

The Mystery of Libertarianism

Conclusion So Far: Here are the two main questions we have asked so far:

- (1) Is Determinism True? Are our actions determined by our genes, our upbringing, the laws of physics and so on? All of these things seem to INCLINE us toward a certain direction, sure, but do we have the ability to OVERCOME these inclinations, or choose to IGNORE them? If so, how?
- (2) Is PAP True? Does free will require the ability to do otherwise? Imagine that you chose to attend class today. Alternative possibilities seems to require that, if we rewind time to the moment that you made the choice to come to class, if you DID have the ability to do otherwise, then sometimes when we “press play,” you chose not to attend class today. Is that what free will is? Or, rather, can we have free will even if we do NOT have the ability to do otherwise?
- (3) Do We Have Free Will? Are we in control of our actions in a way that makes us RESPONSIBLE for what we do?

Peter van Inwagen answers (1) No, (2) Yes, and (3) Yes. Thus, he defends the “standard” view of free will called ‘Libertarianism’.

Libertarianism: This view proposes that we DO have free will, and having free will requires that we DO have the ability to do otherwise (i.e., PAP is true, Determinism is false, and humans have free will).

For quick reference, here is a chart representing the three views we have discussed:

View	Is determinism true?	Is PAP true?	Do we have free will?
Hard Determinism	yes	yes	no
Compatibilism	yes	no	yes
Libertarianism	no	yes	yes

1. The Case for Incompatibilism: Peter van Inwagen begins by noting that, intuitively, we think of time as a “garden of forking paths.” That is, the future holds many forks in the road, where each branch represents a REAL path that we have the ability to choose to take. For instance, when it came time for you to decide what college to go to, or even apply to, it is as if you stood at an intersection—a fork in the road—and you REALLY DID GENUINELY possess the ability to choose any of those paths. To most of us, intuitively, this is what free will IS.

So, **intuitively, PAP is true** (that is, true freedom requires the ability to do otherwise).

But PVI offers a better reason than mere intuition. He also provides an argument for the conclusion that Compatibilists must reject “The Principle”, and that this is absurd.

He begins by noting that some facts are “**untouchable facts**.” That is, they are facts that you have absolutely no control over; facts that you could not change, and could not have changed, no matter what knowledge you had, or how lucky you were. For instance, the shape of the Earth, whether or not the dinosaurs lived, and whether or not $2+2=4$ are all **untouchable facts**—totally outside of your control. He then proposes the following principle, which he simply calls ‘The Principle’:

The Principle: If P is an **untouchable fact**, and if P entails Q, then Q is an **untouchable fact** as well.

But, now, think about what that means if determinism is true. Determinists, remember, believe that ALL events are pre-determined by the laws that govern the universe. In that case, facts about what the universe was like millions, or billions of years ago already entailed what the present would be like. That is, if scientists knew ALL of the facts about the universe 10 billion years ago, and ALL of the laws of nature, they could perfectly calculate what would happen from that moment on.

So, then, it seems clear that—according to Determinism—facts about what happened in the remote past entail facts about what happens in the present. But, facts about the remote past are **untouchable facts**! Therefore, facts about the present are **untouchable** as well. So, ANY fact about my present actions are “**untouchable**” ones. For instance:

1. The Principle: If P is an **untouchable fact**, and P entails Q, then Q is an **untouchable fact**.
2. You are reading some lecture notes right now.
3. Facts about the distant past pre-determined that you would be reading some lecture notes right now (according to determinism).
4. Facts about the distant past are **untouchable facts**.
5. Therefore, the fact that you are reading some lecture notes right now is also an **untouchable fact**.

So, then, if The Principle is true, then anyone who accepts determinism must also accept the conclusion that ALL of your actions are “**untouchable**”. The compatibilist, however, proposes that—nevertheless—we DO have free will. To van Inwagen, this assertion is an utter mystery. How could we be free, or responsible for our actions, if our actions are completely **untouchable** such that we have absolutely no control over them whatsoever?

In short, “compatibilists make their doctrine look like robust common sense by sweeping a mystery under the carpet.”

2. The Case for Libertarian Freedom: Van Inwagen then motivates the conclusion that we DO have libertarian free will.

Brief tangent: Some have tried to do this by arguing for 'agent causation'.

Agent Causation: This view states that we do have free will, because some of our actions are caused by *us*, and these actions are performed *without* being necessitated by all of the previous events. On this view, the causal chain ends in the "agent" (i.e., the free person). For instance, consider the following causal chain: A stone moves because a staff is pushing it, and the staff moves because a hand is pushing it, and the hand moves because some muscles are contracting, and the muscles contract because of some neural events, and the neural events occur because the agent caused it. The end.

(Note that determinists would deny that the causal chain ends there. They would say, and the agent wills it because of a desire, and the desire formed because of some previous experience, and the previous experience ... and so on, all the way back to the Big Bang.)

But, it is hard to see how causation could "end" at the agent. Would the agent's free choice occur for some REASON? If so, then it DOES seem as if it is determined, and that the choice does NOT stop at the agent. If it does NOT occur for any reason, then the event seems UNdetermined, and therefore not under the agent's control, but rather completely random, or arbitrary!

Van Inwagen prefers the following motivation:

(1) Reason #1: The Belief in Free Will is Irresistible: Think about some important decision you've had to make. Is it REALLY possible to bring yourself to believe that you had NO choice in the matter? The choice was NOT up to you?

Van Inwagen says that he finds the belief that many of his choices ARE "up to him" absolutely "irresistible". In short, our belief in our own freedom is unshakeable.

(2) Reason #2: The Belief in Alternate Possibilities is a Pre-Requisite to Deliberation: Imagine that you are in a room with one door, and that you hear a "click". You don't know whether or not the click was the sound of someone locking the door. In short, you have NO IDEA whether or not the door is locked.

In this situation, van Inwagen claims that it is IMPOSSIBLE to try to decide whether to leave the room or stay inside of it.

Sure, you can try to decide whether you'd LIKE to leave or stay; you can try to decide whether some CONDITIONAL such as "IF I get up and the door is unlocked, then I'll leave" is true; but, you try to make the plain-and-simple deliberation over whether to stay or leave.

From this, he concludes that, "I cannot try to decide whether to do A or B unless I believe that doing A and doing B are both possible for me." In short, deliberation (i.e., trying to decide what to do) would be IMPOSSIBLE if you did not believe that more than one option were actually OPEN to you.

(3) Reason #3: Libertarian Freedom is the "Smallest" Mystery: While it may still remain the case that libertarian freedom is somewhat of a "mystery", consider the other two alternatives. They too require the belief in something mysterious.

- (a) **The Mystery of Compatibilism:** Compatibilists must either reject The Principle, or else claim that, despite the fact that The Principle is true (such that ALL facts are "untouchable" facts), nevertheless, SOMEHOW we are responsible for our actions.
- (b) **The Mystery of Hard Determinism:** Hard determinists must embrace the conclusion that, despite the irresistibility of our belief that we have free will, and despite the fact that our belief that various options are "open" to us is a PRE-REQUISITE to deliberation—nevertheless, there is no such thing as free will after all. No human being has ever, or will ever, be responsible for their actions.

Furthermore, this seems to entail that no human being has ever, or will ever, be MORALLY responsible for their actions. When we speak of moral obligations, we speak of what people "ought" to do. But, "ought" implies "can". (for instance, it would make no sense to say that Frank "ought not" have murdered Sally if Frank's action was not up to Frank at all, but was rather completely outside of his control. Thus, if it is impossible for anyone to do otherwise, then it makes no sense at all to speak of moral obligations. That is, it makes no sense to blame anyone for anything they do, no matter how horrific; and it makes no sense to praise them for anything they do, no matter how selfless, amazing, or wonderful.

For van Inwagen, swallowing either of THESE mysteries is far more implausible than swallowing the (admittedly somewhat mysterious) belief that humans somehow have alternative possibilities available to them, and somehow have the ability to control their choices, and choose between the various roads in the "garden of forking paths."