

A discussion on the defence of compatibilism



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In his attempt to understand the world around him, Sir Isaac Newton established his third law of motion, that every action has an equal and opposite reaction (Ostdiek and Bord, 2008). Scientifically speaking, we know that cause has effect. From where, then, does the cause originate? When referring to human acts, from choosing which shirt to wear in the morning to deciding whether or not to cheat on an exam, such acts can be said to either be determined, or a product of free will.

These two viewpoints, determinism and free will, are seemingly diametrically opposed. Supporters of either faction would have us believe the two are mutually exclusive, and an act cannot therefore be a product of both. Compatibilism is the assertion that, without there being any logical inconsistency, there can exist both determinism and free will. By first examining the propositions of these view points, this paper will refute incompatibilistic views and seek to demonstrate that compatibilism can certainly itself be a valid argument.

Hard determinism would have us believe that there is no such thing as free will, and this paper will respond by demonstrating that our society cannot function the way it does without the existence of at least some degree of free will. The opposing viewpoint claims free will is just that: free and uninfluenced, therefore it cannot exist while determinism does. This paper will propose that free will, in fact, cannot exist at all without determinism. Compatibilism is, therefore, plausible at the very least, and arguably the only way to reconcile the points of view on this spectrum.

Determinism can be summed up as the belief that everything that happens “ can, in principle, be explained, or that everything that is, has a sufficient reason for being and being as it is, and not otherwise. ” (Hoefer, 2010). In a situation, an act occurred because it could not have been otherwise, and these laws of nature being so exceptionless that “ given the full knowledge of the state of the universe a million years ago, plus knowledge of the laws of nature, a physicist could, in principle, predict everything that has happened...down to the movement of the last atom” (Law, 2003).

Newton and his contemporaries were demonstrably driven by this premise, and laboured to discover reasons behind natural phenomena. They succeeded. Science continues in their footsteps to unravel further mysteries of the world around us, occurrences that are frequently thought to be unexplainable often eventuating to be the result of the laws of nature. We know these exist: it is hard to find a rational argument against gravity, and just as hard to find a rational person who will argue its existence. What goes up continues to come down. Actions do indeed have reactions.

It is easy to understand, even justify, the origins of determinism – until such time as they are applied to human behaviour. Physics can predict the action of an apple falling from a tree. Hard determinists believe it’s similarly possible to predict the action of a person, even that it’s possible to predict the decision a person will make when confronted with a choice. The premise is that this decision is a result of everything that has come before it, from what a person ate for breakfast to their genetic composition and their upbringing.

While there is to some extent some basis to this, the view held in its extreme form, hard determinism, has a substantial flaw. For, should the action of a person be merely a result of their circumstance, and should they in fact be unable to act in any other way than they do, how then can anyone therefore be blamed for their actions? Should the absence of free will be true, the effects to society as we know it would undergo a remarkable transformation, as the judiciary system collapses around us.

We would cease to be able to punish criminals for their actions, for, should there be no free will, criminals therefore cannot be held responsible. The legal systems is, in fact, an excellent place to compare these notions. For example, society does at this moment in time hold criminals responsible for their acts, and for the most part, punishment is metered out to those found guilty of crimes. Society also deems that certain individuals cannot be held responsible for their actions, such as those considered mentally unfit, and children under a particular age.

Competent adults who would otherwise be responsible can sometimes through circumstance act, legally speaking, against their will, for example those forced to act under the threat of violence. This person can, again in legal terms, be said to have been unable to act otherwise, as determinist proposes we all do anyway. The action is “ not the result of the agent’s will” (Russel, 2007). The legal system therefore offers an example of compatibilism in action. Those we determine to have acted wrongly under their own free will are punished, those who either cannot be held responsible or could not have acted otherwise are not.

Both determinism and free will are taken to be potentially true, and it is by taking into consideration these factors such as age, mental capacity and influence that a reasonable decision is made as to which applies to a given situation. While it can certainly be argued the legal system, and society in general, has abundant flaws, there is little doubt without it society would struggle to continue to function. Is it not, therefore, evident that in our society compatibilism is valid?

Not so, said Immanuel Kant, calling compatibilism a “wretched subterfuge” (as cited in Flynn, 2012, p 112), arguing that we humans are indeed subject to “moral praise and blame”, because we do possess free will and are at liberty to exercise it. To the majority, the legal system does uphold this view, and holds those who exercise their free will accountable for their actions and subject to punishment when they do wrong. From the positive side of the coin, the existence of free will means that should we make morally right choices, we are therefore able to receive praise for our actions. This is surely a much more pleasant view of the world.

Having, by my beliefs, lived a good life, making morally right decisions and doing my best to do right by others, I surely should be the recipient of praise for these good deeds. It’s a somewhat disheartening thought that these ‘good deeds’ were done by me, at the expense perhaps of more personally gratifying activity, because I could not have done otherwise. Again, society would demonstrate common opinion. Time spent in most educational institutions will give more than enough evidence in support of reward being offered by these good choices. So, then, do we have evidence that free will trumps determinism?

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Compatibilism argues that not only can determinism and free will both be true, but in fact there can be no free will without determinism. Free will implies the ability to make a choice. How then, can a choice be made if there are not at least two options from which to make the choice? If so, then these options are themselves subject to cause. Without this deterministic framework, there can be no free will, but only acts of a random nature. Similarly, as David Hume purported, the outcome of this free decision is, itself, a cause - this act of supposed free will now creating a deterministic state (Russel, 2007).

To expand on this theory, let's review an oft discussed example. If offered a choice of ice cream flavours, which one would a person choose? Free will would propose the person in question is able to choose, without coercion or consequence, any flavour he or she liked. A hard determinist would say there is in reality no choice, and that a series of events and circumstances will determine the 'choice', and knowledge of these events and circumstances will even allow us to predict the choice to be made. Suppose free will wins, and without consequence our person makes their choice. Take it back a step.

Though we are assuming free will to be true in this decision making process, what leads our person to make this choice in the first place? Is the fact they are standing here, deciding on ice cream flavours, not a product of circumstance? They didn't eat enough during their main meal and are still hungry. It's a warm day. They were walking past a gelateria when they happened across a five dollar note in their pocket. Whatever the reason, the fact this person is now here and exercising their free will by deciding to

indulge in frozen confection was not a random occurrence, it was the resultant of prior conditions.

The free will has determinist influence. Going with Hume's theory we can extrapolate that the world is not a series of random events. Sensible reasoning supports this – there is enough in a person's day to given evidence to determinism. A tardy bus produces a load of people late to work. Heavy traffic caused the bus to travel slower and arrive at the stop after it was due. A car crash caused the heavy traffic, and so on. The earlier example of a person forced against their will by the threat of violence to commit an act they would not normally choose to do. Newton is here vilified by even human standards, actions have consequence.

Consequence is a determinate. Determinism provides a framework, and within this framework one can exercise a modicum of free will. Support for both determinism and free will can be argued, however these seemingly polar viewpoints are not only tempered by the existence of the other, they in fact themselves cannot exist in isolation. Free will cannot exist without determinism. Hard determinism cannot exist in society as we know it. The softer version, compatibilism, is therefore not only well defended as the sensible point of view, but as the only possible conclusion.