much more efficiently than humans do. This, however, does not make these devices self-conscious. Secondly, it is also not necessary that there cannot by any self-conscious state without language. One can consciously imagine some object without any linguistic symbol that may necessarily require seeing it in the perspective of reflection and introspection. I will proceed to examine this in what follows.

Paul M. Churchland's elaboration on this problem exposes the dissolutionist approach. Churchland explains, regarding mentality, that it

is generally contended that the traditional talk about mentality as internal apprehension in general is not sufficient to account for it, unless various mental states are discriminated from each other within some conceptual frame work involving recognition judgments about them. Thus, in this sense, it is alleged that introspective consciousness is just like perceptual consciousness of the external world.

The difference, if any, lies in the direction of discriminating mechanism. Thus, in introspective consciousness, which I prefer to call reflection, the said mechanism is directed towards the so-called internal circumstances rather than external ones. However, the internal circumstances are essentially different than the external ones. There are conscious as well as unconscious states of various kinds that are reflected upon self-consciously. But, P.M. Churchland points out a considered view that:

> *"…Self-consciousness…is just a species of perception: self perception. It is not perception of ones foot with one's eyes, for example, but it is rather the perception of one's internal states with what we may call (largely in ignorance) one's faculty of introspection. Self-consciousness is thus no more (and no less) mysterious then perception generally. It is just directed internally rather than externally."* [8]

Nevertheless, in my view self-consciousness is, in many important respects, dissimilar to the so called perceptual consciousness. Moreover, self- consciousness is a higher order phenomenon, where one is able to reflect or introspect on one's wants, feelings, imagining, believing, and thinking to do or not to do something. If Kenny is right that self-consciousness pre-supposes sense-consciousness, it is difficult to see how this introspection or reflexivity, so characteristic of the self-consciousness, can merely be an outcome of a complex of sensations or perception.

Thus, it follows that reflection on sensations caused by neural events is distinct from sensations. It seems to be the case that self-consciousness, a power of reflection, is distinct from the things it reflects upon, whether external or internal. I see no way to account for this power in a physically deterministic universe. The sense in which all this is relevant to our problem is that freedom of action, if it is really possible, is possible only when this reflectivity is there, which distinguishes human consciousness from the rest of the physical nature.

This, however, leaves the problem of explanation of the distinction between self-conscious actions and natural events untouched.

But the ground of the distinction is provided by the above considerations. Thus, I will proceed accordingly, to examine this problem in the general perspectives about the distinction between action and events.

Actions and Events

It must be clear, so far, that any account of freedom of action is incomplete without taking seriously the status of self-consciousness within the compatibilist or incompatibilist picture of the universe. I see no way of the reducibility of self-consciousness to mental states or events. Therefore, it seems that the defense of freedom, based on a general defeasibility of practical reasoning conflicts with, or is incompatible with, the compatibilist reduction of consciousness to neurological states. For, the question arises that if all mental states, like beliefs, desires, intentions, and so on, are in fact caused by neuro-physiological events in the brain, then in what sense, if any, one really acts at all. In other words, is there any difference between events and actions, as understood ordinarily? For, if all actions, both mental and overt bodily movements, are in fact events caused by other events, it is difficult to account for the role of the agent qua agent in this causal nexus. Even incompatiblism there muse be some place for the agent to act on what he wants to do. Nevertheless, it appears that the causal nexus of mental or physical events has no such place.

The problem is that under event causality the rational agent is himself constituted by a continuous onslaught of mental events caused by neural events. The whole called the agent is thus a combination of discrete temporal parts called mental events. How this continuous chain of events is synthesized to constitute an agent? Clearly, if one is to talk about any self-conscious agent at all, one must be able to account for the way in which this synthesis takes place; otherwise an extremely devastating picture of the agent emerges. The agent, then, is borne and dies with mental events and states, and pass away, giving place to other mental processes.

Moreover, compatibility of neuro-physiological events with conscious mental acts entails that there cannot be conscious mental acts without prior, or correlated, neural events in the brain. This seems to make event-action distinction questionable. Thus, compatibilism seems to be a thesis about an identity or correlation of mental-physical dichotomy without a clear explanation of the distinction between mental events and mental acts. As argued earlier, choices and decision are mental acts in a proper sense, since practical reasoning by itself does not necessarily culminate in decisions or choices. It usually ends in reaching conclusions about some situation, which may be consistent or

inconsistent with the premises. Thus, we have good as well as bad reasoning. But the conclusions reached are distinct from the decisions reached in that the former are processes, while the later are mental acts.

Further, the mental events and processes are distinct from mental acts in an important sense. One becomes conscious of an event or a mental process after it has taken place within the workings of mind or brain. But this cannot be true about the mental act of making a choice or a decision. This important distinction seems dissolved in the web of neuro-physiological mental compatibility. A complex neuro-physiological process may cause a particular want such that the agent becomes conscious of it. But what follows afterwards in the form of conscious deliberations to act or not to act in fulfilling this is the first order decision on part of the agent's conscious mental act. On the other, deliberation proceeds upon this act, in case one decided to fulfill the want, for means-end searching, reaching conclusions that X is the best means for. Y. Then another mental act of choice or decision to go for it is what the agent does by moving around bodily. It is clear that one may not choose to act even after reaching conclusions.

However, the compatibilist view of mind dissolves all these distinctions mentioned above, and takes its stand on the deterministic model of brain. In this model, there are at least three fundamental contentions involved.[9]

i). All brain states are caused by other physical states.
ii). Many brain states are correlates of experiences, including choices and decisions.
iii). Some brain states have, as their results, certain movements of the body called actions.

This correlation between brain states and states of consciousness on the one hand, and the relation between brain states and bodily movement on the other, entails a conflicting view about the role of mental acts of choices in doing something. It appears that a causal role is assigned to brain states ensuing in bodily movements where as no causal relation is asserted between brain states and conscious mental acts. Instead, a mere correlation between them is asserted in order to wedge neutrality insofar as causality is in question. But then the role of choices in its relation to actions becomes questionable. As Vivian M. Weil objects to this correlation,

> *"The difficulty with the approach appears when…actions [are considered as] certain bodily motions which are caused by certain brain states. If the brain states alone are sufficient causes of our deeds, the*

> *choosing, deciding, intending and the rest play no genuine role unless we give up the neutrality of the correlation thesis."*[10]

Thus, assigning a role to the conscious mental acts of decisions and choices, whether causal or otherwise, becomes problematic for the compatibilist. He can only talk about events taking shape in one's consciousness as a causal outcome of brain activity. However, without the distinction between mental events and mental acts, it is difficult to fully account for the way in which one acts self-consciously.

Moreover, the want-action relation is also distinguishable from choice-action relation in an imported sense. One may act on what one wants without choosing to do so. In this case, the relation may be said to be determined even physiologically. If one is conscious of thirst, one simply acts to quench it in some way. But if there are some conflicting reasons against doing so, one deliberates whether to act or not in fulfilling the natural want. However, where choice is there, and one acts accordingly, we have a sense of freedom that we did something as an agent. The mental act of choice ensues in overt action with the consciousness that one could have acted otherwise. Without being consciousness of this possibility there cannot be any sense of freedom. This sense of freedom arises as a consequence of the mental act of choice rather than overt action. The choice here seems distinct from something that merely happens to us in our consciousness like e.g. a want that suddenly arises in us to sleep. As Franklin contends:

> *"There is a clearly a close connection between choice and action thought its precise nature may not be easy to elucidate … in the first place…. Though there can be actions without choice, yet the obvious paradigms of actions are things we choose to do. Secondly, choices are themselves activities rather than events which happen within us. There is no logical viciousness involved in the circularity; it means simply that the two notions are such that we could not have one without the other."*[11]

Thus, the questions is that if all that happens inside consciousness is correlated with neuro-physiological processes, conscious mental act of choosing or deciding must be correlated with them as well. Thus the mental act of choice must also be somehow, a consequence of something happening in the brain at the same time. In addition if, under

compatibilism, the brain event or process were somehow missing, there would be no mental act at all. As D.M. Mackay points out:

> *"...If [all mental processes] were wholly physically determined, and if my decision could be inferred uniquely from my brain processes, then a fully informed observer of my brain- processes could know the outcome of my choices with certainty before I made them, and my impression of freedom in making these choices would therefore be an illusion, due to mere ignorance of the true state of affairs."* [12]

Mackay's point, if only reverted to the agent rather than the observer, entails that the agent's mental act of making a choice would be illusive. Given a wholly physically determined mind, the making of a choice should, in principle, be discoverable by the agent himself prior to making it. This is clearly absurd! As D. M. Mackay says, "[the agent]…would have to resign from his role as an agent: but then the choice would not be made".[13] In what sense can it be called an act or a metal act then? It seems no different than what happens inside consciousness, such that the agent must become conscious of the choice in the some way in which he becomes conscious of a particular want. However, one does not become conscious of one's choices or decisions just as one becomes conscious about mental events like desires or wants.

Here, Stuart Hampshire's objection, that the agent's decision would then have to be discoverable by him like an event; is another, very significant, expression of the same problem. But, as Hampshire has argued, no one, even a determinist, can predict one's own decision before making it. There is a logical impossibility in doing so. Secondly, Hampshire also made a distinction between the 'self directed' thought process, involved in our reasoning, and the 'acts of will'. Hampshire's distinction corroborates my contentions, stated above, that the process of reaching conclusions in practical reasoning is distinct from the mental acts of making a choice or decision. If we could take these acts as acts of will in some sense then Hampshire's view about this problem conforms to my distinction between the process of practical reasoning and the mental act of making a decision or choice. Hampshire states:

> *"Thought, when it is most pure, is self-directing, as the exercise of the intellect in deduction and in following an argument. When I use the active verb of will, and speak of directing my thoughts to a certain topic, or concentrating my attention on it, I still contrast that act of will, which starts the process, from the process itself.*

> *Thought begins on its own path, governed by its universal rules when the preliminary work of the will is done. No process of thought could be punctuated by acts of will, voluntary switching of attention, and retain its status as continuous process of thought."* [14]

Thus, Hampshire's distinction, between thought process and the acts of will' conforms to my distinction between practical reasoning and the mental acts of choice or decision. We can see now, so far, that the compatibilist view of want-action relation fails to account for the distinguishing aspect of mental acts. Given this failure, I think that the incompatibilist view of this relation seems nearer to the correct explanation. What is specific about the mental act of making a choice or decision in the free will controversy is that only the agent himself can truly know what it means to go through the act of making a choice.

Conclusion

Incompatibilism, therefore, there seems to be no way of clearly pointing out the distinction necessary for being an agent. Clearly, a neuro-physiological brain process or want is not what the agent brings about himself. Rather, the mental act itself is brought about or caused by the non- conscious brain processes. But then naming such causally determined conscious phenomena as mental acts seems unjustifiable even if personal and physical languages differentiate events from actions. The difference in the description of mental and physiological processes makes no difference to the fact that the mental, however described, is a causally determined and thus a predictable outcome of the physical.

Thus, there must be a distinction between mental events and mental acts. This distinction has a very significant bearing the problem of freedom and determinism. So far, at least, there seems to be no way to account for this distinction in a compatibilist framework. Therefore, the only recourse is to see this distinction in an incompatibilist view of the self and consciousness.

Notes and References

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