

"We must believe in Free Will—we have no choice."  
-Isaac Bashevis Singer

## Free Will

New Topic: Humans seem to be special in that they *face choices*. They can *intervene* in the world to change it and be *responsible* for how they choose. But is this right? Do we have *free will*?

Why is this important? Consider some ways in which someone can be said to lack freedom:

- (1) By physical impediments to action
  - You're put in chains.
  - You're physically obstructed by a wall.
- (2) By sanctions or coercion
  - You know you will be put in jail if you try to vote.
  - The mugger tells you "your money or your life".
- (3) By manipulation
  - You're duped into thinking some action will help a friend, when really it harms them.
  - You're drugged or brainwashed into having foreign thoughts and desires.
- (4) By influences on your character and dispositions that are beyond your control
  - You're raised to have certain outlandish false beliefs.
  - You were subject to a horrific childhood, which made it harder for you to know the difference between right and wrong.

In general being unfree in all of these ways can *mitigate responsibility*. The less free you are, the less responsibility you have:

- It often seems unreasonable to *punish* you for things you did unfreely.
- It also seems reasonable to some extent to suspend *reactive attitudes* like:  
blame, resentment, reward, guilt, shame, pride

Okay so why worry that we *always* aren't free? We aren't bound, coerced, and so on. So what's the problem? The worry we're going to focus on is that we might never be free because the *future is always determined by the past*.

There are plenty of examples of one event being determined by a prior event (e.g. the shattering of a glass pane by a prior firing of a gun in the right circumstances). But why think *every* event is determined by the past like that?

## Determinism

**Natural Law:** a law of nature which describes how certain things *always* and *everywhere* behave.  
(for example, the Law of Gravity)

A law is **deterministic** if given some state, the law dictates that a *single* subsequent state *must* result.  
(for example, the Law of Gravity, Newton's laws of motion.)

A law is **indeterministic** if given some state, there are many subsequent states compatible with the law.

**Determinism:** All the laws of the universe are deterministic.

Determinism implies that given an initial state of the universe (say, the big bang) there is only *one possible way the universe could turn out over all time*. Determinism implies the future is completely determined by the remote past!

Question: But don't we know some laws are indeterministic laws?

(A) Not quite. Interpretations of, say, quantum mechanics remain controversial to *some* extent.

(B) Even if quantum mechanics introduces indeterminacy into the world, it's unclear that our actions being indeterminate rather than determinate is easier to square with the existence of free will. (We'll revisit this topic very soon).

So we can learn a lot about free will by asking if it is compatible with determinism. It will help us get clearer on two key questions at the same time:

- (1) What *is* free will?
- (2) Do we *have* it?

## The Classic Positions

