

Knowledge and Reality B: Lecture Two

1. Free Will

We think that we have free will. I *chose* to be here today. I didn't *choose* to stay at home and play on my Xbox, chortling at the idea of a lecture full of students waiting for me to arrive. And I generally think I could have chosen to stay at home. It was within my power. So I *freely* chose to come here. I make choices, I have free will.

You *chose* to be here. You *chose* to come to University, and sit this module. You *chose* what to eat last night (or *chose* to let someone else give you a selection – which is the same thing). You might *choose* what religion to follow; whether to learn how to drive; what films to see at the cinema; whether to kick a small baby to death or smile at it in an attempt to make it giggle. As the baby example makes clear, that we have free will has practical implications. If I *couldn't* choose whether to beat small babies to death or not, perhaps it isn't my fault if I do.

2. Moral Culpability

Consider the following examples:

- I kill someone in cold blood to take their wallet.
- I kill someone during a furious argument after I snap.
- I kill someone because I get so drunk one night I think they're an alien come to kill me.
- I kill someone at night because I suffer from severe sleep conditions that make me 'sleepwalk' and kill them.
- I am driven temporarily insane, and kill someone.
- An evil scientist kidnaps me, inserts probes into my brain and uses me like a puppet to kill people.

In some of those cases, we intuitively think I am morally culpable. In others, we intuitively think I'm *not* morally culpable. I'm not culpable in the latter three cases because I didn't seem to have a choice. Whereas I did in the first three cases. So we generally think that we have free will. And that we have free will has a direct effect on how we evaluate actions when it comes to morality. So if we didn't have free will that'd have a *clear* practical effect.

When we think our action has been forced by some factors external to our control, we generally think we have less of a choice. That condition seems to be beyond control, so we think there was no choice. Again, something is happening to me to *determine* my actions – so we think I don't have a choice. Further examples: genetic factors (genetic predispositions); psychological factors (insanity); personal historical factors (mitigating factors for child abuse etc.)

But what if *everything* was determined. Not just by external factors such as psychological or pathological ailments, but that the *laws of physics themselves* determined my actions. If *every* action was forced to happen in virtue of the universe itself, am I responsible for *anything*?

3. Determinism

In comes the theory of Determinism.

Crude definition

Determinism says that all of the physical events that take place in the world are *determined* by the earlier physical events. That is, the events that take place *had* to take place given the previous states (and the laws of nature).

Imagine a simple universe with simple laws like those Newton supposes. Imagine it has two objects in it moving towards one another at a certain velocity. Let's say that the laws of nature dictate that when they hit they lose a bit of velocity and bounce back. If the world is *determined* then this happens *each and every time*. That is, whenever you start off with the same initial conditions you *always* end up with those bouncing colliding and bouncing off of one another at a certain velocity. If you 'rewound' back time and let it play forwards again it'd *always* play forwards in exactly the same way.

4. Possible Worlds

I said the definition of determinism was crude. It'd be nice to have a better one, and we can get that, if we start talking about 'possible worlds'. In philosophy you'll hear a lot about 'possible worlds' so you'd better get used to talking about them. Fortunately, it's dead easy.

When we say 'world' we don't mean 'planet'. We mean something more like 'universe' – that is, 'world' means 'everything that actually exists'.

Imagine that for every way that the world could be (every way that what exists could be) God made a universe that was that way. So:

- He makes this universe.
- He makes a universe where I *don't* come to the lecture.
- He makes a universe where Gordon Brown is secretly a Korean spy trying to take over the country.
- He makes a universe where humans never lived.
- He makes a universe where the speed of light is slower than it is.
- He makes a universe where the events of Harry Potter are played out.
- Obviously He *can't* make a universe where, say, there are round squares.

Each universe is a *possible world*. One of them is special – *ours*! That is the *actual world*.

Philosophers talk in terms of possible worlds all the time (we'll see why in a bit). For reasons to be laid out in a bit, they translate *modal* talk into *possible worlds* talk. So modal terms are those like: Necessarily; contingently; possibly; essentially; would; could. Philosophers often try and do away with that and turn it into possible worlds talk.

'Possibly P' becomes 'At some possible world, P'.

- 'It's possible that Elvis is alive' becomes 'At some possible world, Elvis is alive'
- 'Possibly, I could fly to the moon' becomes 'At some possible world, I do fly to the moon'

'Necessarily P' becomes 'At every possible world, P'.

- 'Necessarily, $2+2=5$ ' becomes 'At every possible world, $2+2=4$ '

'It's impossible that P' becomes 'At no possible world, P'

- 'It's impossible for there to be round squares' becomes 'At no possible world are there any round squares'

Possible worlds are just a useful piece of terminology. Very few people believe *there really are* such worlds out there, disconnected from ours, where the events of Harry Potter play out. They're used to make life easier, and talking about possibility easier.

5. Defining Determinism

Here's just one example: defining determinism. Say that a world is a *physically possible world* iff that world has the same laws of nature as our world. We also need to talk about the *initial conditions* of a universe. That is, what the *very beginning* of the universe was like (in our case, the Big Bang).

Determinism can then be defined as:

Determinism is true iff every physically possible world, which has the same initial conditions as the actual world, is identical in every way to the actual world.

So, if the world is determined, every world with the same laws and initial conditions has to turn out the same. Which is what we wanted. Note that this is *very different* from saying that given determinism *things couldn't have been different*. Sure they could've been different. I *could* have failed to come to this lecture. It's just that for that to happen the laws of nature or the Big Bang would've had to have been different. And those things *could* be different.

So we've now defined determinism. The problem with it is that if the universe *had* to turn out the way that it did (given the laws of nature and the Big Bang), isn't that a good reason to think I *don't* have control over what I do? That the laws of physics *determine* my actions? That if I slaughtered babies left, right and centre it wouldn't be *my* fault. No more than if I did it because of night terrors or the evil scientist controlling me?

Notice that the definition of determinism is NOT that we don't have free will. I curse anyone who sticks that in their essay.