

ARE WE REALLY FREE?

Freedom. We all want it. We know it's important. We want to make our own choices to chart our own voyage of life unconstrained by circumstance or the will of others. While we value freedom, we don't often think about what it actually is. When we do start to think about what this vital thing called liberty is all about, things get complex or just plain confusing. We may think that freedom has to do with making individual choices. A free country is one where people organize to choose their own form of government, one that brings liberty from tyranny and oppression. Perhaps freedom is about society and government. Or maybe freedom is about economics, the free-market economy and capitalism. Perhaps we are seeking the kind of spiritual freedom from sin and for God and others, which Christian faith enjoins. Whatever freedom is, we all seem to want some. Many in our world value freedom and speak about it, but it's rare to find much careful thinking about what freedom actually is. It is not always clear even how we can make headway on this big question.

Here is another place where philosophy and sound, careful thinking can help us. Given that "freedom" can mean many things, here our focus will be on the freedom of the individual. This could be called freedom of choice or freedom of the will. We make choices all the time, and these choices make a difference in our lives. We all have the experience of thinking about some options and then choosing the

one that seems best to us at the time. So by a "choice" in this discussion we will always mean a weighing of various options, considering several possible outcomes, and then making a decision as to which one to bring about. It can be as trivial as the color of shoes I'm going to wear today or as important as making an enduring commitment to another person. We value the fact that we can make choices and have freedom to carry them out. But are we as free as we think we are?

Let's start by imagining a situation where you're not free. You wake up with strong ropes tying you to chair. You try to get up or move across the room, but it's just not possible. You can choose to try, but you just can't do it. Let's agree to call what you've lost by being tied up **freedom of action**. This is a kind of external freedom, a freedom from constraints that allows you to move and carry out the other choices that you make. Often the constraints are more subtle than big ropes, but the constraint can be just as real. Whatever the constraint may be, from physical force to social manipulation, there's no freedom of the individual without freedom of action. Freedom means, at the very least, freedom to act as we choose.

There is another kind of freedom that philosophers discuss in greater detail. This is **freedom of the will**, also called **libertarian freedom**. This is the internal freedom to choose between various options before us. The idea here is that the will itself sometimes is free and not completely caused to choose one way or another. Of course context, history, and other matters are necessary in order to have options at all. Prior causes and even unconscious urges may well lean us in one direction or the other. But if we have freedom of the will, these causes do not have the final decision. We ourselves weigh the options and then make a final choice to act. To be sure, not every human choice is an exercise in the freedom of the will. Some of our behaviors, like reflex actions, are determined. The point is that we *sometimes* have the power of genuine freedom of choice—a choice that is not completely caused by outside factors or inner thoughts, motives, or compulsions—not that all of our choices are always free in this way.

To explore this notion more fully, let's use the words **prior causes** to name all the different kinds of prior causal factors that help bring

about human behavior: the set of circumstances, histories, characteristics, feelings, thoughts, motives, divine will, fate, and so forth. Prior causes are whatever it is that influences our choice. When an event is completely caused or determined, philosophers say that it has **necessary and sufficient conditions** (see chap. 9) to cause that event. Now a free choice may well have necessary conditions that enter into the very possibility of the choice. In fact, it normally will have necessary conditions, which set up the choice in the first place. If a ball player is deciding upon which of two invitations to accept for joining a new team, a necessary condition of this choice is the invitations themselves. We can admit that the invitation is a cause or necessary condition of the choice, but it would be a mistake to say these provide the *sufficient* conditions. By itself the invitations do not completely cause the player to pick one team over the other.

Another way of talking about libertarian freedom of the will is to propose a **principle of alternative possibilities**. This says that only when we have other choices that we might have made in *exactly the same circumstances* do we enjoy libertarian freedom. The whole history of reality, including your history and all the prior causes in the world, could be exactly the same up to the moment of your choice, and you might still have real options that are causally open. In cases like this, you can choose either alternative path, while the place you stand in and the road behind you remain just the same. Maybe an example of this principle will help us understand.

You have some free time this coming weekend and are thinking about what to do for a little R and R. Still, life being what it is, you have limited time and funds. Thinking over different options, you can't decide between going dancing and going to see your favorite sports team. These two options are clear favorites, but practically speaking you simply cannot do both. So you are forced to decide. Are you really free to decide; is your choice a free choice?

Here we have a classic situation of freedom of the will, the sort of choice we are faced with often in life. Philosophers who press for the model of libertarian freedom insist that in a case like this, cases of genuine freedom, our choices are not causally necessitated. You have genuine, causal options that you and only you make real. Even

given all the prior causes, there is no set of necessary and sufficient causes that make you choose dancing instead of the game. Whether you go dancing or go to the game is up to your own free will, your own power as a free agent to choose and act. To be sure, the prior causes like your impulses, habits of mind, circumstances, preferences, and the like will influence your decision. They may be necessary conditions for your choice. But on the model of libertarian freedom, these constraints and preferences do not rule out all other options. That's the point: there is a degree of freedom in the complexity of making a real decision. In the end, at least sometimes in our lives, it's really up to us which option becomes reality. To some degree, even with all the constraints and limitations of existence, we help write the story of our own lives.

So when there is true freedom for the individual, libertarians argue, we have to find both freedom of action and freedom of the will. To put this another way, we are free when we enjoy **agent causation**. This means that we ourselves, and not just our history and context, decide the outcome of our free decisions. Freedom of action alone is not enough. External freedom is important, true. If you chose to go dancing but someone comes at the last minute and forces you to go to the game, you are not genuinely free. You could try to go dancing, but external circumstances force the other option upon you. The libertarian insists that you are not truly free in a case like this. So a wise libertarian will agree with **determinism** (more on this later) that freedom of action is an important kind of human freedom. I'm not free if I'm tied to a chair, but I'm also not free (argues the libertarian) if prior causes create the necessary and sufficient conditions for my choice. There is not really an alternative before me in this case, although it may feel like it. Such feelings are in fact a kind of illusion of the conscious mind. I could choose differently only if at least one of the prior causes was different, only if I could change the past—which is impossible (sorry Dr. Who!). But our choices can make the future different than it otherwise would have been. So the libertarian will argue that individuals are truly free only when they have agent causation—both freedom of the will and freedom of action.

Perhaps such a view looks like plain common sense to you. Of course we make free choices, and normally we are free to carry them out. Don't be too hasty, though. There is another alternative view, or better a family of views, that we can call determinism. Many philosophers have found the case for determinism to be compelling. Four important trends in Western thought have argued that, despite choices that feel free to us, our actions in fact are guided to a specific end. We will introduce all four before moving on in the debate.

The first view is the idea of fate or destiny. We can make all the choices we want, and run for as long as we can, but our fate will come upon us no matter what. The second type of determinism depends on God, or at least on a certain understanding of God. In this view God determines and decrees all events to happen just as they do, even though we make free choices. A third challenge to libertarian freedom comes from logic. If truths about the future are true now, how can we possibly choose to do otherwise in the future? That would make truth into falsehood, which is absurd. The final view we will consider places the power of determination in the created order. Causal, or scientific, determinism argues that human behavior is wholly caused by a combination of social, psychological, and biological factors (including unconscious ones). These factors work together to ensure that all of our actions have prior causes that provide both the necessary and the sufficient conditions to bring about all human behaviors. On this view, human actions could, if we only knew enough, be predicted in advance—even those that we seem unsure about until the last minute. Let's dive into each of these types of determinism to explore them more fully.

FATE

We begin with fate. While an ancient idea, the notion persists even into our own time. People read their horoscope, talk about having a certain destiny, and the more romantic among us may even believe that coming together with their beloved was a matter of fate. It was written in the stars and imprinted on their souls from their very birth! As Shakespeare once wrote, Romeo and Juliet were "star-crossed lovers." Their meeting, love, and tragic end were predestined in the

heavens. Prophecy and fate also play an important part in *Macbeth*, as you may remember. Try as they might, there is nothing our heroes can really do about it. Their end is predestined. As a matter of fact, this notion of fate, prophecy, and predestined ends plays an important part in the history of drama, especially tragedies. This goes all the way back to ancient Greek plays like the famous *Oedipus Rex*.

It was the ancient Stoics of Greece and Rome who, more than most others, turned this idea of fate or destiny into a key part of their developed philosophy. The Stoics believed that most things that happen in life are beyond our control. Happiness or tragedy, sickness or health, fame or insignificance—all of these will happen according to the ordered structure of history and the cosmos. **Stoicism** was a practical philosophy, with its focus on ethics, **virtue**, and the way to lead a fulfilled and fruitful life. But to do this we must understand what the world is actually like. And Stoic cosmology was one of universal causation. Everything derived either from passive matter or from the ordering principle of the reality (Logos or God). The Greek term “logos” meant both **reason** and speech. The Stoics held that reason and order were the very fire of existence, the ultimate structure and law of the universe. In the Stoic universe, everything happened for a reason, and everything was fully caused. There was an order and logic to the movement of history that the wise person would do well to acknowledge, seek to understand, and also to adapt to. Our life stories are, therefore, already written.

At the heart of Stoic thought is ethics, the practical wisdom of how to live a good life. Stoics argued that we are morally responsible despite the immutable power of fate and causation. Given the universal scope of fate and destiny, we are morally responsible for the things we can directly control—that is, for what we bring about through our choices. True, our choices are indeed caused, like all things that are real, but we are still responsible for them since they are what we chose to do. I have no control over my ultimate fate, but how I respond to it and the choices I make in my freedom of action—these are up to me. Going back to the choice of dancing or sports, even if you are wholly caused to make the choice that you do, you still do so freely. You are not compelled by external circumstances to go to one or the

other. You are thus responsible for your choice, because it was in your control to do one or the other. And you are morally responsible for that free choice, even though libertarian freedom is not possible in a world ruled by reason and order—the Logos.

GOD

Stoic thought was influential in Western philosophy and theology, and it may be that **theological determinism** borrows something from it. This particular theology is called “predestination” by Christians and *qadar* by Muslims. Both have been matters of serious debate for centuries in their respective traditions. Be that as it may, theological determinism is not based on the power of Logos and order in the material universe (like in Stoicism) but on the glory, power, and wisdom of God. On this type of determinism, the eternal God has decreed in his wisdom what every event shall be. Even evil and sinful events come about, ultimately, according to the will of God. Paradoxically, even those who think God brings about every event still thank God for the good things yet beg for God’s mercy for the sinful ones we do ourselves. This is because even for theological determinism, creatures, not the Creator, are responsible for sin. Theological determinists like *Augustine of Hippo* and *John Calvin* (1509–1564) vigorously defended God from being the author of evil. Rather, humans are morally responsible for their free choices. By “free” they mean something like freedom of action, the freedom to do as we choose. The human will, however, still falls under the power, rule, and law of God. The sinner is rightly judged by God for their misdeeds and disobedience, since they did these acts according to their own will. Theological determinists have insisted that two seemingly contradictory ideas are in fact compatible: God decrees our choices and our choices are sometimes free. To explain more, let’s return to our previous example. If you do in fact go dancing, this is a free act. You are free to do as you will; in other words, you have freedom of action. At the same time, you might theoretically have chosen to do otherwise and go to the game. If so, then God would have eternally decreed that you go to the game! After all, the argument goes, human free will is a gift of God, a creaturely ability that in no way limits the power, wisdom,

and rule of God. We might have chosen and acted otherwise only because God might have willed otherwise.

DETERMINISM AND COMPATIBILISM

Before we move on to consider other types of determinism, we had better stop at this point in our exploration and clarify some terms used in contemporary philosophy. After all, explorers have to work on their maps even while they are in the field, before they forget the details of their discoveries. We also need to explore and clarify views on the compatibility of determinism—a word we have been using but have not yet defined—and moral responsibility.

The term “determinism” has a surprising number of specific definitions in philosophy, but the basic idea is pretty straightforward. It means that a set of events, or a system, is causally controlled. In the light of contemporary physics, many determinists have become selective. They hold that some systems are determined while others are not. In this chapter we are specifically interested in *human* determinism. Universal determinism was a popular view a century or more ago, but not so much today. We will not burden the determinist with the view that absolutely everything is determined, but only that humans are. In addition to this clarification, we should be very careful not to make two common mistakes when we think of determinism. One mistake is to think that determinists posit that we don’t make choices. Of course we do—the question before us is about the connection between these choices and various types of prior causes. The other common mistake turns determinism into sheer fate: it doesn’t matter what you do or how you feel, the future is already fixed. In this case it would make no sense to deliberate or persuade others to change their mind, since it’s all “determined.” But this is just a flat error in understanding determinism. Of course human choices matter to the future; they help to bring it about, after all.

So what is determinism, exactly? We can say that a system or organism is determined when its choices or behaviors are brought about by prior causes. These prior causes provide the necessary and sufficient conditions for the choices we make, even when they feel totally free. Not everything makes choices, so we need to add

“behaviors” to the definition as well. The point is that what a determined system, thing, or person does is a necessary outcome of systems of laws, forces, or other prior factors (like the will of God or fate). That’s pretty abstract, so maybe an example would be good here.

Think of our solar system. The movements of the sun, Earth, our moon, and the planets in the sky (as seen from Earth) are determined. The laws, forces, and matter that make them up wholly cause how they behave. There’s a corollary to this that has to do with knowledge. The behavior of a determined system could, in theory at least, be fully predicted by a mind that knew everything about it. While we don’t know enough about asteroids to be able to know if and when another big one will hit the Earth again, a being that did know all about the cosmos in every detail could tell us. On this understanding, determinism can lead to sound predictions about the future, but not always in practice. Still, even in the real world, the behavior of a determined system can often be predicted with a great deal of accuracy. An example of this is the phases of the moon listed in many calendars, or the exact time and place to observe a total eclipse of the sun. These are, in fact, predictions of the behavior of the Earth, moon, and sun as seen from Earth.

Hopefully you have enough now to give you an idea of what the term “determinism” means for philosophers. We still need to clarify the relationship between determinism and morality. The idea of morality has popped up twice now, and in the debates about determinism, ethics has always played a prominent role. Due to the influential work of *William James*, a philosopher we will discuss later in this chapter, there is a common distinction made between two types of determinism. **Soft determinism** names those philosophies that are deterministic but also accept that we have moral responsibility for our behavior even when we are determined. This Stoics would be a good example of this combination of determinism and ethics. **Hard determinism** is a label for those philosophies that are deterministic but are also incompatibilist. This means humans do not, in fact, have moral responsibility for their choices. The hard determinist might allow that society has

the right to use force to protect citizens, but this is just a matter of law and self-defense rather than ethics.

While these views are clear enough, we hope, this way of discussing the issues has fallen out of fashion among philosophers today. Now we distinguish between two views called **compatibilism** and **incompatibilism**. Compatibilism names any philosophy that holds humans morally responsible for their behaviors even when they are determined. Incompatibilism becomes pretty obvious as simply the denial of compatibilism. For incompatibilists, human beings are *not* morally responsible for their behaviors if their choices are determined. With respect to human freedom, the key point for compatibilism is the freedom to act—that is, freedom from constraint or compulsion. If we are free in this way, thinks the compatibilist, we are morally responsible for the choices we act out. It doesn't matter if there are prior causes that determine our motives and the like. When we are acting out of our free choice, we are free from external constraints. This is enough to make us morally responsible for our actions. The incompatibilist will deny this point and insist that what is also required for moral responsibility is freedom of the will—that is, the choice itself must not in fact be preselected by prior causes.

LOGIC

Now that we have cleared the air about determinism, compatibilism, and incompatibilism, we are ready to explore further. Another type of determinism with ancient roots is **logical determinism**. This problem was raised long ago by Aristotle and has been discussed by many philosophers since his time. The problem goes something like this: Imagine a contingent proposition about the future, one that is not already decided by present causes. That proposition needs to follow a rule in logic called the **excluded middle** and so be either true or false. There's no truth value in between true and false, no positions between on and off—at least not in logic. What this rule excludes is a kind of in-between truth value. All propositions just are plain true or false. Are you with me so far?

Now turn back to our contingent proposition about the future. For fun, let's use this example of a future proposition: (V) In your

lifetime you will visit Timbuktu. If you've already visited Timbuktu (lucky!), imagine some other place. By the law of the excluded middle, V is either true or false. If it's true, you have no choice but to visit Timbuktu. If V is false, you couldn't visit Timbuktu even if you really wanted to. So it looks like all future events are logically fixed by the set of all propositions that are now true about future things. Since they are true or false now, their truth is fixed and certain in the future (for the present will be past later on). Once again, it sure looks like we are determined. In fact everything that happens has to happen exactly that way if this argument works.

Aristotle himself gave one of the better responses to this problem. While it's true that, seen from a timeless eternity, all propositions are either true or false, within time, future propositions like V may not yet be simply true or simply false. The truth value of V may simply not yet be determined, although it will be in the future. Let's agree that right now it's possible that you might visit Timbuktu, and equally possible that you might not. In this way of looking at propositions about the future, the proposition V is still either true or false. The law of the excluded middle is not violated. At the same time, it is not yet determined whether V is in fact true or false. Right now it is *one or the other* rather than just one. We might say that the truth value of V has not yet been firmly attached and remains in a state of potential. This is because you have not yet gone to Timbuktu in reality, but it is still possible that you might choose to visit or not in your lifetime. As for logic, it is much easier to create and use a system of logic with only two truth values: true (1) or false (0). But recent logicians have developed a three-valued logic that allows for propositions to have three truth values: true (1), false (0), and indeterminate (1/2). This would seem to fit something like what Aristotle had in mind, but in terms of modern symbolic logic. So the argument for logical determinism is not necessarily logical. It assumes a simple two-value logical system without arguing that it's the only right one. Granted, this is what we learn in basic logic, but that may be only for the sake of simplifying a complex reality. We could also think of basic logic as taking a kind of timeless view of all propositions which once again is something of a simplification.

CAUSAL DETERMINISM

Fate, God, and logic all play their part in the history of debates about determinism. Yet, the most common modern view appeals to none of these things. Instead, contemporary determinists appeal to the lawlike order and structure within the created realm of nature, including human social and psychological factors. For want of a better name, let's call this **causal determinism**. Many theories exist as to just what the causal factors are that make human choices determined. These include economic, social, and biological factors (like genetics or brain function), which are external, as well as internal psychological factors we will call "motives." Here we will simply take a holistic view, allowing all of them to work together to determine all human behavior.

For causal determinism, human motivation is causally necessitated by a complex set of factors. This means that human choice is not simply random and chaotic but always wholly caused by prior causes, including personal history, context, character, and motives. What is more, our motives are themselves caused by prior factors. Human choice is then simply the product of the strongest motive, or maybe several motives leading to same behavior. Determinists willingly acknowledge that these motives may be unconscious and thus unknown to the one who chooses. This allows for a kind of perceptual illusion of the mind making a free choice. But modern determinism appeals to the natural and social sciences to argue that our conscious mind is only a small part of the complex and fascinating story of why we behave the way we do. This approach is also called **scientific determinism** because of its typical appeal to the sciences.

In earlier times causal determinists could appeal to the general sense of a mechanistic world, a cosmology of the universe in which everything was determined. Nature was understood to be a well-oiled machine, and libertarian freedom was an exception to the rule of determinism. Freedom of the will just did not fit with a scientific, mechanistic worldview. This view has been changing for about a century now on the scientific side. Appeal to a universal system of physical determinism has been undermined, first of all, by developments

in contemporary physics. To be fair, however, developments in the natural science of randomness need not fully undermine the case for determinism. Arguments in favor of human determinism can be made that deserve careful consideration. But it does mean that the confidence of the recent past, the central claim that determinism is the only scientific view of things, should be resisted. If a case for determinism is going to be made, it will need to be on different assumptions.

So how might we go about arguing in favor of determinism? How strong of a case can we present? The appeal to science has not gone away in such arguments but rather has shifted ground to specific examples. To start with, those defending human determinism in our time may appeal to the hive mind of some insects, like an ant colony or a beehive, as a kind of analogy. Entomologists (specialists in the study of insects) generally accept that insects are determined animals. They also have excellent data to support the notion of intelligent behavior from the insect colony acting as a group. Yet colonies of bees, ants, and termites can act freely and with intelligence, altering and responding to their environment in ways that maximize the survival of the colony. Since they are determined, the kind of freedom these hive minds exhibit must be the freedom of action rather than libertarian free will. The complex behavior and brain of a human may well be like this. After all, humans are animals too.

For another analogy drawn from science, determinists compare the human mind to a computer. Computer scientists have been working for decades on AI: artificial intelligence. The goal of AI is to create a computer or robot that can think, self-program, react to its environment, and carry out purposeful activities. The human brain may well be like this kind of AI. No one doubts that a robot is a determined system, so why should we object to humans being understood in the same way? Other arguments for causal determinism come from the social sciences. Sociologists, psychologists, and economists have shown that human behavior can be predicted with some degree of accuracy. Whether it's the influence of group pressure or the behavior of an economy when the government prints more money, with a large enough sample, stable statistical laws can predict what a certain

percentage of the people will do. A determinist can point to these facts and argue that the laws are statistical only because we lack knowledge. The circumstances of everyday life and the differences that we all have as individuals make prediction extremely difficult, if not impossible. But these are limits of knowledge, and the evident success of experimental psychology on human subjects supports the idea that human behavior is determined. If humans were not determined systems, such regularities would be impossible, argues the causal determinist.

The second psychological argument looks at motives. The determinist can admit that at the quantum level there may be randomness in the universe, and then respond that human choice is not random. When you make a choice, like the choice between going dancing and going to the game, it's not pure chance that you happen to go to one rather than the other. Instead, you deliberate, ponder the options, and weigh different motives. The strongest motive is the one that you act upon. Next the determinist will insist that our motives are brought about by prior causes. All that we are calling "motives"—including reasons, desires, conscious or unconscious urges and impulses—arise from factors that are, in the end, external. Even our genetic makeup comes to us from our parents, after all. So all motives in human beings are brought about by prior external causes. The strongest motives rise to the top, causing us to make the choices we do. This is the determinist theory of choice. The conclusion is that human choices are fully caused, and human behavior is determined by prior causes even when we deliberate and make a free choice. The only true freedom is thus the freedom to act, and freedom of the will is an illusion of human consciousness.

LIBERTARIAN QUESTIONS

The case for determinism we have presented briefly in these arguments looks pretty compelling. It seems to be a rational, realistic, and scientific understanding of the human animal. But are these arguments as strong as they seem? Libertarians have sought to call these arguments into question, suggesting that they are weaker than they appear at first glance. Let's start a review of these arguments

with the hive-mind analogy. Although we run across this analogy from time to time in debates about determinism, it contains a fatal flaw. It conflates intelligence with freedom of the will. The analogy is not without merit, however. It does show us that freedom of the will is only possible for creatures that have some degree of intelligence. Still, this does not make intelligence the same thing as freedom of the will. It does not show that freedom of the will is essential to being intelligent. On the plus side, this analogy makes it clear that intelligence of some kind is a necessary condition for libertarian freedom, even if not a sufficient one. The analogy does not support the idea that freedom of action plus intelligence is sufficient to count as freedom of the will. In other words, a beehive can act with intelligence and without external constraint, but this does not mean that the beehive acts freely in terms of freedom of the will. Only when we already accept determinism would we think that freedom of action is all there is to animal freedom. So the hive-mind analogy is weaker than it first appears because it depends on a crucial assumption that the libertarian rejects—that freedom of action is all there is to freedom of choice.

The other analogy, between the mind and a computer, is growing in popularity. The human mind may well be like a computer in some ways, but the idea that a biological organ would act like a digitally programmed machine should give us pause. Is not the mind also very different from a computer? Do the causes that bring about our inner motives really seem like programs? If you're already a determinist, the mind may seem a lot more like a computer than if you're not. So the argument from analogy, that the mind is like a computer, doesn't seem very strong unless you already accept a determinist understanding of the workings of the human mind-brain-body complex.

Let's return to the view that human beings always behave according to their strongest inner motivations. One of the first problems we encounter is knowing just what the "strongest" motive is. In a mix of inner processes, it's hard to say which is strongest until the behavior results. We could say that, going backward from the action itself, the motives that prompted the action are the strongest ones. But logically

this is the same thing as saying that we act upon whatever motives we act upon. That doesn't seem to give us much information! This is like the common saying, "It is what it is." The statement is true enough, but weak sauce in terms of telling us anything at all. So the argument that human beings always behave from the strongest motive may not be as strong as it seems. We only know that motives are "strongest" because one in fact acts upon them, after all. So this argument may be circular, and not support the case for determinism at all.

This leads us to the idea of causation. The determinist is right to say that human choice is not the same thing as pure chance. A free decision between two alternatives is not a random event that has no causes at all. The difficulty here is a subtle one of distinguishing between that event being caused completely (causally necessitated) and a cause that shapes or influences an event. In technical terms, this is the difference between causal necessity and causal probability. Modern sciences uses natural laws that lead to probable outcomes rather than determinate ones. Weather (meteorology), ecology, and economics all give us good examples of this kind of probable outcome rather than a determined one. Libertarian choice may be like this. Prior causes and circumstances certainly set up our options. But the acting person may influence the probabilities to bring out the chosen action instead of an alternative one that is just as likely.

This notion of the person acting to freely choose between genuine options is called "agent causation" by philosophers. To take an analogy, a free choice may be like dancing with a lead partner. Without prior causes there can be no dance, for it always takes two to tango. Yet the agent is the lead partner, and decides in the end where the dancing couple will go. The libertarian can agree that at times human behavior is indeed determined. All the libertarian needs is the fact that *sometimes* the human agent decides between genuine options. These are the times when we are morally responsible for our behavior. When we use our free will, the agent, and only the agent, makes sure that one or the other option happens. If your choice between going to the game or going dancing is a free choice in this sense, it is you who makes it happen one way or the other. The universe as a whole is perfectly fine with either choice.

INCOMPATIBILISM

The history of philosophy echoes with the debates, arguments, claims, and counterclaims concerning determinism and free will. Usually caught up in these discussions has been the question of moral responsibility. The main debate here is whether a fully determined choice could still be a morally responsible choice. Note that this question is somewhat independent of the debate about determinism. The philosopher could be unsure about whether humans are determined or not but still be willing to defend compatibilism. The compatibilist believes that people are morally responsible for their actions even if their choices are determined. The only kind of freedom necessary for moral responsibility is freedom of action. After all, if you choose something and then freely bring that thing about, should you not be responsible for your behavior? Let's take a moment to explore this question.

An incompatibilist holds the opposite view, since these positions contradict each other. Incompatibilism teaches that when human choice is in fact determined, then there is no moral responsibility on the agent's part. Determined people may do things that are illegal and suffer the consequences under the law, but this has everything to do with laws rather than morality as such. Put in positive terms, this means people are morally responsible for their choices when they have genuine options that are causally open to them. As noted earlier in the chapter, this is sometimes called the principle of alternative possibilities. In order to have libertarian free choice, we must be considering actions that are open to us even if the history of the world up to that moment was just the same. This means the alternatives are open even with all prior causes and circumstances, all past and present truths about God and creation, being exactly the same. Only in a situation like this will the incompatibilist find that a person was morally responsible for the choice and the behavior that results. Only if you have freedom of the will to decide between going to the game or going dancing are you morally responsible for that choice, thinks the incompatibilist.

Support for the alternative view, compatibilism, comes from the intuition that a person is responsible for their choices unless they are

constrained by external forces. If a person does what they choose, they should be held morally responsible for it *even if* their choice is in fact determined by prior causes. In the end determinism does mean we are constrained by external factors, it's just that most of them will be in the past. What happens in the choice itself, what the agent in fact brings about, is what matters for the compatibilist. We are morally responsible for our choices even if they are, as it were, remotely constrained by prior causes.

The incompatibilist will argue for the other side of this point. For incompatibilism, if human choices are determined, long past external circumstances have constrained our choice. How is this different in the long run from being constrained by external circumstances? The incompatibilist insists that not having freedom of the will is similar to not having freedom of action. The determinist will insist, on the contrary, that freedom of choice is what really matters and freedom of the will is not necessary for moral responsibility. On the other hand, the incompatibilist will insist, genuine freedom with moral responsibility requires not only freedom from external constraints in the present but freedom from the constraints that are now internal but originated from external prior causes.

Perhaps a story will illustrate the intuition about freedom and moral responsibility on the side of incompatibilism. Imagine that when you were young a very powerful dark wizard placed you under the Imperius Curse. The curse prevents you from ever marrying anyone, no matter how much you love them or how obvious it is that such a union would be to everyone's benefit. All your friends, family, and trusted advisers explain that marrying your beloved is what you should do. But you just can't bring yourself to do it because you are under a curse. Are you free to marry or not in this case? Our moral sense rebels at the idea. We are constrained by this curse from the past and so are not really free to either marry or stay unmarried, even when we think we are. The indeterminist will see an analogy between this anti-marriage curse and the position of determinism. According to determinism, our choices are all determined by prior causes that eventually lead outside of us. The fact that we have freedom of action misses the point. This is why the incompatibilist will insist that we are

only truly morally responsible when the principle of alternative possibilities applies. Then we have both freedom of action and freedom of the will, and only then are we morally responsible for our behavior.

Perhaps you find both determinism and libertarianism compelling in their own way. It can be difficult sometimes to weigh the evidence fairly and come to the best conclusion. The intuition behind compatibilism makes sense, but the analogy of being constrained by another unbeknownst to myself also makes a good point for the other side. If my choice is constrained by another in my past, through magic, hypnosis, or some other means, surely my choice in the present is not a free one. Yet is this analogy as good as it looks? Does the incompatibilist insist on something too rarified and metaphysical with the principle of alternative possibilities? If you find this debate difficult to decide, you may find some help from the great American philosopher William James.

WILLIAM JAMES AND THE WILL TO BELIEVE

One of the most famous and influential philosophers in American history, *William James* (1842–1910), was a medical doctor, psychologist, philosopher, and popular lecturer. He was a major figure in pragmatism, the only major school of philosophy originating in the United States (we discuss pragmatism earlier in chapter 3). His interest in religion and pragmatism come together in his famous lecture "The Will to Believe." The title can be misleading. He did not argue that it is rational to believe just anything we choose. In fact later he wished he had called it "The Right to Believe." His argument is that, in the right circumstances, we have the intellectual right to believe a teaching to be true even when there is not enough evidence to prove it. In the sciences we can decide to withhold belief for some scientific theory until enough evidence turns up one way or the other, but life does not always give us this kind of freedom; we may not always have the liberty to wait and see.

James carefully sets out the kind of specific situation and "hypothesis" he has a mind. Most of his examples come from moral and philosophical teachings of the kind that give shape to our everyday life. One of these is a basic trust in other people. The healthy development

of children requires some basic trust, both in the world and in our parents or caretakers. This is so even though experience eventually teaches us that neither everyone nor everything should be trusted. It is interesting that psychologists today have confirmed this view of James to some degree. So what are the criteria that he sets for reasonable belief in these special cases? What is the situation that makes it right to believe in this way, even without full proof?

James' first point is that we are talking here about some hypothesis that cannot be decided on the basis of evidence and argument alone. He next states that the belief has to be a forced option. We must believe one of two or more contrary beliefs, and we have no option in practice but to believe one way or the other and act accordingly. Another important criterion is that this has to be a live hypothesis in which we are forced to believe. "Live" here means that we are willing to live our lives based upon it. So you can see he does not have just any belief in mind. Finally, the decision between the two alternative beliefs must be momentous rather than trivial. In conclusion, he held that a "genuine option" was one that was forced, live, and momentous. Along with a basic trust in others and the world, his examples of genuine options were belief in moral truths, in God, in the freedom of the will, and in life after death.

Much of the essay is devoted to the importance of the quest for truth. Doubt and skeptical attitudes do indeed have a part to play in the quest for truth about momentous matters, but James' point is that sometimes we can discover the truth of a genuine option only by accepting it in practice. In other words, in some special circumstances, I can discover the truth of a hypothesis only when I accept it as true for now and act upon it. Like many philosophers, James did not believe that we can—just by willing it—really believe something to be true. Such a "belief" will be a sham and is irrational. But we can choose to live life according to a belief we are investigating, accepting it for now until we have evidence to prove otherwise. And such acceptance, such belief-for-now, is reasonable, especially when further evidence can only be found by a life based upon that belief. This includes ongoing critical reflection on our experience and learning from it. It seems he is pointing here to the importance of wisdom,

of learning from a rational reflection on experience and taking that as philosophical evidence.

Let's say that you've been dating someone for a while, and you ask yourself, "Do we really love each other?" If you believe the answer is no, you may act in ways that are more cold and distant. Your behavior may then push the other person away, so that in the end all the evidence points to your not loving each other. On the other hand, if you believe that you do love each other, the opposite outcome may well come to pass. By acting on the belief that you love each other, you help to bring about the truth of that belief. Acting on the belief that you love each other can bring about a true and deep love. Finally, there is a third option, too: you could just suspend belief one way or the other. And yet by deciding not to believe one way or the other, you in fact may fall into the "not in love" side of the option *in practice*. Of course, it is silly to just choose to love someone, but this is not the point. Instead, it may be wise to adopt the idea, for now, that you love each other. Only in this way might you come to explore the truth of this belief more fully through experience.

This is a fascinating argument that has been debated and discussed since James published it. James may well be right about a very small set of beliefs, genuine options that one must act upon now in order to further investigate their truths. So let's apply this to a topic of this chapter: determinism versus free will. Is this option a genuine one in James' sense? It is certainly momentous as we seek to understand the meaning of our lives. It is a live option because it affects the way we live, our approach to important decisions. It's an either/or option because we cannot rationally believe both philosophies. Finally, it is a forced option, for if we just wait and see, we could be missing out in the quest for truth through wisdom and experience.

The evidence for determinism comes mostly from impersonal behavioral studies and neuroscience. In light of the evidence for determinism, James' argument seems to have little significance. If we choose to live our lives accepting determinism, it makes less sense to invest the energy, time, and thought needed to gain wisdom about making a free and difficult choice. Things are different with the hypothesis that you and I are free moral agents. By exercising the

freedom to believe in the freedom of the will, we open up a space for careful reflection on our important future decisions. As we enter into critical examination of our own experience in making such choices, we can see if there may be philosophical evidence in favor of libertarian freedom.

Of course this does not solve the question of truth. There is a matter of fact about whether human beings have libertarian free will or are determined in their choices. But the quest for truth in philosophy is based on evidence that goes beyond what the sciences study. Philosophy appeals to common sense, to the wisdom of experience, rational reflection, and intuition in matters that the sciences do not study. So the wise thing to do in such a situation may well be to embrace genuine freedom as a working philosophy of life. In this way we can make further progress in the quest for truth. Such an approach to difficult big questions like this one does not bring an end to our exploring or close the door on the question, but it does open up new pathways for discovery.