

Van Inwagen and Ayer on Free Will and Determinism

1. Van Inwagen on free will

• van Inwagen's basic idea is that our possession of free will is primarily a matter of our possessing the power or capacity to act otherwise than we in fact do. That is, for certain actions A that we perform, we could have refrained from performing A; and, for certain actions A that we refrain from performing, we could have performed A. Thus, van Inwagen offers the following necessary condition for free will:¹

(VI) S possesses free will only if S could have acted otherwise than he in fact does.

• It is plausible that our concept of free will concerns freedom in choice as much as it concerns freedom in action. If so, we have a second necessary condition for free will:

(C) S possesses free will only if S could have *chosen* otherwise than he in fact does.

• Furthermore, in conceiving of ourselves as possessing free will, it's plausible that we think of our choices and decision as having causal influence on our actions. That is, we see ourselves as capable of acting otherwise than we in fact do because of our capacity to choose other than we in fact do. Pulling all of this together, we have the following, richer conditions for our possessing free will:

(FW) S possesses free will only if S could have acted otherwise than he in fact does *because* S could have chosen otherwise than he in fact does.

• All van Inwagen needs to run his argument is (VI).

• An interesting, but difficult question: are the conditions laid out in (FW) sufficient conditions for our possession of free will?

2. Van Inwagen's characterization of determinism

• Determinism: If A and B are complete descriptions of the physical state of the world at times t_1 and t_2 respectively ($t_1 \leq t_2$), then the conjunction of A with the laws of physics L entails B.

3. Van Inwagen's argument for incompatibilism

• Definitions:

B: complete description of the physical state of the world at the time that S does not raise his hand.

A: Complete description of the physical state of the world at some earlier time.

L: The laws of physics.

• van Inwagen's Consequent Argument:

(1) The conjunction of A and L entails B.

[Assumption: determinism is true]

(2) S could have raised his hand.

[Assumption: we have free will]

(3) S could have rendered B false.

[From (2)]

(4) S could have rendered the conjunction of A and L false.

[From (1), (3)]

(5) S could not have rendered A false.

[Assumption: independently plausible]

(Intuitive idea: One cannot change the past.)

(6) S could not have rendered L false.

[Assumption: independently plausible]

(Intuitive idea: One cannot violate the laws of physics.)

(7) If S could not have rendered α or β false, then S could not have rendered the conjunction of α and β false.

[Assumption: independently plausible]

(8) S could not have rendered the conjunction of A and L false [From (5), (6), (7)]

(9) Free will and determinism are incompatible.

[From (4), (8)]

• More precisely: given assumptions (5), (6) and (7), free will and determinism are incompatible.

¹ As plausible as (VI) sounds, your next assigned reading—Frankfurt's "Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility"—contains a fairly nice argument that the conditions laid down by (VI) are *not* necessary conditions for free will. Frankfurt argues that one can possess free will even if one is *incapable* of acting otherwise than one in fact does.

4. Ayer's argument for "radical compatibilism"

• '[N]ow we must ask how it is that I come to make my choice. Either it is an accident that I choose to act as I do or it is not. If it is an accident, then it is merely a matter of chance that I did not choose otherwise; and if it is merely a matter of chance that I did not choose otherwise, it is surely irrational to hold me morally responsible for choosing as I did. But if it is not an accident that I choose to one thing rather than another, then presumably there is some causal explanation of my choice: and in that case we are led back to determinism...[I]t looks as if the admission of moral responsibility [and free will], so far from being incompatible with determinism, tends rather to presuppose it.' (Ayer, pp. 275-6)

• Question: What does Ayer mean when he refers to "the moralist"? Answer: a libertarian. That is, one who believes that free will is incompatible with determinism, but that we possess the type of free will necessary for morally responsible conduct.

• A plausible principle concerning free will and moral responsibility:

(MR) S is morally responsible for performing A if and only if S performed A freely.

• A reconstruction of Ayer's argument:

- (1) If there is no causal explanation for S's choosing to perform A, then it is merely a matter of chance that S did not choose otherwise. [Assumption: independently plausible]
 - (2) If it is merely a matter of chance that S did not choose otherwise, then S is not morally responsible for performing A. [Assumption: independently plausible]
 - (3) If S is morally responsible for performing A, then there is a causal explanation for S's choosing to perform A. [From (1), (2)]
 - (4) If S performed A freely, then there is a causal explanation for S's choosing to perform A. [From (3), (MR)]
 - (5) If there is a causal explanation for S's choosing to perform A, then S's choosing to perform A was determined. [Assumption: Suspect?]
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- (6) If S performed A freely, then S's choosing to perform A was determined. [From (4), (5)]

• A version of Ayer's argument that does not appeal to principle (MR):

- (1) If there is no causal explanation for S's choosing to perform A, then it is merely a matter of chance that S chose to perform A. [Assumption: independently plausible]
 - (2) If it is merely a matter of chance that S chose to perform A, then S did not exercise his free will in choosing to performing A. [Assumption: independently plausible]
 - (3) If S exercised his free will in choosing to perform A, then there is a causal explanation for S's choosing to perform A. [From (1), (2)]
 - (4) If there is a causal explanation for S's choosing to perform A, then S's choosing to perform A was determined. [Assumption: Suspect?]
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- (5) If S exercised his free will in choosing to perform A, then S's choosing to perform A was determined. [From (3), (4)]

• Notice that if both van Inwagen's and Ayer's arguments are sound, we have an antinomy on our hands: free will is incompatible with determinism and free will requires the truth of determinism. The only reasonable conclusion to draw is that our concept of free will is internally inconsistent or in some way incoherent.

• Premise (4) of the above argument is certainly suspect. Why should we think that it's false? (Hint: think about probabilistic explanations.)

• If premise (4) is false, then Ayer does not have a sound argument for his radical compatibilism. However, it looks like he has a pretty good argument for the following (i.e., line (3) of the above argument):

(A) If S exercised his free will in choosing to perform A, then there is a causal explanation for S's choosing to perform A.

• It should be noted that (A) by itself raises difficult questions about how free will is possible. If, whenever we exercise our free will in choosing to perform some action A, there is a causal explanation for our making this choice, what does our exercise of free will amount too? Perhaps, nothing.

5. Ayer's positive account of free will

(FW_A) S exercises his free will in performing A if and only if:

- (1) If S had chosen not to perform A, S would not have performed A; and
- (2) In performing A, S is not subject to internal forms of coercion (like kleptomania); and
- (3) In performing A, S is not subject to external forms of coercion (as in a car-jacking).

• Notice that Ayer is appealing to a *subjunctive* conditional in clause (1). (1) is commonly referred to as the “conditional analysis of free will” or the “conditional analysis of ‘could’.”

• Questions about Ayer's positive account:

1. Why is Ayer's positive account consistent with determinism? That is, why do we come out as having free will be the lights of Ayer's account even if determinism is true?
2. In his analysis of free will, is Ayer violating his own stricture (pg. 278) that the notion of free will is not to be arbitrarily redefined so as to render it consistent with determinism? Does Ayer's analysis accurately capture our ordinary concept of free will? If not, what does it leave out?

6. Chisholm's criticism of the conditional analysis of free will

• The conditional analysis of free will:

(CA) (*) S could have acted otherwise than he than he in fact does
if and only if

(1) If S had chosen to act otherwise, S would have acted otherwise.

• (1) is consistent with determinism. (Why?) Thus, if (CA) supplies an adequate account of free will, our possessing free will is compatible with determinism.

• Chisholm's objection to the conditional analysis: (1) does not constitute a sufficient condition for (*). To see this, suppose that the following claim is *false*:

(2) S could have chosen to do otherwise.

Even if (1) is true, (*) comes out false if (2) is false. Thus, (1) does not specify sufficient conditions for (*).