

Free Will, Determinism, and Moral Responsibility

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Moral Responsibility and Free Will

Here are three concepts:

1. **Moral Responsibility.** You are *morally responsible* for doing something just in case it is appropriate to praise or blame you for having done it.
2. **The Ability to Do Otherwise.** Suppose you do something. You had *the ability to do otherwise* just in case there was some other option for you at the time you acted such that you could have taken that option instead.
3. **Determinism.** The laws of nature plus the initial conditions of the universe necessitate everything that comes after.

This calls out for some further analysis. What does it mean for there to be something else that you could have done? We will take up this question in a bit.

These concepts relate to Free Will in the following way:

You are **morally responsible** for doing something *only if* you did that thing of your own **free will** *only if* when you did that thing you had **the ability to do otherwise**.

Here's the worry. If Determinism is true, it looks like we never have the ability to do anything other than what we did. And so, if Determinism is true, then no one is ever morally responsible for what they do.

The Incompatibilism Argument

Imagine that Alfred steals some money. Is Alfred morally responsible for doing so?

P1 If Determinism is true, then the laws of nature plus the initial conditions necessitated that Alfred would steal the money.

P2 If the laws of nature plus the initial conditions necessitated that Alfred would steal the money, then Alfred could have refrained from stealing the money *only if* Alfred could have made the laws of nature different or could have made the initial conditions different.

P3 Alfred could not have made the laws of nature different, and Alfred could not have made the initial conditions different.

C If Determinism is true, then Alfred could *not* have refrained from stealing the money.

Notice that **P2** is an instance of a more general principle: *If you could have made X happen and, necessarily, for X to happen, Y must also happen, then you could have made Y happen.*

And, in general, if Determinism is true, then no one ever has the ability to do anything other than what they in fact do. So, if Determinism is true, and having the ability to do otherwise is necessary condition for being morally responsible, then no one is ever morally responsible for anything that they do.

You Could Have Done It?

The argument crucially depends on what it is to have the ability to do otherwise. What does that mean? Here are some ideas:

1. You could have done X = *Were you to have wanted to do X, X would have happened.*
2. You could have done X = *There was no physical or psychological barrier standing in your way of doing X.*
3. You could have done X = *It was sensible for you at the time of the decision to consider X as a feasible option for you.*

How does the argument look when we plug in these definitions?

Compatibilism

Suppose the argument works: *if Determinism is true, then no one ever has the ability to do anything other than what they do.* Does it follow that no one is ever morally responsible for anything?

You are morally responsible for doing something *only if* you had the ability to do otherwise.

Is that true? Can you think of any counterexample?