

## Libertarianism or Incompatibilism

Learning Objectives:

To understand: -

- The link between free will and moral responsibility
  - The ethical theories of hard determinism, libertarianism and soft determinism or compatibilism
  - The influences of genetics, psychology and social environment on our moral choices
  - Religious ideas of free will and predestination
  - The strengths and weaknesses of determinism and free will
  - The link between free will, determinism and moral responsibility
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- The view of those who reject determinism and say we have complete moral responsibility is called libertarianism or Incompatibilism, as they believe determinism is false and we have free will.
  - Libertarians say that the ideas of cause and effect cannot be applied to human behaviour and choices; we do have freedom to act and we are morally responsible for our actions.
  - Libertarians do not believe that we are compelled to act by outside forces but that moral actions are the result of the values and character of an individual.
  - This view means that we have free choice and can choose different ways to act, whereas determinism means that we do the only thing we can do and so never really have a choice about anything.
  - The most common argument for Libertarianism is that it appeals to our intuitions – we see ourselves as free agents, able to make moral choices, not as puppets on a string or robots. Unlike puppets or robots we have a mind, and it seems reasonable to conclude that having a mind is necessary in order to have free will.
  - Peter van Inwagen uses the analogy of choosing which branch to go down when travelling along a road, whereas determinism is like travelling along a road with no branches – we cannot choose a different way, or reach a different destination.
  - Libertarians also argue that unlike, Darrow's argument that we do not 'make ourselves', we do 'make our actions' and we could have chosen to do something else. This, they argue, is clear because when asked to defend our actions we blame ourselves, or wonder if we did the right thing – we evaluate our action by asking ourselves whether, at that time, we could have acted differently.
  - We would only blame, criticise or regret, if we believed we had alternative ways of acting.
  - This is a common –sense view of ourselves as choosers and agents with the future open to us in the way the past is not. We know that unforeseen events can alter things in the future – e.g. a student may always achieve A grades in

practice examination papers, but this does not mean that on the day of the final examination they will do so. Their experience may predict that they will do so, but on the day of the examination they may have a bad cold, their dog may have died or they may have misread a question – from our observation of the world around us we know that things can always go wrong.

- Another answer to the claim of determinism is that it is not the case that all events have a cause: some events are uncaused, and human decisions and choices are an example of such uncaused events.
- Modern physics is often used to defend this view and especially Werner Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, which says that we cannot know both the location and the momentum of subatomic particles at the same time. He therefore thought it was better to refer to the statistical probabilities rather than formulate general laws. Using this principle as a basis it seems that determinism is false.
- Many scientists now agree that ever since the idea of cause does not apply to subatomic particles, not every event in the universe is caused – some are, in principle, unpredictable.
- Honderich rejects the claims of quantum physics, saying that they only apply at the subatomic level; it is certainly not true to think that quantum physics refutes Newtonian mechanics – it is more accurate to say that it qualifies Newton's view and puts his theories in a broader context.
- Using this argument to support Libertarianism misses the point. The principle of causality is actually presupposed when considering freedom, as the opposite of causality is randomness. A universe in which there are random events is not one in which we have free will. Behaviour caused by a random event is no more freely chosen than behaviour completely determined by the laws of Newtonian physics. Nobody could be held morally responsible for an act that was caused by a random event occurring in his brain. Modern physics seems to maintain that the most basic laws of nature are not deterministic but probabilistic. Einstein said, 'God does not play dice' – but apparently Einstein was wrong.
- For free choices to be real, a person must be able to cause the events he chooses. If all human actions take place independently of any cause at all, including the will of the individual, then there is no genuine freedom. I am only not free to act if I am forced or compelled.
- This idea of freedom is also seen as a goal of moral action – even if our freedom is limited, we show freedom in our aim to be free and act freely. This is one of the great themes of existentialism. For Jean-Paul Sartre, freedom is both the goal and the measure of our lives – from nothing man makes himself what he chooses.
- Freedom here is an end in itself, as it does not matter what a person chooses as long as he chooses freely. A person must fill his nothingness with freedom – everything depends on the individual and the meaning he gives to his life. A person may try to avoid this freedom; then he is guilty of *mauvaise foi* and just

conforms to what is decided by others. He sees life as ultimately absurd, meaningless, and without any reason why an individual exists or chooses to do one thing rather than another.

- 'To be free is to be condemned to be free'. So freedom is both underpinning of any morality and it is a goal – to be free is to have a humanly fulfilling life.

### **Evaluating Libertarianism**

- Libertarianism recognises that people have a sense of decision-making, a sense of freedom, a sense of deliberating over their choices in life.
- Personal responsibility underpins our whole system of ethics and law.
- David Hume pointed out that, even if in nature event B consistently follows event A on every observed occasion, to say that event A causes event B is to go beyond observation. It is our way of interpreting the events, not a feature of the events in themselves.
- Libertarians insist that free will is the uncoerced power to choose – but how does a person decide what to do? What criteria does he use to make a decision? What about his past experiences, emotions, beliefs and values?