



Compatibilism

1. Introduction

The view that there is really is no conflict between determinism and free will—that free will and determinism are compatible—is known as *compatibilism*; and it is the first view about free will we shall consider. Compatibilism has become an increasingly popular doctrine in modern philosophy because it provides what seems to be a neat, simple solution to the free will problem. If there really is no conflict between free will and determinism, as compatibilists say, then the age-old problem of free will is resolved in one fell swoop.

Compatibilism was held by some ancient philosophers, like the Stoics, and perhaps Aristotle too, according to some scholars. But it has become especially popular since the seventeenth century. Influential philosophers of the modern era, such as Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, David Hume, and John Stuart Mill, were compatibilists. They saw compatibilism as a way of reconciling ordinary experience of being free with scientific views about the universe and human beings. Compatibilism remains popular among philosophers and scientists today for similar reasons. If compatibilists are right, we can have both freedom and determinism, and need not worry that future science will somehow undermine our ordinary conviction that we are free and responsible agents.

This is a comforting thought. But is compatibilism believable? In my experience, most persons resist the idea that free will and determinism might be compatible when they first encounter it. The idea that determinism might be compatible with freedom and responsibility looks at first like a “quagmire of evasion,” as William James called it, or a “wretched subterfuge” as Kant called the compatibilism of Hobbes and Hume. If

compatibilism is to be taken seriously by ordinary persons, they have to be talked out of this natural belief in the incompatibility of free will and determinism by means of philosophical arguments; and supplying such arguments is what compatibilists try to do.

2. Freedom as the Absence of Constraints

The first step in the compatibilists' argument is to ask us to reflect on what we ordinarily mean by saying actions or choices are “free.” What does it mean to say I am free to take the bus this morning? It does not mean I will actually take the bus, for I may choose not to take it. But I am free to take the bus, if I have the *power or ability* to take it, should I want or decide to do so. Freedom then is, first of all, a power or ability to do something, a power I may or may not choose to exercise.

Second, this power or ability, which is my freedom, entails that there are no *constraints* or *impediments* preventing me from doing what I want to do. I would not be free to take the bus if various things prevented me: such as being in jail or if some one had tied me up (physical restraint); or if someone were holding me at gunpoint, commanding me not to move (coercion); or if I were paralyzed (lack of ability); or if buses were not running today (lack of opportunity); or if fear of crowded buses compelled me to avoid them (compulsion), and so on.

Putting these thoughts together, compatibilists argue that to be free, as we ordinarily understand it, is (1) to have the power or ability to do what we want or desire to do, which in turn entails (2) an absence of constraints or impediments (such as physical restraints, coercion, and compulsion) preventing us from doing what we want. Let us call a view that defines freedom in terms of 1 and 2 “classical compatibilism.” Most traditional compatibilists, such as Hobbes, Hume, and Mill, were classical compatibilists in this sense. Hobbes stated the view succinctly, saying a man is free when he finds “no stop in doing what he has the will, desire or inclination to do.”¹ And Hobbes noted that if this is what freedom means, then freedom is compatible with determinism. For, as he put it, there may be no constraints or impediments preventing persons from doing what they “will or desire to do,” even if it should turn out that what they will or desire was determined by their past.

But doesn't freedom also require alternative paths into the future, and hence the freedom to do otherwise? How do classical compatibilists account for the freedom to do otherwise? They begin by defining the freedom to do otherwise in terms of the same conditions 1 and 2. You are free to do otherwise than take the bus if (1) you have the power or ability to

avoid taking it, which entails (2) that there are also no constraints preventing you from *not* taking the bus, if you wanted to (no one is holding a gun on you, for example, forcing you to get on the bus).

Of course, an absence of constraints preventing you from doing otherwise does not mean you will actually do otherwise. But, for classical compatibilists, the freedom to do otherwise does mean that you *would* have done otherwise (nothing would have stopped you) if you had wanted or desired to do otherwise. And they argue that if the freedom to do otherwise has this *conditional* or *hypothetical* meaning (you *would* . . . , if you wanted to), then the freedom to do otherwise would also be compatible with determinism. For it may be that you *would* have done otherwise if you had wanted to, even though you did not in fact want to do otherwise, and even if what you wanted to do was determined.

3. Freedom of Will

Is this classical compatibilist account of freedom plausible? It does seem to capture the *surface freedoms* discussed in chapter 1. Surface freedoms, you may recall, were those everyday freedoms to buy what we want, walk where we please, take buses when we want to, without anything preventing us. These everyday freedoms do seem to amount to (1) the power or ability to do what we want (and the power to have done otherwise, if we had wanted to) and (2) doing so without any constraints or impediments getting in our way. But if the classical compatibilist analysis of freedom does capture these surface freedoms of *action* discussed in chapter 1, does it also capture the "deeper" freedom of the *will*?

Classical compatibilists respond to this question in two ways. First, they say:

It all depends on what you mean by "freedom of will." In one sense, freedom of will has a perfectly ordinary meaning. For most of us, it means *freedom of choice or decision*. But freedom of choice or decision can be analyzed in the same way that we compatibilists analyze freedom of action generally. You are free to *choose* to lend money to a friend, for example, if (1) you have the power or ability to *choose* to lend the money in the sense that (2) no constraints would prevent you from making the choice, if you wanted to, and, in addition, nothing would have prevented you from *choosing otherwise* (choosing not to lend the money), if you had wanted to choose otherwise.

In short, compatibilists say that free choices or decisions can be treated like free actions of other kinds. For, choices or decisions can be subject to

constraints just like other kinds of actions; and when choices or decisions are subject to constraints, they are also not free. For example, you might have been brainwashed or hypnotized, so that you could not have chosen otherwise (chosen not to lend money), even if you wanted to. Conditions such as brainwashing and hypnosis are two further constraints that can take away freedom; and they sometimes take away even the freedom to *choose* what we would otherwise have wanted to choose. When brainwashing or hypnosis do this they take away our freedom of *will*.

Here is another example of constraint on choices or decisions. If a man holds a gun to your head and says "Your money or your life," he is giving you a choice of sorts. You can choose to hand over your money or take a chance on losing your life. But in another sense, the man has not given you any *real* choice at all, if you believe he is serious. For the prospect of losing your life is so horrible this is no choice at all. Your choice to hand over the money is therefore not really free. It is *coerced*; and coercion is a constraint on your freedom of choice or freedom of will. The thief's actions have kept you from making the choice you really wanted to make, which was to keep both money *and* life.

So the first response of compatibilists regarding "freedom of will" is to say that if freedom of will means what we usually mean by it—*unconstrained freedom of choice or decision*—then freedom of will can also be given a compatibilist analysis. You have freedom of will when nothing would have prevented you from choosing or from choosing otherwise if you had wanted to; and if this is what freedom of will means, they argue, then freedom of will (as well as freedom of action) is consistent with determinism.

4. If the Past Had Been Different

But compatibilists are aware that many persons are not going to be satisfied with this account of free will as mere unconstrained choice or decision. So they have a second response.

If you are still not satisfied with the above account of freedom of will, then it is no doubt because you are thinking of free will in some further sense than simply the ability to choose or decide *as* you will without constraint. You must be thinking of freedom of will in something like the 'deeper' sense of free will of chapter 1—as a kind of *ultimate* control over what you will or want in the first place. A control incompatible with your will's being determined by any events in the past over which you did not have control. Now we compatibilists obviously can't

capture *that* deeper sense of freedom of will, no matter what we do, because it is incompatible with determinism. But, as compatibilists, we believe that any so-called deeper freedom of the will—or any kind of free will that requires indeterminism—is incoherent anyway. No one *could* have a freedom of will of such a deeper kind.

Why do compatibilists believe that any kind of deeper freedom of will that requires indeterminism must be incoherent? Well, if determinism means (as it does): *same past, same future*, then, the denial of determinism—indeterminism—must mean: *same past, different possible futures*. (Think of the garden of forking paths of chapter 1.) But if that is what indeterminism means—same past, different possible futures—indeterminism has some odd consequences regarding free choices. Consider Molly again deliberating about whether to join the law firm in Dallas or the one in Austin. After much thought, let us say, Molly decided that the Dallas firm was a better one for her career plans and she chose it. Now if her choice was undetermined, she might have chosen differently (she might have chosen the Austin firm instead), *given the same past*—since that is what indeterminism requires: same past, different possible futures. But note what this requirement means in Molly's case: exactly the same prior deliberation, the same thought processes, the same beliefs, desires, and other motives (not a sliver of difference!) that led to Molly favoring and choosing the Dallas firm *might have issued in her choosing the Austin firm instead*.

That scenario makes no sense, say compatibilists. It would be senseless and irrational for Molly to choose the Austin firm, given exactly the same motives and prior process of reasoning that *in fact* led her to believe the Dallas firm was the better one for her career. To say that Molly "could have chosen otherwise" in these circumstances must mean something else, say compatibilists—something like the following: *if* Molly had had *different* beliefs or desires, or had reasoned differently, or *if* other thoughts had entered her mind before she chose the Dallas firm, *then* she might have come to favor the Austin firm instead and chosen it. But this more sensible interpretation of "could have done otherwise," say compatibilists, means only that Molly would have done otherwise, if things had been different—*if the past had been different in some way*. And such a claim, they insist, does not conflict with determinism. In fact, this interpretation of "could have chosen otherwise" perfectly fits the classical compatibilists' *conditional* or *hypothetical* analysis—"Molly could have chosen otherwise" means "She *would* have chosen otherwise, *if* she had wanted to (if her mind-set had been different in some way). And such a hypothetical interpretation of "could have chosen otherwise" is, as we have seen, compatible with determinism.

One's first thought when encountering this argument is that there must be some way around the conclusion that if Molly's choice is undetermined, she must have been able to choose otherwise "given exactly the same past." But in fact there is no easy way around this conclusion. For indeterminism, which is the denial of determinism, *does* mean "different possible futures, given the same past." In the diagram of forking paths of chapter 1, the single line going back into the past is just that: a single line indicating "same past", while the multiple lines going into the future represent "different possible futures." By contrast, determinism means only one line into the future. If Molly really is free to choose different options at any time during her deliberation, and her choice is not determined, then she must be able to choose *either* path (the Dallas firm or the Austin firm), given the *same* past up to the moment when she chooses.

You can't cheat here by suggesting that if the past had been a *tiny bit* different, then Molly might have chosen differently (chosen the Austin firm). *Determinists* and *compatibilists* can say this: for they insist that Molly might have sensibly and rationally chosen otherwise only if the past had been different in some way (however small the difference). But persons who believe free choices cannot be determined must say that Molly may have chosen different possible futures, given the same past at the time she did choose. And this does seem to make choosing otherwise in the same circumstances arbitrary and irrational.

To sum up: compatibilists have a twofold response to the objection that their view accounts only for freedom of action but not for freedom of will. On the one hand, they say, if "freedom of will" means what we ordinarily mean by *free choices* or *decisions* (those that are uncoerced and unconstrained), then freedom of will can also be given a compatibilist analysis and can thus be seen to be compatible with determinism. On the other hand, if "freedom of will" has a stronger meaning—if it refers to some kind of "deeper" freedom of the will that is not compatible with determinism—then that deeper freedom of will is incoherent and is not something we can have anyway.

5. Constraint, Control, Fatalism, and Mechanism

So far, the compatibilist argument has been that people believe determinism conflicts with free will because they have confused ideas about *freedom*. But compatibilist arguments about freedom of action and will are only half of the compatibilists' case. They also argue that people mistakenly believe determinism and free will conflict because they also have confused ideas about *determinism*. Determinism, compatibilists insist, is not

the frightful thing we think it is. People believe determinism is a threat to freedom because they commonly confuse determinism with a host of other things that are a threat to freedom. But determinism does not imply these other threatening things, according to compatibilists. For example, they say:

1. "Don't confuse *determinism* with *constraint*, *coercion*, or *compulsion*." Freedom is the opposite of constraint, coercion, and compulsion. Compatibilists insist, but it is not the opposite of determinism. Constraint, coercion, and compulsion act *against* our wills, preventing us from doing or choosing what we want. By contrast, *determinism* does *not* necessarily act against our wills; nor does it always prevent us from doing what we want. Causal determinism, to be sure, *does* mean that all events follow from earlier events in accordance with invariable laws of nature. But, say compatibilists, it is a mistake to think that laws of nature *constrain* us. According to A. J. Ayer (a noted twentieth-century compatibilist), many people think freedom is inconsistent with determinism because they have a mistaken image of natural causes or laws of nature "overmastering" us, forcing us against our wills. But, in fact, the existence of laws of nature indicates only that certain events follow others according to regular patterns. To be governed by laws of nature is not to be in chains.

2. "Don't confuse *causation* with *constraint*." Compatibilists also insist that it is constraints, not mere *causes* of any kind, that undermine freedom. Constraints *are* causes, but they are causes of special kinds: impediments or hindrances to our doing what we want, such as being tied up or paralyzed. Not all causes are impediments to freedom in this sense. In fact, some causes, such as muscular strength or inner strength of will, actually *enable* us to do what we want. It is therefore a mistake to think that actions are unfree simply because they are caused. Whether actions are free or not depends on what kinds of causes they have: some causes enhance our freedom, while other causes (i.e., constraints) hinder our freedom.

It is a further mistake, say compatibilists, to think that, when we act or choose freely in accordance with our wills, our actions are *entirely uncaused*. To the contrary, our free actions are caused by our characters and motives, and this state of affairs is a good thing. For if actions were not caused by our characters and motives, we could not be held responsible for the actions. They would not be *our* actions. This point was made in a well-known passage by perhaps the most influential classical compatibilist, David Hume:

Where [actions] proceed not from some *cause* in the character and disposition of the person who performed them, they can neither redound to his honour, if good; nor infamy, if evil. . . . The person is not answerable for them;

and as they proceeded from nothing in him that is durable and constant . . . it is impossible he can, upon their account, become the object of punishment or vengeance.²

Classical compatibilists follow Hume in saying that responsible actions cannot be uncaused; such actions must have the right kinds of causes—causes that come from inside our selves and express our characters and motives, rather than causes imposed upon us against our wills. It is a mistake to think that free will and determinism are not compatible because free actions should be uncaused. Free actions are *unconstrained*, not *uncaused*.

3. "Don't confuse *determinism* with *control* by other agents." Compatibilists can concede (and often do concede) that it *does* count against our freedom if we are controlled or manipulated by other *persons*. That is why sci-fi utopias, like *Brave New World* and *Walden Two*, where people are controlled by behavior engineers or neurochemists, seem to undermine human freedom. But compatibilists insist that determinism by itself does not necessarily imply that any other persons or agents are controlling our behavior or manipulating us. *determinism* $\neq$ *control by Gods, etc.*

Nature by itself "does not control us," says compatibilist Daniel Dennett, since nature is not an agent.³ What is objectionable about control by other agents, Dennett argues—whether they be behavioral engineers or con men—is that other persons are using us as means to their ends, lordling it over us and making us conform to their wishes. We resent this kind of interference. But merely being determined does not imply that any other *agents* are interfering with us or using us in this way. So compatibilists can reject Brave New World and Walden Two scenarios, says Dennett, without giving up their belief that determinism is consistent with freedom and responsibility.

4. "Don't confuse *determinism* with *fatalism*." This is one of the most common confusions in free will debates. Fatalism is the view that whatever is going to happen, is going to happen, *no matter what we do*. Determinism alone does not imply such a consequence. What we decide and what we do would make a difference in how things turn out—often an enormous difference—even if determinism should be true. This important point was made by another influential classical compatibilist, John Stuart Mill:

A fatalist believes . . . not only that whatever is about to happen will be the infallible result of causes that precede it [which is what determinists believe], but moreover that there is no use in struggling against it; that it will happen however we may strive to prevent it. . . . [Thus, fatalists believe that a man's]

able to 'ism
doesn't act
against our
wills.

Our persons cause the events . . .
this is good b/c makes us accountable for our actions.
free actions *cause* lives
inside ours!
19

character is formed *for* him, and not *by* him; therefore his wishing it was formed differently is of no use; he has no power to alter it. This is a grand error. He has, to a certain extent, a power to alter his character. It's not being, in the ultimate resort, formed for him, is not inconsistent with its being, in part, formed by him, as one of the immediate agents. His character is formed by his circumstances . . . but his own desire to mold it in a particular way is one of those circumstances, and by no means the least influential.

we have an influence on how things turn out

Determinism, Mill is saying, does not imply that we have no influence on how things turn out, including the molding of our characters. We obviously do have such an influence, and determinism alone does not rule it out. Believing in fatalism, by contrast, can have fatal consequences. A sick man may excuse himself for not seeing a doctor saying: "If your time is up, it doesn't matter what you do about it." Or a soldier may use a familiar line for not taking precautions: "There's a bullet out there with your name on it. When it comes, you will not be able to avoid it, no matter what you do." Mill is saying that such fatalist claims do not follow merely from determinism. To think they do is a "grand error."

The claims of the sick man and the soldier are in fact examples of what the ancient philosophers called the "lazy sophism" ("sophism" meaning a fallacy of reasoning). The proper answers to the sick man and the soldier would be, "*Whether* your time is now up may depend in great part on whether you see a doctor; and *whether* any bullet out there right now has your name on it may depend on what precautions you take. So instead of sitting around doing nothing, see a doctor and take precautions." This is the response that compatibilists, such as Mill, would give to the "lazy sophism." Believing that determinism is compatible with freedom, they would say, should not make you a fatalist. Indeed this belief should convince you that your life is to some extent in your own hands, since how you deliberate can still make a difference in your future, even if determinism should turn out to be true.

Sometimes our deliberations do not matter to our fate, but not always. For example, Dennett describes a despairing man who jumps off a bridge intending to commit suicide. Halfway down, the man deliberates again, and thinks of life from a different perspective, deciding that perhaps suicide isn't a good idea after all. Now *this* man's deliberation no longer does matter to his fate. But ordinarily when we deliberate we are not in such desperate straits. Indeed, conditions like this man's are rare. Most of the time, say compatibilists, our deliberations do affect our future, even if determinism should be true.

5. "Don't confuse *determinism* with *mechanism*." Another common confusion, according to compatibilists, is to think that if determinism were true, we would all be machines, running mechanically, like watches,

robots, or computers. Or, alternatively, we would be like amoebae or insects and other lower creatures responding automatically, and with a fixed set of responses, to the stimuli of our environment. But, compatibilists insist, none of these consequences follows from determinism either.

Suppose it should turn out that the world is determined. There would still be an enormous difference between human beings, on the one hand, and amoebae and insects, or machines and robots, on the other. Unlike machines (even complex machines like computers) or robots, we humans have an inner conscious life of moods and feelings, and we react to the world accordingly. And unlike amoebae, insects, and other such creatures, we do not just react to the environment instinctually, and in automatic ways. We reason and deliberate, question our motives, reflect on our values, make plans about the future, reform our characters, and make promises to others that we then feel obligated to keep.

Determinism does not rule out any of these capacities, say compatibilists, and they are the capacities that make us free and responsible beings, capable of moral action—as machines and insects are not. Determinism does not necessarily imply mechanical, inflexible, or automatic behavior either. Determinism is consistent with a whole spectrum of complexity and flexibility of behavior in living things, from the simplest amoeba all the way to human beings. The complexity and degrees of freedom of creatures in the world, from amoebae to humans, might differ incredibly, yet all these properties might be determined.

We don't insects.

6. Assessing Classical Compatibilism

In summary, classical compatibilists say that our natural belief in the incompatibility of free will and determinism rests on confusions of two kinds—confusions about the nature of *freedom* and confusions about the nature of *determinism*. Once these confusions have been cleared up, they insist, we should see there is no necessary conflict between freedom and determinism. To assess the classical compatibilists' position, one must therefore ask whether their account of freedom really does capture what we mean by freedom of will and action; and one must ask whether the belief that determinism conflicts with free will does rest on confusions about determinism. Both these questions will be considered in the next chapter.

It is worth noting in conclusion, however, that classical compatibilists do seem to be right about certain things, whatever the final judgment may be about their view. They would appear to be right, for example, in saying determinism *in and of itself* does not imply *constraint, control by other agents, fatalism, or mechanism*. These would indeed rule out free will, but determinism does not necessarily imply them, and it would be a mistake to

believe determinism to be incompatible with free will *merely* because determinism implied them. Many people probably have confused determinism with constraint or control or fatalism or mechanism, and so thought determinism to be incompatible with free will for the wrong reasons.

But if these are bad reasons for thinking free will and determinism are incompatible, there may nonetheless be some good reasons. We may still wonder whether determinism *itself* might not conflict with free will—not because it implies constraint, control, and so on, but *just because it is determinism*. For it seems that if determinism is true, there is only one possible future (hence no garden of many forking paths into the future); and this fact alone seems to rule out the possibility of free will and responsibility for actions.

To this objection, compatibilists issue a challenge of their own. “If there is an argument to show that determinism *must* be incompatible with free will, *just because* it is determinism, and *not* because it implies constraint or control by others or fatalism or mechanism, then provide us with such a direct argument for the incompatibility of free will and determinism! In short, “prove it.” In the next chapter, we will consider how incompatibilists try to meet this challenge.

An Addendum on the Term Soft Determinism

In many writings on free will, compatibilists are often referred to as *soft determinists*. Soft determinists are compatibilists who also believe that determinism is true. Classical compatibilists, such as Hobbes, Hume, and Mill, were also soft determinists, since they believed that determinism was true in addition to believing that freedom and determinism were compatible.

Suggested Reading

A lively and readable defense of compatibilism is Daniel Dennett's *Elbow Room: The Varieties of Free Will Worth Wanting* (MIT, 1984). Defenses of classical compatibilism appear in essays by J.J.C. Smart (in Gary Watson, ed., *Free Will* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2nd ed., 2003]) and Kai Nielsen (in Robert Kane, ed., *Free Will*). Other selections from classical compatibilists are contained in Derk Pereboom, ed., *Free Will* (Hackett, 1997); and classical compatibilist positions are discussed in Ilham Dihan's historical introduction, *Free Will* (Routledge, 1999).



Incompatibilism

1. The Consequence Argument

The popularity of compatibilism among modern philosophers and scientists means that *incompatibilists*—those who hold the traditional belief that free will and determinism are in conflict—must provide arguments to support their position. Incompatibilists cannot merely rely on their intuitions about forking paths into the future to make their case, as in chapter 1. They must back up their intuitions with arguments that show why free will and determinism must be incompatible. New arguments for incompatibilism have indeed been proposed in modern philosophy to meet this challenge. The most widely discussed of these new arguments for the incompatibility of free will and determinism is the subject of this chapter.

The argument is called the Consequence Argument, and it is stated informally as follows by one of its proponents, Peter van Inwagen:

If determinism is true, then our acts are the consequences of the laws of nature and events in the remote past. But it is not up to us what went on before we were born; and neither is it up to us what the laws of nature are. Therefore the consequences of these things (including our own acts) are not up to us.¹

To say it is not “up to us” what “went on before we were born,” or “what the laws of nature are,” is to say that there is nothing we can now do to change the past or alter the laws of nature (such things are beyond our control). This gives us two premises of the Consequence Argument.

- (1) There is nothing we can now do to change the past.
- (2) There is nothing we can now do to change the laws of nature.