



Chapter 8.

The Problem of Free-Will

The Problem: Free-Will vs. Determinism

Determinism is typically defined as the view that all events and states of affairs are ‘determined’ by antecedent events and states of affairs. At its core, determinism holds the view that everything that happens is fully fixed by what has gone before it; every event has causes *sufficient* to ensure its occurrence. In a popular articulation, Determinism is expressed as the idea that if one were **(a)** to know everything that is true about the universe at a particular instant of time, and also **(b)** to have complete knowledge of the laws of nature, **then**, if determinism is true, one would be able to derive from this knowledge a true and complete account of the state of the universe at any subsequent time. Most philosophical discussions of Determinism are motivated by questions such as: Is human freedom of action possible if the universe behaves as (--or near enough as--) a deterministic system? If everything I do has some prior event as its determining case, how can any of it be a matter of my own free-will, my own free-choice? If my current behavior is fixed by the way things were long before I was born and by the eternal (unchanging) laws of nature, surely the idea that I am freely in control of my own actions must be some kind of illusion!

Determinism is one of the oldest and most intractable philosophical puzzles to contemplate. As already suggested, Determinism concerns two fundamental conceptions of (or aspects of) human existence: In one respect, human beings believe that their lives are the result of the choices that they make. Each person seems to have a ‘life’ filled with choices; one chooses what to study, what sports to play, who to date and marry, what career is most appealing, how to spend one’s free-time, what hobbies to pursue, what religion to practice, etc. In another respect, contemporary human beings live in a technological, scientific world. Since at least the time of Newton, science presents us with a picture of the universe as exhibiting causal regularity. For every event or state of affairs e, there are antecedent events or states of affairs c such that the occurrence of e may be deduced from the occurrence of c plus a true account of all of the laws of nature.

On this view, each event is the effect of previous causes in accordance with the laws of nature. For example, think of astrological examples. Consider something as trivial as ‘an eclipse.’ Regularly, astrophysicists tell us that given their knowledge of the positions of the planets in our solar system, the rotation of the earth, the proximity of the sun, etc. a “solar” or “lunar” eclipse will occur on such and such day, at such and such an hour, and so on. Citizens, school children, families, and so on. often relish such information as they “prepare” to “observe” the predicted astrological occurrence. In a similar vein, astrophysicists can tell us what *happened* in the past. Again, using the positions of celestial phenomena and the laws of nature, they can tell us with absolute precision what types of events (eclipses, comet sightings, etc.) occurred thousands of years ago. They can “confirm” that the ancient Mayans or Egyptians saw such and such a comet in the night sky.

The universe is governed by natural laws, and each event is the effect of previous causes in accordance with the laws of nature. The problem comes visible when we understand that *we too* are part of the universe, governed by the same natural laws. An agent’s actions are events in the universe. Hence, they too must be the effects of previous causes that obey the laws of nature. Thus, when we think of ourselves, we often ask: ‘How is free-action possible if every event in the universe is determined by previous events and natural law?’ ‘Is anyone morally responsible for anything if all events, including each person’s actions, are determined, and (hence) out of each agent’s control? The problem, as expressed so far, seems to arise out of a conflict between two fundamental concepts. On the one hand we think of ourselves as free, but on the other hand we conceptualize the universe in deterministic terms. However, the problem of Free-Will has been around since antiquity. Aristotle grappled with the problem in a different way than post-scientific revolutionary thinkers. For Aristotle it was a problem related to “truth.” (In theology, the Free-will puzzle is transposed into a puzzle involving God’s omniscience and omnipotence.)

Aristotle and Free-Will: “Once True Always True”

In antiquity, the free-will / Determinism puzzle was articulated differently. Aristotle expresses the problem in his **Metaphysics** (in roughly 300 B.C.). A Determinist holds the thesis that whatever will happen in the future is unavoidable (where to say that an event is *unavoidable* is to say that no human being is capable of preventing its inevitable happening). Consider the following argument: