

Consider the view  
that free will is an  
illusion (30 marks)

Philosophy



Consider the view that free will is an illusion (30 marks) You decide on the chocolate cake confident that you could have chosen the sandwich instead. You were free to do both, but as a matter of fact, you chose to eat the unhealthy option. But were you actually free to choose the unchosen alternative? Many philosophers think that free will is actually an illusion — that the choice you actually made was inevitable. Schopenhauer, for example, argued that for a man to say that he could have chosen an alternative is analogous to water in a still pond saying it could be flowing. Yes, he said, the water could be flowing if that same water were in a river, but given that it is actually in a pond its stillness is inevitable. I will argue that the arguments that purport to show that free will is an illusion are weak, and that we have such a thing as free will. First let us look at the arguments for determinism (here I will understand the determinism being discussed to be hard determinism — the view that our free will is illusory — rather than the compatibilist idea that free will can exist alongside causal determinism). What makes you take the chocolate cake instead of the sandwich? We think that the chocolate taking is the result of our deliberation and that the motive for eating the chocolate cake overcame our desire to be healthy. But what determined or caused us to be the kind of being that preferred the one to the other? It was our overall character. But what caused this? We say it is our upbringing and our genes. Now did we decide upon our upbringing that started the casual chain of events that culminated in the taking of the chocolate? No, so there was no other action that was in fact possible. Think of a snooker ball falling into the pocket. What caused this to happen? It was the combination of its shape, the direction of the cue, and the nature of the

table. These factors combined with the laws of physics made the event inevitable. Of course, the snooker ball was not logically required to go into the pocket. There could have been a gust a wind at the crucial moment, but then this other event would have been causally necessary. Other things can only happen if other things which cause these other things to happen occur. So whatever happens is determined. If this is true of snooker balls, why should it be not true of us as well? If we are physical beings, and our brains composed of physical stuff, why should I be not constrained by the same physical forces as everything else? The hard determinist says that there is no reason to believe that we are not subject, like the billiard ball, to the laws of nature. We feel like we could have chosen the sandwich, but given the physical facts about the situation the taking of the chocolate was inevitable. Of course, we could have taken the sandwich if the physical facts were different, but they weren't! So free will — the sense that we could have done otherwise in the same situation — is an illusion say the hard determinists. We are not free. This is a radical thesis, and if accepted would result in a radical readjustment of our concept of ourselves. And it from this that my first argument comes. According to phenomenalism we should proceed according to this methodology: accept the appearances — accept what you have the most warrant for believing. Descartes, for example, says we can be more philosophically assured of the existence of our own minds than the existence of the physical world. Hence his famous proposition: Cogito ergo sum. Why should the more doubtful propositions of science about the nature of the doubtable physical world take precedence over the immediate data of consciousness? Why should the philosophically disputable over-ride the

philosophically indubitable? Physical determinists are committed to this doubtful methodology: let the world, which we cannot prove to exist, take precedence over the mental world whose existence we simply cannot doubt. The phenomenalist like Sartre says the mental appearances are indisputable. We certainly have the phenomenology of the appearance that we could have chosen otherwise. And it is from these certainties that we should proceed. So our freedom is here an inevitable part of our conception of ourselves and no argument from the outside world of physics can over-ride these certainties. Here's another argument against the acceptance of the idea that free will is an illusion. Kant says that ought implies can. In other words, we cannot be obliged to do something if it is not within our ability to do it. Someone may say that I ought to eliminate third world poverty — that if I do not do so I am guilty of a neglect of duty. But this is unreasonable. It is not within my power to eliminate third world poverty, so it cannot be said that I ought to do so. Of course, if someone were to say that I ought to help to eliminate third world poverty, this is a reasonable 'ought' because I can do it. Ought then implies can. The argument proceeds from this presupposition and says that if Eric murders Sam we say that he ought not to have done so. He ought to have done differently — he ought to have refrained from murder. But if determinism is true, then, Eric had no alternative open to him. He was caused by his nature, the laws of physics, and his environment to kill Sam. We cannot therefore say that he ought not to have done it. We cannot expect people to do things that are not within their power to do. Our moral beliefs then presuppose that determinism is false. If we are not free then a morality of oughts and duty is incoherent. Again, we could proceed

phenomenologically on this — we are more sure and have more warrant for our oughts than we have for our beliefs in determinism, so moral oughts should over-ride any belief we might be entertaining for determinism.

Another argument against determinism says this: if I am caused to inevitably accept the conclusions of an argument then I cannot have been rational to accept the conclusions of the argument. If I am determinist I have to say that my belief in determinism was caused by physical processes. The determinist has to accept that it is true for his opponent. Both are caused by ignorant physical forces to accept their beliefs. But this is self-refuting. The determinist is in effect saying that there is no rationality, so we cannot be rational in accepting or rejecting beliefs. So the consistent determinist cannot say that he is offering reasons for accepting determinism; he must say he is putting in new causal inputs that cause a new belief state to emerge. This seems little better than irrational brain-washing! To conclude: belief in determinism is not warranted. It goes against our fundamental conceptions of ourselves and threatens to make morality meaningless.

Moreover, determinism is self-refuting. It says of itself ' There is no rational reason for accepting me.' I cannot rationally accept that which has no rational reason for its justification.