

Free Will - Compatibilism

Compatibilism is the view that, despite the fact that all events are determined and could not occur any other way, we are nevertheless “free.” Compatibilists believe this because of the way that they define freedom. Let’s look at the two most prominent early modern Compatibilists:

1. Hobbes: Hobbes, though a determinist, believed that we have free will. This is because, by “free” he simply means “the absence of opposition.” In other words, as long as the actions that we form a desire to perform are not hindered or prevented in any way by some obvious, external force, we are said to be free.

A man is not free to walk around, for instance, if he is chained to a wall. A body of water is not free to flow forward if it is walled up or dammed.

So, if you form a desire to perform some action, and nothing prevents you from doing it, you are free—EVEN THOUGH it is still true that the formation of that desire couldn’t be helped; i.e., the desire was determined to form within you, because all desires are the result of some cause, and that cause is the result of some prior cause, etc., such that we are never in control of the chain of events. Hobbes states that a man is free if “he finds no stop in doing what he has the will, desire, or inclination to do.” (*Leviathan*, 2.21)

This is, apparently, the best we can do. There is no sort of freedom other than this. If we DID have the power to truly determine our own actions, this would be a violation of God’s omnipotence. Furthermore, Hobbes points out that, if we could see the chain of causes that affect our actions (e.g., our upbringing, inclinations, and all prior events, etc.) it would be obvious that all of our actions are necessary. Nevertheless, if we define freedom in the way that Hobbes does, necessity and freedom are compatible.

2. Hume: David Hume’s view was much like that of Hobbes. If we mean by a free action the sort of action that is totally independent of prior motives, inclinations, and circumstances, then the idea of freedom is absurd. How—for what reason—would such actions even come about? Such a will that performed actions without any reasons or causes would be the same thing as random chance. But, surely that is not free will.

Freedom, then, is to be contrasted with constraint—not necessity. That is, freedom is the ability to do what one chooses to do—not the ability to be free of the laws of nature. Hume clarifies, “that is, if we choose to remain at rest, we may; if we choose to move, we also may.” (*Inquiry*, 8.1)

This is a very common sort of definition of freedom for the Compatibilist. They say that we are free so long as, if we want or choose or desire to do X, then we do X. (Nevermind that those wants or desires are themselves determined).

Hume notes that we FEEL free because we do not recognize the connection between desires, motives, actions, etc. We do recognize that the material world acts according to certain necessitating laws, but we think that our minds are somehow an exception because we do not view them as material, but we are wrong. We think that there is no necessitation whenever the causes are too remote, minute, or complex to discover. But, the human mind, he says, is "a mighty complicated machine."

We do recognize that our actions are determined by our will, but we never think that our WILLS are determined by something else. But, why? People are often very predictable. We often know what someone we are close to will do. Why, then, do we not see the connection between inclinations and dispositions and our will? He writes,

a spectator can commonly infer our actions from our motives and character and even where he cannot, he concludes in general that he might, were he perfectly acquainted with every circumstance of our situation and temper and the most secret springs of our complexion and disposition. Now this is the very essence of necessity ... (*Inquiry*, 8.1n)

One of the biggest criticisms of Determinism is that, if we are not free, then it is unfair to praise or blame people for their actions (since it only seems fair to blame someone for something if they were in CONTROL of what they were doing). But, Hume argues that the fact that we praise and blame people demands that Compatibilism is true! For, if our actions DIDN'T proceed from our inclinations and desires, etc., it wouldn't make sense to blame or praise people. It would only make sense to praise or blame actions. He writes,

For as actions are objects of our moral sentiment only so far as they are indications of the internal character, passions, and affections, it is impossible that they can give rise either to praise or blame where they do not proceed from these principles. ... [If actions do not proceed from these, then] the person is not answerable for them, as they proceed from nothing in him that is durable and constant ... (*Inquiry*, 8.2)

[Is this right? It seems that, if Determinism is true, then all of our actions are determined by prior causes, and it is impossible that we do anything other than what we in fact do. Is this freedom? Should we be held responsible for our actions in this case? We judge a drug addict or kleptomaniac to have lost their freedom. Is it different when the compelling forces are hidden?]