

Knowledge and Reality B: Lecture Two

1. Libertarianism

Libertarians think that the activity of certain things is governed entirely by the laws of physics, but that we are not so governed! So even though the laws of nature determine that my particles go left we *do* have the power to go right. We have the power to 'break' the laws of nature, and steer the particles to the right even though the laws of physics say otherwise. So determinism *is false* because people can change what goes on in the world.

Why libertarianism (allegedly) doesn't help

The worry is that libertarians seem to deny some fundamental beliefs about science. The things you do are caused by neural impulses from your brain; your brain sends those neural impulses because the neurons charge and fire in a certain (incredibly complex!) way; but we understand the laws that govern how, why and when an individual neuron fires. The suggestion is that if I was super-intelligent, and knew all about the individual atoms in your brain, I could figure out what you were going to do. How is it that libertarians think I can avoid the laws of nature? There's a worry, then, that Libertarianism is just outlandish. Although Libertarians do have some inventive things to say at this point, either that science in fact *allows* for this kind of activity. Or that we are actually non-physical souls beaming signals to our bodies that moves things around.

2. Indeterminism

The other argument for determinism being false is that science actually *demonstrates* that it's false, but for reasons quite apart from Libertarianism. Maybe the laws don't *determine* what will happen even though you admit that everything in the world is governed by what the tiny little things do. That is, the laws of nature are *probabilistic*. Think back to the deterministic balls of last lecture. Given determinism we had a law of nature that says that when two objects (of a certain consistency) strike one another at 5 m/s they bounce off at 4 m/s. A probabilistic law would say that there was a *chance* of them doing that: say 80%. There would be a chance of them doing something different, say 19.9% chance of bouncing off at a different angle. And, say, a 0.1% chance of them just coming to a complete halt. Now we can see that given indeterminism is false. *Some* worlds turn out one way, other worlds turn out another.

It's likely the laws of nature are *actually* like this. The laws of quantum physics appear to be fundamentally probabilistic. For instance, if you have a uranium atom it might undergo radioactive decay. There's no telling *when* it will. You can't say it *will* at any given point – you can't predict it. But you can say that, in a period of about 70 years, there's a 50-50 chance of it decaying. Its decay is governed by a *probabilistic* law.

Why indeterminism (allegedly) doesn't help

And if indeterminism is true (as it probably is) we've no longer got a problem? One of the premises is now false, and we have free will? Don't we...? Alas, indeterminism probably doesn't help. Whilst it's now possible for things to turn out differently the reason *why* they turned out differently just seems to be *random chance*. So now the actions I do may not be determined to happen, but it doesn't seem I have free will just because they *randomly* happen either.

For instance, go back to that scientist that played with my noggin and made me do things. But imagine that he now hooks me up to a roulette wheel. When the roulette wheel lands on some numbers I murder people. On other numbers I squawk like a parrot. Still other numbers I break out into a one-man re-enactment of all of the plays of George Bernard Shaw. So what if it's random? I'm still not free! I'm still being *forced* to do things. Similarly, even if indeterminism is true, it still seems I'm being forced to do things given the *random activity* of the atoms. So indeterminism probably doesn't help (allegedly).

3. Hard Determinism

So should we say we don't have free will? That's just *crazy*. I don't choose to do things? If I spit in your face, would you be unjustified in blaming me as it's not my fault? What if I make sure all your essays get a mark of 5? If I'm not choosing to do these things, why get upset *at me*? As free will is so tied into moral culpability we'd better *hope* this isn't the right option! So whilst we *could* say this, we'd better not. Perhaps if we spent *years* searching for an answer, you'd accept it. But, let's be honest, you've only examined the topic of free will for a ten days or so – it's premature to start recommending massive changes to our ethical structures. So, whilst there's more to be said about this 'hard determinist' stance, let's assume it's false.

4. Compatibilism

The previous options were incompatibilist. They worked on the premise that determinism and free will were incompatible. But many philosophers are *compatibilists*. They *deny* that determinism and free will come into conflict.

Free will and determinism aren't *obviously* inconsistent. So the incompatibilists endorse the belief that:

If determinism were true then we would not have free will.

Whereas the compatibilists deny it. But what *arguments* are there for that belief? It's not good enough just to say it's *true* – we need a *reason*. We gestured at some reasons at the end of last lecture, but can we spell them out more fully?

Try this argument.

(1) If you couldn't have done any differently than you did, then you didn't have any choice in the matter.

(2) If determinism is true, then you couldn't have done anything differently.

So, for everything that you do, you don't have a choice in it (i.e. don't have free will) if determinism is true.

Premise (2)

Some compatibilists think this is false. You *could* have done things differently. *Fatalists* say that if you do *p* then necessarily you had to do *p*. But determinists don't. They say that you only do *p* given the initial conditions and the laws of nature. That's just not the same thing at all. We *could* have done differently. It'd just have meant that the initial conditions of the Big Bang would've needed to be slightly differently.

But is that a problem? It'd mean the past being different. Imagine you were late here because you got drunk last night and woke up late. I say 'You could've made it sooner.' Imagine you then say 'But I couldn't. For that to happen, I'd have to have not gone out and got drunk. But I did! So I surely had to be late.' What rot! *Of course* I realise that for things to be different the past events (namely your getting drunk; your developing a per chance for alcohol in the first place!) had to be different. So who cares if the big bang had to be *slightly* different? So what if the past had to be different for things to be different now? We *already* acknowledge that the past has to be different for things to be different – we just don't *usually* think this includes *all of history* being different all the way back to the Big Bang.

Premise (1)

Even this has problems. What if aliens decided to make a play, and (without telling us) use us as unwitting actors. Hovering in their space ships, armed with a script, they are ready to zap us with mind rays that force us to do their bidding and make us follow the script. But imagine that, *by chance*, everything we do is inline with what the script says. So the aliens never do use the mind rays. It's true that *if* I tried to do something different then they'd zap me and I would – unfreely – follow the script. It's true that there's no way I could do differently! But, surely, if they *don't* use the mind ray machine I *am* choosing my actions freely. *Even though I couldn't have done otherwise!*