



As you journey along the path you meet an old man.

He tells you that modern neuroscience has proved that all our actions and decisions are merely the machinations of a predetermined universe and that our concept of '*free will*' is naught but a comforting illusion.

If you agree with his hypothesis, **turn to page 72**

If you disagree, **turn to page 72**

## Moral Responsibility

# A theological puzzle

Evodius says, “I am troubled exceedingly by the question how God can have foreknowledge of all future events, and yet how there can be no necessity for us to sin.” Why is this troubling? Because, Evodius says, “since God had foreknowledge that he would sin, it must have happened of necessity, because God foreknew it would happen. How, then, is the will free, when the necessity seems so inescapable?”

Agustine fleshes out Evodius’ worry as follows. If God has foreknowledge that you will, say, be here today, necessarily, you will be here today. If you must be here today, you are not here as a result of choice, but because of some “fixed and inevitable necessity”. Either, God has no foreknowledge (blasphemy!) or we act of necessity and not freely.

Let me flesh it out further:

If someone knew millions of years before today that you’d come to lecture, nothing that happened during the past few million years could have led to a world in which you missed lecture. God knew millions of years before today that you’d come to lecture. (To assume otherwise is blasphemy!) Thus, nothing that happened during the past few million years could have led to a world in which you missed lecture. But, if you are here as a matter of necessity, you are not here freely.

# Augustine's response

## **(i) Foreknowledge doesn't destroy freedom**

We know this because we know that God foreknows God's own free actions.

## **(ii) To foreknow is not to cause**

God's beliefs about the future need not be the cause of your actions, so it doesn't follow from the fact that God believes you'll be here that God caused you to be here.

## **(iii) A model of foreknowledge of free action**

God can foreknow whether you have the opportunity to decide between various options; God can foreknow what you would decide when presented with various options; God can thus predict how you will use your will; Given that you use your will to pursue an option rather than another, you are free. Thus, there's no incompatibility.

Surely, if you do what you want most because that's what you want most and because you were in circumstances where you had the power to do something because that's what you wanted, you can't then complain that you weren't free to decide. (And, surely, if you act wrongly, you can't get off the hook by saying that you did it because you wanted to and nothing stopped you!)

# Compatibilisms

Evodius' worry was that two hypotheses were incompatible:

H1: God has foreknowledge of all of our actions.

H2: We often act freely.

Augustine thought that H1 and H2 were compatible and so defended what we might call “theological compatibilism”. (We might say that theological incompatibilism is the view that H1 and H2 are incompatible.)

In saying that two hypotheses are compatible, we don't have to take a stand as to whether these hypotheses are true. Consider four further hypotheses:

Hv: There are vampires.

Ha: There are aliens.

Hg: There is a god.

He: There is evil.

I'm a vampire-alien compatibilist. I don't believe in either, but I don't see any reason why the discovery of one would rule out the possibility of the other. Mackie was a god-evil incompatibilist. He thought that there couldn't be room enough in the world for both. In saying that, he might believe in neither evils nor gods.

In our discussion of freedom, our focus will be on compatibility-questions (i.e., questions about whether freedom is compatible with foreknowledge, determinism, vampires, etc.).

# From foreknowledge to determinism

Augustine is right that to know that  $x$  will occur is not to cause  $x$  to occur, but is his defense of theological compatibilism a bit too quick? Let's stipulate that the world is indeterministic. A complete description of the world at  $t$  along with a full specification of the laws of nature does not entail what will happen at  $t+1$ . (If you let things roll forward to  $t+1$ , roll things back, and let things roll forward again, you could get a different outcome if the universe is not deterministic.) In such a world, would foreknowledge be possible?

1. It seems whatever basis you had for your beliefs at  $t$  about subsequent events would be based on knowledge of events at  $t$  and earlier times. [All knowledge of the future is grounded in knowledge of the present and the past]
2. Descriptions of such events wouldn't entail that descriptions of later events would be correct. [Because of indeterminism]
3. Thus, your reasons for forming beliefs about the future would be based on fallible grounds (i.e., it would be possible for someone to believe for just the same reasons and be mistaken).

Can you have knowledge of the future based on fallible grounds? That is, can you believe that your friend will be here next lecture on the basis of what you know today when you have to concede that it's possible given everything you know that your friend won't be here next week? Can we really say, "Yes, I know she'll be here, but she might not make it"?

If God's foreknowledge requires infallible grounds, then it seems that God couldn't have foreknowledge in an indeterministic universe. Consider three hypotheses:

H1: God has foreknowledge of all of our actions.

H2: We often act freely.

H3: We act in a deterministic universe.

The argument just sketched suggests that H1 could be true only if H3 is. You might think that H3 and H2 are incompatible. Either, Augustine should explain how H1 could be true even if H3 is false or explain how H2 and H3 are compatible.

# Freedom and Determinism

van Inwagen defends incompatibilism, the view that freedom and determinism are incompatible:

(P1) If determinism is true, then a complete description of the laws of nature (L) and a description of the past (Pa) entails that you would be here today (T).

(P2) If you had stayed home today, (T) would have been false.

(P3) If (P2) is true and you could have stayed home today, you could have rendered (T) false.

(P4) If you could have rendered (T) false and (T) is a logical consequence of (L) and (Pa), you could have rendered the conjunction of (L) and (Pa) false.

(P5) You could not have rendered the conjunction of (L) and (Pa) false.

(C) If determinism is true, you could not have stayed home today.

[NB: The first premise is supposed to be true in virtue of the definition of 'determinism'.]

# In other words...

(P1) You have no control over past events.

(P2) In a deterministic world, the laws determine a unique outcome given a set of initial conditions. Since you cannot change the laws of nature, you have no control over how the past gives rise to the present or the future.

(P3) If you have neither control over the past or how the past gives rise to the future, you have no control over the future.

(P4) You the power to act freely only if you have some control over future events.

(C) Because you have no control over which future events come to pass in a deterministic world, you do not have the power to act freely in such a world.

*Hard determinists* accept the argument and also think that determinism is true. They deny that we can act freely.

*Libertarians* agree with the hard determinists that freedom and determinism are incompatible, but they think we can act freely.

The *compatibilists* don't think that freedom and determinism are incompatible, so they would have to reject some step in the argument above.



# Freedom without Determinism?

Van Inwagen thinks that in a deterministic world, you don't have the power to do otherwise and that you cannot act freely unless you have this power.

What if the world were not deterministic? Let's say:

$L$  = a full description of the laws;

$P_a$  = a full description of the past; and

$P_f$  = a full description of the world in the near future.

If determinism is false, the conjunction of  $L$  and  $P_a$  does not entail  $P_f$ . We might have two worlds,  $w_1$  and  $w_2$ , where  $L$  and  $P_a$  are true in both but  $P_f$  is true in only one. At least some event will occur in  $w_1$  that doesn't occur in  $w_2$ .

Suppose this event takes place in Mars a million years from now. Surely that wouldn't set us free. It seems the undetermined events must happen more 'locally' if we're to exercise our freedom. But where and when? If they occur after we decide to do something, they threaten to undermine our control over our surroundings. If the undetermined events occur in the chain of events involved in perceiving our surroundings, that threatens our ability to perceive our surroundings. If they occur in deliberation, they undermine our ability to exercise deliberative control over our own actions. Unless we can say how undetermined events could 'liberate' us, there's a fear that exercising our freedom to take control over our lives is impossible in deterministic and indeterministic universes.



## Why does freedom matter?

The thought that we're not free is disturbing, but not because we want there to be events that are undetermined by any prior causes. Presumably, freedom matters for this reason at least: we want to think that we are responsible for our actions.

If that's right, perhaps we can set aside talk of freedom and free will and focus on moral responsibility. If van Inwagen is right, the reason that determinism threatens to undermine responsibility is that we cannot truly be responsible for our actions unless we had the power to do otherwise. (He thinks his consequence argument shows that we don't have this power in a deterministic world.)

Frankfurt isn't convinced that moral responsibility requires the possibility of doing otherwise.

# Alternative Possibilities

The arguments for incompatibilism discussed earlier assumed something like the principle of alternative possibilities:

*PAP: A person is morally responsible for what she has done only if she could have done otherwise.*

Frankfurt thinks he can show that the principle is false by describing situations in which (a) the conditions are such as to prevent the agent from doing otherwise and (b) these conditions do not impel the person to act or do what she does.

# Coercion

Frankfurt writes:

*It is generally agreed that a person who has been coerced to do something did not do it freely and is not morally responsible for having done it. Now the doctrine that coercion and moral responsibility are mutually exclusive may appear to be no more than a somewhat particularized version of the principle of alternate possibilities. It is natural enough to say of a person who has been coerced to do something that he could not have done otherwise. And it may easily seem that being coerced deprives a person of freedom and of moral responsibility simply because it is a special case of being unable to do otherwise. The principle of alternate possibilities may in this way derive some credibility from its association with the very plausible proposition that moral responsibility is excluded by coercion.*

He thinks that this is a mistake:

*This question may be approached by considering situations of the following kind. Jones decides for reasons of his own to do something, then someone threatens him with a very harsh penalty (so harsh that any reasonable person would submit to the threat) unless he does precisely that, and Jones does it. Will we hold Jones morally responsible for what he has done?*

## Coercion (cont.)

If Jones acted on the basis of some prior decision, we might agree that he couldn't have done otherwise (e.g., it might be that he would have done things differently if he had been threatened not to carry out his intended course of action) while still insisting that he's responsible for what he did.

The upshot seems to be that you can be morally responsible for what you do even when you could not have done things differently.

# Jones and Black

Suppose someone-Black, let us say-wants Jones to perform a certain action. Black is prepared to go to considerable lengths to get his way, but he prefers to avoid showing his hand unnecessarily. So he waits until Jones is about to make up his mind what to do, and he does nothing unless it is clear to him (Black is an excellent judge of such things) that Jones is going to decide to do something other than what he wants him to do. If it does become clear that Jones is going to decide to do something else, Black takes effective steps to ensure that Jones decides to do, and that he does do, what he wants him to do. Whatever Jones's initial preferences and inclinations, then, Black will have his way.

Now suppose that Black never has to show his hand because Jones, for reasons of his own, decides to perform and does perform the very action Black wants him to perform. In that case, it seems clear, Jones will bear precisely the same moral responsibility for what he does as he would have borne if Black had not been ready to take steps to ensure that he do it. It would be quite unreasonable to excuse Jones for his action, or to withhold the praise to which it would normally entitle him, on the basis of the fact that he could not have done otherwise. This fact played no role at all in leading him to act as he did.

# The threat of determinism

If PvI is right, determinism threatens freedom because it threatens to deprive us of the power to do otherwise. If Frankfurt is right, you can be morally responsible even if you don't have the power to do otherwise. As such, perhaps determinism is not itself a threat to responsibility. Even if we take your forks, we might not take your freedom.