

# Handout 25: Hume's Compatibilism

Philosophy 322: Modern Philosophy  
Professor Geoff Pynn  
Northern Illinois University

Spring 2016

## I WHAT IS COMPATIBILISM?

### i. Determinism

- (a) *Def.* Condition  $C_1$  *necessitates* condition  $C_2$  iff  $\Box(C_1 \supset C_2)$ .<sup>1</sup>
- (b) DIVINE DETERMINISM: Every event's occurrence is necessitated by God's decrees.
- (c) CAUSAL DETERMINISM: Every event's occurrence is necessitated by the occurrence of the event's cause together with the laws of nature.
  - i. Let  $L$  = the laws of nature and  $D_t$  = a complete description of all events in the universe occurring at time  $t$ .
  - ii. Causal determinism (together with the assumption that every event has a cause) is equivalent to the claim that  $\Box((D_t \& L) \supset D_{t+1})$
- (d) Note that divine determinism and causal determinism are logically independent.
- (e) Note also that neither is equivalent to NECESSITARIANISM, the much stronger view that all truths are necessary truths.
  - i. If God's decrees are necessary, then divine determinism entails necessitarianism.
  - ii. If (a) there is some  $t$  such that  $\Box D_t$ , and (b)  $\Box L$ , then causal determinism entails necessitarianism.
  - iii. But most determinists would deny these assumptions.
- (f) Hume is concerned with the compatibility of causal determinism and freedom. So henceforth, casual determinism = DETERMINISM.

### 2. Freedom

- (a) What is it to act freely? This is a contentious question. Best to start with examples of (apparently) free acts:
  - i. This morning, I had Grape Nuts for breakfast.
  - ii. I bought a lottery ticket last week.
  - iii. I got married in 1999.

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<sup>1</sup> $\Box$  means "necessarily".  $\supset$  is the material conditional, which means roughly (though not precisely) "if... then..."; i.e., " $p \supset q$ "  $\approx$  "If  $p$ , then  $q$ ."

- (b) Free acts can be constrained in various ways. E.g., I didn't have any Froot Loops, so I could not have had those for breakfast. Still, I freely had Grape Nuts.
  - (c) Free acts can be (partly, though not entirely) influenced by outside or unconscious forces. E.g., even if I only bought the lottery ticket because my friend pressured me to, I still did it freely.
3. INCOMPATIBILISM: If determinism is true, then no acts are free.
- (a) Intuitive argument. An act is free only if the agent (i.e., the person doing the act) could have done otherwise. But if every act is necessitated prior to its occurrence, no agent could ever do otherwise than she actually does.
  - (b) Incompatibilism seems to be the "default" position most people take when first exposed to these ideas. This was true of me and it is true of most students and non-philosophers I discuss it with.
4. COMPATIBILISM: Incompatibilism is false.
- (a) This is Hume's view. He claims, surprisingly, that "all men have ever agreed [...] and that the whole controversy has hitherto turned merely upon words."
  - (b) Hume's defensive strategy (an example of a typical compatibilist defense; compare what we saw in Leibniz): show that once we get clear about what we mean by "liberty" (i.e., freedom) and "necessity" (i.e., determinism) we'll see that they're compatible.
  - (c) Hume's offensive strategy: argue that freedom *requires* determinism; i.e., that if determinism is *false*, then no acts are free. We might call this *reverse incompatibilism*.
- 2 DEFENSIVE PLAY I: FREE ACTS CAN BE DETERMINED
- i. Definition of "liberty":
- "By *liberty*, then, we can only mean *a power of acting or not acting, according to the determinations of the will*; that is, if we choose to remain at rest, we may; if we choose to move, we also may."
- Cleaned up: *S* is *at liberty* with respect to action *A* = (if *S* chooses to do *A*, then *S* will do *A*) & (if *S* chooses not to do *A*, then *S* will not do *A*).
- 2. A prisoner is not at liberty to leave his cell. On Hume's definition, this means roughly that that the following conditional is not true: (if the prisoner chooses to leave, then he will leave). The guard, on the other hand, is at liberty to leave (or stay), since both conditionals are true of him.
  - 3. Hume thinks that this notion of "liberty" is the only one relevant to our idea of free action.
  - 4. Here is a simple Humean account of free action. *S* did *A* freely iff:
    - (a) *S* did *A* because *S* chose to do *A*;
    - (b) *S* was at liberty with respect to *A*.
  - 5. This account makes free action compatible with determinism.

- (a) I had Grape Nuts because I chose to.
  - (b) At the time, it was true that (if I choose to have Grape Nuts, I will) and (if I choose not to have Grape Nuts, then I won't).
  - (c) Neither condition implies that my having Grape Nuts was not causally determined.
- 3 DEFENSIVE PLAY 2: "ALL MANKIND HAVE ALWAYS AGREED..."
- 1. We all treat free actions as caused by the agent's choices; this is apparent from our predictions and explanations of others' behavior. Indeed, it's a requirement of the Hume-inspired account of a free act that it occur *because* it was chosen.
  - 2. But what is it for one event to cause another? Hume's answer, in part, is that  $E_1$  caused  $E_2$  only if  $E_1$  necessitates  $E_2$ :
    - "Let any one define a cause without comprehending as a part of the definition a necessary connection with its effect [...] and I will readily give up the whole controversy."
  - 3. Thus, given that we regard free actions as being caused by the agent's choices, we already regard free actions as necessitated. ("[A]ll mankind have always agreed in the doctrine of necessity.")
  - 4. Hume's shrug: "You gotta problem? What problem? I don't see a problem."
- 4 PROBLEMS WITH HUME'S DEFENSIVE PLAYS
- 1. Counterexamples
    - (a) Acts that result from addiction, hypnosis, brainwashing, etc. all seem somehow unfree, but each satisfies the Hume-inspired account perfectly.
    - (b) E.g.: as a result of expert brainwashing by my cult leader, I alter my will so that all of my assets will go to him when I die. I did this because I chose to, and I was "at liberty" with respect to that action in the sense defined above. But, it seems, there is an important sense in which my act was not free.
    - (c) There are two ways to deal with counterexamples like these:
      - i. First way: bite the bullet. Say that, despite appearances, such acts *are* free.
      - ii. Second way: modify the account. E.g., add another condition:
        - (c)  $S$  chose to do  $A$  because  $S$  had good reason to do  $A$ .
 The brainwashing case seems not to satisfy this condition. I didn't chose to alter my will because I had good reason to; I did it because I'd been brainwashed!
      - iii. Other modifications are possible. Contemporary versions of compatibilism often begin with something like the simple Humean theory sketched here, and build from there.
  - 2. Free actions vs. free choices

- (a) Let's suppose that Hume is right that we all regard free actions as necessitated by choices.
- (b) That doesn't mean that we regard *choices* as necessitated by anything.
- (c) Intuitively, we may want to add a third condition to the Hume-inspired account:
  - (c) *S*'s choice to do *A* was not necessitated.
 Roughly: when I act freely, I could have chosen otherwise. More carefully: it was possible for me to choose otherwise, even holding fixed all of my motives, reasons, etc.
- (d) But (c) is not compatible with determinism.

## 5 HUME ON OFFENSE

1. Suppose we insist that free acts are, in some sense, not necessitated (perhaps because the choices that cause them are not themselves necessitated). Then, Hume thinks, we are treating free acts as *chance events*:

“[L]iberty, when opposed to necessity, not to constraint, is the same thing with chance.”

2. Why? Remember that for Hume, causation implies necessary connection. If  $E_1$  didn't necessitate  $E_2$ , then  $E_1$  didn't cause  $E_2$ . So the only way for  $E_2$  not to be necessitated is for it not be caused by anything. But, Hume thinks (reasonably), an uncaused event is nothing more than a chance occurrence.
3. If causation doesn't require necessitation, Hume's offensive play won't work: then something can be caused, not necessitated, and not a chance event.
4. Here is another way of putting Hume's point:
  - (a) Let  $C$  be the total actual cause of action  $A$ . Suppose we insist that  $A$  is free even if both  $C \& A$  and  $C \& \neg A$  were equally possible before  $A$  was chosen.
  - (b) What explains the fact that  $A$  occurred rather than not? It doesn't seem that it can be anything in  $C$ , since  $C$  was equally compatible with  $A$ 's not occurring. But  $C$  is the total cause of  $A$ . So the total cause of  $A$  doesn't explain why  $A$  occurred rather than not. Thus it seems that  $A$ 's occurring rather than not was a matter of chance or luck.
  - (c) But it is odd to say that an action is free only if its occurrence is a matter of luck or chance. It seems to be the *opposite* result from what we'd want.

## APPENDIX: KANT ON HUME

Here is what Kant had to say about Hume's compatibilism:

“This is a wretched subterfuge with which some persons still let themselves be put off, and so think they have solved, with a petty word-jugglery, that difficult problem, at the solution of which centuries have labored in vain.” (*Critique of Practical Reason*)