

A criticism of incompatibilism



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

In Van Inwagen's paper, "An Argument of Incompatibilism", he posits in his consequence argument that, under determinism, there is no moral consequence of intentional actions. It is hard to think that one can act without free will. We seem to be able to make our own choices in life every step of the way, yet we are still exceedingly aware of situations and even decision that we seem to have no control over. This is the issue philosophers often encounter in the study of free will in our causally determined world. The subject of free will has been a matter of intense debate in the philosophical community for ages. Not surprising, seeing as its very concept has profound implications on metaphysical, deontological and moral grounds; the absence of free will puts into question the existence of moral responsibility, free thought and even our own existence. However, the compatibilists think that there are certain flaws in some of the premises of Inwagen's argument that make it unreliable. David Lewis points out that two of the premises in Peter Van Inwagen's Consequence Argument do not support it being viewed completely in the strong or weak sense of determinism.

Incompatibilists such as Inwagen have trouble with the idea of determinism, or at least in the context of free will. Determinism is the view that there is a predetermined future that is created by events in the past while being governed by the laws of nature (Van Inwagen, 1983). A common example of determinism is the predestination paradox of time travel. What you do in the past affects what happens in the future, but unfortunately the future stays the same no matter whatever you try to do because you would still have caused the future regardless. When you apply determinism to something like

intentional actions, it means that what you've done could have been predetermined to happen due to something having happened in the past. In the context of the free will debate, compatibilists subscribe to this very concept of determinism. This philosophical viewpoint is commonly brought up in free will related arguments. A reason for this is that the idea of a causally determined future is distressing when applied in the context of free actions. That is to say, that because everything is predetermined, there is technically no free will; whichever actions one believes they are doing is in fact simply an illusion. In his paper, Van Inwagen outlines seven propositions, which encompasses the Consequence Argument that argues against that fact. His argument seeks to remove determinism from the arguments of freewill due to the fact that it is deemed incompatible.

In his Consequence Argument, Van Inwagen uses an example of a governor choosing not to raise their hand and influence the process of the final deliberation of a criminal's death sentence. In this argument, he outlines the conditions that would have governed free will in a deterministic world in the form of six premises. In the Consequence Argument's first three premises, the argument outlines that intentional human actions are causally necessitated because they all happen within the natural, causally determined, world (Zimmerman, 2010). That is to say, the actions are determined to happen. The argument then goes on to outline the notion that if "an event is necessitated by prior events, it could not have happened other than the way it actually happens" (Zimmerman, 2010). This follows that because of the previous propositions, human actions cannot happen in any other way than what has already happened. For instance, following the

argument's logic, I could only open a door ajar when I chose to do so because I was causally determined to do so. Finally, Inwagen's Consequence Argument finally goes onto the topic of free will; a person can only be considered free if he can actually do otherwise on an action. Unfortunately, as stated before, any action a person does happens because it could not be done otherwise. Ultimately, following this line of reasoning, the person cannot do otherwise and is thus following the illusion of free will as he performs his seemingly intentional actions.

Now, returning to the Inwagen's example of the governor, we see what implications Inwagen's argument has on this proposed scenario. By the logic of the Consequence Argument detailed earlier, the governor, despite having chosen to refrain from raising their hand, is not performing the action under their free will. In fact, according to the Consequence Argument, if determinism is true then there is no free will involved in the governor's action. This has some severe implications on that particular subject. What it means is that since free will is not involved in his performing an action that would ultimately be responsible for sending a man to his death, the governor cannot be held morally responsible for that act. Hence, by this logic, the absence of free means one could not possibly be held morally responsible for anything they do. This certainly sounds like an outrageous, yet distressing, conclusion. How could there be any form of responsibility, or any rational thought even, in a deterministic world when every action is seemingly predetermined? It is with this thought in mind that Van Inwagen argues that free will and, by extension moral responsibility, has no place in the deterministic world.

So does this mean we can safely remove the possibility of free will in determinism? The compatibilists say otherwise. David Lewis, a compatibilist himself, has an interesting critique of Inwagen's argument. In his paper, "Are We Free to Break the Laws?", he argues that there are ways "responsibility-grounding freedom of action" (Zimmerman, 2010) can exist alongside determinism. Compatibilism is the view that free will does have a role together with determinism, specifically soft determinism. In his paper, he divides determinism into two different categories, hard and soft determinism. Hard determinism is defined, as a sort of determinism in where there seems to be no room for free will. Soft determinism, on the other hand, is the belief of the exact opposite, allowing for free will in the deterministic world. Lewis himself is a soft compatibilist. In "Are we free to break the laws?" he argues that there is a flaw in the consequence argument. Lewis admits that "[he is] able to do something such that, if [he does] it, a [causal law will] be broken" (Lewis, 1981), although he claims that the incompatibilists behind the Consequence Argument takes this claim to the extreme or what he calls the strong sense. To an incompatibilists, this statement can be taken to mean that he can "break the very laws of nature" (Lewis, 1981). These are the definition of the weak and strong theses. The difference between the two is that the weak thesis, which says that "a [causal law will] be broken" (Lewis, 1981) implies that whenever he decides to take an action, the act itself is what causes a law to be broken. A nice analogy of the weak thesis can be summed up with a simple rock thrown at a window. If someone throws a stone and in the process breaks a window, then, following the logic of the weak thesis, the act of throwing the stone is what ends up breaking the window. On the other hand, the strong thesis

suggests the very act of performing an action means that he himself has broken the law. Using the same example from before, instead of the act of throwing the stone, it is the thrower himself who breaks the window. Lewis outlines an important distinction between two different ways of viewing the premises of Van Inwagen's Consequence Argument.

The difference between the strong and weak theses plays an important part in Lewis' argument. Lewis rejects the strong thesis that the Consequence Argument seems to imply but accepts the weak one. From the weak thesis he posits that one can actually do otherwise in the Consequence Argument's presumably unyielding deterministic actions. Lewis introduces a concept, which he calls a divergence miracle, since breaking a causal law requires nothing short of one. A divergence miracle is a divergence in the causal history that occurs before the act is performed. That is to say, that prior history may have been changed had the governor from Van Inwagen's example raised his hand. Although, that's not to say that this would not be the case had the person simply chose not to have done so, Lewis claims that " a miracle might have taken place, only to have its work undone by a second miracle" (Lewis, 1981). This is where the weak thesis plays a significant role. Lewis states that for him to perform an action that would result in the breaking of a law, a divergence miracle independent of his own actions offers an alternate causal history that would allow the lawbreaking action to be possible.

Lewis's paper draws attention to two premises from Inwagen's Consequence Argument, most specifically the fifth and sixth premise. In Inwagen's sixth premise, he states that a person could not have rendered a law of nature

false (Van Inwagen, 1983). Lewis cites an example, which Van Inwagen has used in defense of this premise, of the possibility of the construction of an apparatus that can potentially violate the laws of physics. It follows that, following the rough outline of the sixth premise, if it is possible such an apparatus can be made then the laws of physics have certainly been rendered false (Van Inwagen, 1983). However, according to Lewis, while this proposition can be rejected, on the grounds that we “ have no choice what the laws of nature are” (Van Inwagen, 1983), and in turn support viewing it from the strong sense. That is to say we cannot break the laws of nature. However, this defense is not suitable when being viewed from the perspective of the weak thesis.

Inwagen’s sixth premise has an opposite effect. In defense of his fifth premise, he says that there is no way he can render false a conjunction that the Spanish being defeated in the past with the proposition that he will never visit Alaska (Van Inwagen, 1983). Inwagen believes that the reason one cannot render that false is that “ any deviation from actual events would be incompatible with any past state of the world taken with the laws of nature” (Van Inwagen, 1983). Lewis counters this argument by saying it is completely irrelevant due to the fact that the claim of one’s inability to render those false is only true in the sense of the weak thesis, but it completely neglects the strong thesis. The problem with these premises, according to Lewis, is that the arguments that Inwagen uses to support these premises are not sounds, seeing as neither of them addresses the Weak and Strong Theses.

Generally the problem with the Consequence Argument, according to Lewis, is that it is not consistent in its premises. As outlined earlier, Inwagen's fifth and sixth premises cannot both be viewed according to either the Strong or Weak Theses alone. This has the effect of weakening Inwagen's argument, since it lessens the severity of the deterministic viewpoint; the inconsistency in views shows that that part of the argument seems unsound. In addition, Lewis's concept of divergence miracles also offers some welcome changes to the determinism that Inwagen's Consequence Argument paints less rigid and unyielding. Such inconsistencies ultimately undermines what would normally be a rather solid argument convincing us of what would seem to be a no space for free will alongside determinism.

Peter Van Inwagen's Consequence Argument is seemingly unsound given that the argument does not hold up completely well when viewed from the Strong or Weak Theses that David Lewis had outlined. Incompatibilists have produced a fairly strong, if disturbing, argument of the potential link between determinism and free will. However, the viewpoints that result from the rejection of compatibilism, such as hard Incompatibilism and libertarian incompatibilism, seem far more alarming. One either outright rejects free will while the other posits that the world is not complete causally determined. Compatibilism on the other hand seems easier to accept.