

Lesson 7

Freedom

In short, the actions of man are never free; they are always the necessary consequence of his temperament, of the received ideas, and of the notions, either true or false, which he has formed to himself of happiness. . . .

Baron Paul Henri d'Holbach, 1770

One's own free unfettered choice, one's own fancy, however wild it may be, one's own fancy worked up at times to frenzy. That is the "most advantageous advantage" which is always overlooked.

Fyodor Dostoevsky, 1864

Freedom and The Good Life

"Give me liberty, or give me death," cried the early American patriot Patrick Henry. Most of us, too—whether or not we would go quite so far—believe that freedom is one of the most important things in the world. It is not only an ingredient of, but the presupposition of, the good life; indeed, it may itself be the good life. It is possible to live our life fighting for freedom, and there are few things that we would say are more important to fight for. What we mean by freedom in this context is political freedom, the right to make autonomous choices and the practical ability to act on them independently of coercion by other human beings or institutions.

On a deeper philosophical level, we encounter another sense of **freedom**, in which it seems not only to be the presupposition of the good life but also the logical prerequisite for morality and moral responsibility. This is metaphysical freedom, the capacity to make choices that are not determined by forces external to us. If we were not free to act as we choose—whether rightly or wrongly—then holding us responsible for what we do would not seem to make any sense, nor would there be much point in imposing upon us those moral rules and principles that tell us what we ought to do. After all, we do not praise or blame a person for obeying the law of gravity, nor do we see any point in telling a person that he or she ought to do so. "Ought implies can," wrote Immanuel Kant in his discussion of moral philosophy and freedom. Without freedom there could be no morality. Without freedom, we often say, life would hardly be worth living.

Obviously, metaphysical and political freedom have something important in common. Freedom in either sense implies the unconstrained power to act autonomously, without being forced by anything outside of us. Among the questions we will consider in this lesson are why we consider freedom so important and how important it actually is. We will also consider the merits of the view that our imagined metaphysical freedom is illusory or considerably more restricted than we tend to think. A powerful argument can be made for the view that there can be no human freedom of choice or action, that is, no metaphysical freedom. This view is called **determinism**. The argument, quite simply, follows from the tenet we have called the **principle of universal causality** (see Lesson 5)—namely, the universal necessity that every event must have its explanatory causes. But if human decisions and actions are events, then it follows that they, too,

must have their explanatory causes. If an action or a decision is caused (which is to say, brought about, or determined beforehand, by earlier events or conditions), then how could it possibly be free? What would it mean to say that we have a “choice”?

Before we examine this troublesome matter in some detail, let’s first raise two questions too rarely raised in our constant adulation of freedom. Why is freedom so important to us? And what is freedom?

Why Is Freedom So Important to Us?

We posit freedom and slavery as opposites. We imagine a polarity and think that liberty represents the one extreme and slavery the other. That makes the case for freedom categorical and simple. Who wants to be a slave? But is the difference between the master and his slave simply that one has freedom which the other lacks? Doesn’t the master live in a mansion, and the slave in quarters? Doesn’t the slave toil while the other drinks mint julep? Doesn’t the master wield the whip that cuts the other’s back? A preference for the master’s life proves very little about freedom.

Frithjof Bergmann, 1977

Freedom—the word, that is—excites almost everyone, but it can mean almost anything. We generally define freedom as the absence of all (unreasonable) restraint in our movements, our speech, our beliefs, and our activities. But is being left alone the same thing as freedom? Is being alone in the desert being free? And what is to count as an unreasonable restraint? If we think of almost any controversial social issue—particularly those involving drug taking, sex, or other personal activities—the vagueness of this question becomes painfully obvious.

In his book *On Being Free*, Frithjof Bergmann outlined what he called our “schizophrenic view of freedom.” The first side of this is the familiar view that freedom is “wonderful.” It is what gives human beings distinguished status and separates us from nature, and it is assumed to be the goal of everyone, in every society, even those who do not know the word and have never thought about being free. The urge to be free is not to be questioned; the value of freedom is absolute, even more important than life itself. But notice that this view already poses a dilemma: it says both that we are already (by nature) free and that we aspire to be free. (Rousseau wrote, “Man is born free, and yet everywhere he is in chains.”) We might thus distinguish intrinsic (that is, metaphysical) freedom, or our natural free will, and extrinsic (political) freedom, the freedom for which we must fight.

The other side of our conflicted view of freedom, however, is that it is dreadful and that we want nothing more than to escape from it. It is terrifying to have to make decisions that will affect one’s entire life—choosing a college, selecting a marriage partner, deciding whether to join the army. And so we feel relieved (or, at least, part of us does) when someone else makes the choice or, better, “fate” steps in and makes it for us. The existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre and the psychiatrist Erich Fromm have both argued, for example, that we all try to “escape from freedom”; we find it too painful. We retreat into unquestioning obedience to authority; we fall into what Sartre called **bad faith** (see Lesson 6). The example Bergmann gave is the story of the Grand Inquisitor in Dostoevsky’s novel *The Brothers Karamazov*. Jesus finally returns to earth,

but he is arrested by the Grand Inquisitor, who is also head of the Christian church. The cause of the arrest is that Jesus offered freedom; the Inquisitor recognizes that what people really want is authority and mystery, and so he has given them the church. The people are left with the word freedom, but what they are taught is obedience and servitude.

We think we want freedom, but do we really? And if we do, why? Imagine a life in a very happy little island village. Everyone is born into a role, which he or she will assume for life, with certain stages appropriate to his or her age. Everyone knows his or her identity; everyone knows what he or she is expected to do, and everyone sets about to satisfy these expectations. Life is sufficiently full to prevent boredom; it is sufficiently luxurious to prevent scarcity and selfish infighting. What would freedom mean in such a society? What would be the value of freedom in such a situation? If a ship of European sailors were to land on the island and destroy the structure and the harmony of this little village, force its members to make hard choices and restructure their lives in accordance with what we call freedom, would this necessarily have to be considered an improvement in their lives? Is freedom necessarily a boon? Or consider a person who has just been fired, whose employer says, "Now you are free to do what you want with your daytime hours." If this is freedom, what is so good about it? Unless the job in question were utterly intolerable, is there any virtue at all in this newfound freedom?

These examples, of course, are biased to present freedom in the worst possible light. But such examples are necessary to balance those of the other kind, involving people who are generally miserable and oppressed, who are abused by some powerful conquerors or an insufferable king or queen, and who revolt in the name of freedom. The emancipation of the slaves in the southern states in 1865 did not make life immediately better for many former slaves. The lack of freedom within many religious communities has not been considered a terrible disadvantage or an inhuman situation—at least, not by those members who conform to their sect's basic beliefs and practices. Indeed, one might argue that the history of the United States exhibits the breakdown of family and community values in which obedience and conformity are presupposed; the emergence of freedom of personal choice has threatened and sometimes destroyed the peaceful harmony of the conformist community.

This argument would seem to contradict everything that we in the United States claim to stand for. Still, today it is argued persuasively in the name of "American values" and even "freedom." Here we face the same dilemma again, hidden by the word "freedom": Do we, in fact, want freedom above all things? Or is it the case that freedom is often destructive, undesirable, and unwanted? Is it true that the basic value of American life is freedom? Or is it rather the case that the basic values of American life are community values and the virtues of moral conformity? Despite the familiar rhetoric, these are not the same values—in fact, they seem directly opposed. Is it reasonable, then, for us to want both of them?

What Is Political Freedom?

When people are free to do as they please, they usually imitate each other.
Eric Hoffer, 1955

Part of the problem in defining freedom and trying to say what is so good about it is that freedom is so often understood as a negative concept: it is a reaction against something, and what that “something” is can be known only in a particular context. When a people are suffering daily under an oppressive and unreasonable government or when an adolescent suffers through six dreary hours of classes that he or she is forced to attend, the meaning of the word freedom is clear: it means “free from.” If taxes are imposed and we pay them unwillingly, then relief from taxes would be a form of freedom. If government forces prevent us from expressing our opinions or practicing our religion, then our right to speak or to worship would be denied.

What is far more difficult is pinpointing what freedom is in cases in which there is no evident oppressor, no obvious suffering, and nothing definite to react against. It is not at all clear, to return to the example of the little village, that a happy population has been made “free” if we destroyed the life within which its members were most content. Or we may say, if we wish, that people who have just been fired are “free,” but the context doesn’t really justify this conclusion. The former employees did not want to lose their jobs; they had nothing else they wanted to do instead. They may be free from the demands of that particular job, but it is not clear what they are free to do. And it simply will not do to say, “They are free to do anything.” First, this is obviously false. (None of us has that much freedom.) Second, it is probably true that “free to do anything” is a fraudulent way of talking about their not having the faintest idea what to do.

The question of context suggests that we miss part of the idea of freedom when we consider it simply as “freedom from” some undesirable imposition, power, or rule. What we’re forgetting is freedom to do or have something as well. People seek freedom from an oppressive government so they can form their own government. The unhappy adolescent in class wants to be free of school so they can play baseball, go fishing, or lie in the sun. These two notions of freedom, freedom from and freedom to do something, have been called (since the eighteenth century) **negative freedom** and **positive freedom**. They always go together; the one always presupposes the other, even if only one is actually stated. Indeed, it is unthinkable that people would overthrow their government, no matter how intolerable, if they had no idea, however dim, about what they would do to replace it. And it is unimaginable that the adolescent would so desperately want to be free from school if he or she had no idea, however vague, of doing something else instead.

We can see now how it is that such different definitions of freedom have emerged in politics and history; the fascist who claims that freedom is obedience to the state is actually just giving us the positive notion of freedom and leaving out the negative notion. (This idea of being free to obey may sound peculiar. But a Catholic who was not allowed to obey the authority of the Catholic Church without being persecuted by the secular authorities, for example, would be lacking freedom of exactly this sort.) The civil libertarian, on the other hand, emphasizes the negative notion of freedom—as in the fight to be free from racial or political discrimination—but sometimes fails to mention the positive notion.

But leaving out the positive notion of freedom too easily leads to the absurdity of people demanding freedom from everything with no positive idea of what they want that freedom for. A person who demands **absolute freedom** of speech, for example, may not be thinking about what restraints may be required on speech. Yelling “Fire!” in a crowded theater may be asserting that

person's absolute freedom from any restraint whatsoever. Still, it is not at all clear that there is any defensible claim for his or her freedom to do anything. And if we are looking only at negative freedom from interference by government agencies and other people, this leads us to the absurd conclusion that the most free person is the one out in the middle of the desert, safely out of range of government interference and any restraints from other people. Of course, we might insist that this person, to be the freest, should also be free from want, but that is saying only that he or she must be free to have the necessities for human survival—but for most of us these necessities include human companionship and an orderly society as well as food, water, and shelter.

Concepts of Self and Our Notions of Freedom

The force we seek to be free from is often more obvious to us than what we want to be free to do. It is easy to be so caught up in fighting against something that the alternative, what you are fighting for, is neglected or becomes reduced to a buzzword (like freedom) whose content has not been thought about at all. What makes this particularly difficult is that most of us feel that, whatever we are fighting against, what we are usually fighting for is in some sense ourselves, a chance to improve ourselves, a chance to be what we want to be. But as we saw in an earlier lesson, what counts as oneself is not always so obvious either.

If what we mean by self is an isolated individual self, then we will tend to conceptualize freedom as freedom from other people and society, whatever it is that we want to be free to do. Thus, we get the idea that freedom to “find yourself” is often obtained by “getting away from it all”—in other words, by a purely negative freedom. On the other hand, if we understand ourselves as a social entity that depends for its very existence on our relationships with others, then what counts as freedom will necessarily involve those relationships. The person who is alone would not be free in this sense. If, with the Buddhists, we see the self as an illusion, freedom will tend to mean freedom from this illusion and a consequent freedom to realize ourselves as being one with the entire interconnected reality that the Mahayana Buddhists call “the Buddha nature.” If we think of ourselves (with Descartes) as essentially consciousness, then freedom will tend to mean the development of consciousness—and this is indeed what freedom has most often meant in our Western tradition. But even this is too simple, for there are many aspects of consciousness, not all of them equally our self.

For example, suppose we identify ourselves with our feelings about other people, our social attachments, and our sense of ourselves as social beings. Our concept of freedom, accordingly, will be such that we are most free when we are acting those roles and participating in those relationships. We will be less free if we are prevented from performing those roles or from being with our friends. People in love will not feel free when they are away from their beloved, no matter what else they can do, because what counts as essential to their self-identity is that one relationship. A traveler in a foreign country may be totally free of any expectations or responsibilities, and of interference from other people. Still, if he or she identifies self with friendship—and no friends are around—it makes no sense to call the individual free. Freedom, in such a conception of self as social, is the freedom to participate in society and the freedom from factors that would prevent this. We can call this social freedom.

More generally, we can say that freedom depends upon self-identity—namely, those aspects of a person with which he or she identifies and defines the self (see Lesson 6). Consider this alternative view of self and, consequently, of freedom. A person thinks of the true self as the rational self. (Plato would be a good example.) A person acts freely, then, whenever he or she acts in accordance with reason, does what he or she has decided to do after careful thought and deliberation. The same person would consider an act less than free, on the other hand, if prompted by a mere whim or sudden desire or obedience to the urgings of a friend or authorities (assuming, that is, that the person had not already decided that obeying this friend or authority was the rational thing to do). People with such a rational conception of themselves will consider action most free when it has been carefully planned and thoroughly thought out; the less the planning and the thinking, the less free the action and the less it is an expression of the person's true self. This is rational freedom.

Yet another example would be a person who identified most with their emotions. People in love would consider themselves most free when acting out of love, even if, on psychological analysis, those actions could be called compulsive and even if, according to more rational-minded friends, such obedience to emotion is the very antithesis of freedom. Individuals who so value their emotions will not feel free if forced to suppress violent feelings of anger, but will feel free when they “let it out.” For such people, the expression of emotion—whatever emotion—is freedom; being unable or not being allowed to express emotions, even under the respectable guise of “being reasonable,” would seem like being deprived of freedom. This is emotional freedom.

Finally, there is the most perplexing example, which Bergmann discusses at great length, based on a most curious character in Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*. The bizarre hero of that short novel considers freedom to be the most important thing in human life. In fact, not only is his notion of freedom based on his sense of self-identity, but his self-identity is the conception of his freedom. He is truly himself only when he acts completely freely. His problem is this: Whenever he acts in accordance with other people's demands, he does not feel free, so he shuns others and spends much of his time alone. But neither does he believe that acting according to reason is acting freely, because reason is, in fact, a system of thinking imposed on us by our society. In acting rationally, in other words, we are actually following other people's demands, and so we are not free. But neither are we free when we act out of emotion. Our emotions do not seem to be products of our free deliberation but of forces within us that stem from our animal natures and social conditioning.

Then what does count as a free action? The perverse answer of Dostoevsky's character is, acting entirely on whim, for no reason whatsoever. His character insists on capricious freedom. But even acting entirely on whim, how does one know that one is indeed the sole author of one's own action? How does one know that the expectations of society or the hereditary workings of one's brain have not in fact caused this particular whim, which thereby is not really one's own? One cannot know, and so Dostoevsky's pathetic character becomes in fact totally paralyzed in his actions because he can never know for certain whether they are truly his own free actions or not.

The philosophical principle here is not unfamiliar to us. It is the idea that behind all our more superficial aspects lies a pure inner self—not our thoughts, emotions, or desires, but the self

itself. And acting out of this pure self is what constitutes the true nature of freedom. Thus, Christianity teaches us that true freedom lies in giving up worldly interests and focusing wholly on our inner souls. Thus, philosophers such as Sartre tell us that consciousness itself is pure freedom, which means not only the freedom to act in any number of different ways, but also freedom from determination by all other influences—those of other people and those of our own reason, emotions, and desires as well. But here we come to our troublesome philosophical argument about the principle that every event has its explanatory causes. If there is a cause for every event and therefore for every action, what could it mean to say, as Dostoyevsky insists, that a truly free action is wholly undetermined by anything but the pure self, which in turn is not determined by anything else? With this question, we enter one of the most difficult problems in philosophy: the so-called free-will problem, which concerns metaphysical freedom.

Free Will and Determinism

“The murderer had been raised in a slum. His father abandoned him when he was seven months old; he was beaten by his older siblings and constantly abused by his mother. He never had the chance to attend school; when he was able to get a job, he never could hold it. By the time he robbed the store, he was near starvation, addicted to hard drugs, without friends, and without help of any kind. His sister said, ‘I’ve known since he was a child that he would do this someday.’ His mother complained, ‘I don’t understand!’ The prosecutor called it a ‘cold-blooded, premeditated act.’ The defense accused the whole of society, claiming that it had, through its neglect as well as its negative conditioning, made this man an inevitable killer.” We know the rest of the arguments: what we don’t know is their resolution. Should a man be held responsible for an act for which he has been conditioned the whole of his life? Or must we not hold out that, no matter what the circumstances, he could have resisted, he could have decided not to commit the crime, and therefore he must be held responsible?

Are we cogs in the machine that is the universe? Are we pawns of the fates? People have often thought so. Most ancient Greeks believed that our destinies were already decided for us; no matter what our actions, the outcome was fixed. Powerful movements in Christianity have taught that God has predetermined or at least knows in advance every action we will perform, as well as our ultimate chances for salvation. And today, most people believe that a person’s actions and character result from genes and upbringing, and perhaps also from unconscious fears and desires that may never be recognized. Then, too, astrology and other theories of external determination have always been popular, and we can see why. The more our actions are the result of other forces rather than our own doing, the less we need to feel responsible for them and the less we need to worry about deciding what to do. It is already decided, and not by us.

The determinist argument can be cast as a syllogism, the premises of which seem beyond doubt:

Every event has its explanatory cause.

Every human choice or action is an event.

Therefore, every human choice or action has its explanatory cause.

Then, by a second syllogism:

Every human choice or action has its explanatory cause.

To have explanatory causes is not to be free.

Therefore, no human choice or action is free.

This conclusion means there are no real choices. If a person can choose only one course of action, and if there are no alternatives that he or she (given the explanatory causes) can choose, then it makes no sense to say that the person has a choice. To have a choice means to be able to do either A or B. To have chosen A means that one could have chosen B. According to the determinist, even if I (seem to) choose between A and B, what I choose is already determined by causes, including those involved in my character and the process of deliberation.

On the other hand, one might want to reply that one could have done otherwise if one's character, motives, and deliberations had been different. This retains the determinist's insistence that antecedent conditions cause the choice but retains, too, the idea that the person certainly has something to do with the choice. But it would make no sense to suppose that a person could have chosen otherwise if everything else (character and the rest) stayed the same. A different choice would imply something different, perhaps dissimilar personal traits or some alternative way of thinking through the decision.

We sometimes talk of a "free choice," as opposed to a choice made under coercion, but if either is a choice at all, it must be free in the sense that one could have chosen otherwise (whatever the cost). If a man holds a gun to my head and forces me to give him my wallet, I have nonetheless freely chosen; I could have chosen to fight and be shot. But this is only to say that some free choices are made under conditions that make certain alternatives extremely foolish. It doesn't affect the metaphysical question of freedom.

If it is true, however, that every choice or action is fully determined (that is, brought about by earlier events and conditions) and fully explainable (if only one knows enough about the earlier events and conditions), then even the most obvious case of a free choice would not be free and would not really be a choice. It would be as if someone said to you, "OK, here is A; there is no B or C. Which do you choose: A, B, or C?" If the whole of our history, our genetic makeup, our education, the influence of our parents, our character, and the workings of our brains already predispose us to make choice A rather than any other, if our makeup is such that we could not choose any other, then all of our talk about "choice" and "decision"—and therefore "responsibility," too—amounts to just so much nonsense. We may have the experience of making a choice, but we never actually choose. Indeed, the experience is just another event in the causal chain, brought about by earlier conditions and just as predictably leading on to other effects in our behavior.

Determinism is therefore the theory that every event in the universe, including every human action, has its natural explanatory causes; given certain earlier conditions, then an event will take place necessarily, according to the laws of nature, and that accordingly we lack metaphysical freedom. But we must fill out the determinist's first premise with at least one more step. It is not enough to say, "Every event has its natural explanatory cause(s)," because this would leave open the possibility that, although every event requires certain earlier events and conditions to take place, the event might still be a matter of chance, at least to some extent, or a matter of human choice. In other words, the earlier events and conditions might limit the possibilities but not fully determine them. To be determinists, we must say, therefore, that "every event has its sufficient natural explanatory cause(s)." Sufficient means capable of bringing the event about by itself. Then there is no room for chance, no room for choice, and no room for human freedom. Without

choice, there can be no freedom, and without freedom, there is no reason to hold a person responsible for his action, no matter how virtuous or how vicious it might be. According to the determinist thesis, we can barely be said to be “acting” at all, for our actions are nothing but the results of conditions and laws of nature that leave no room for our “doing something.”

Some philosophers, called **libertarians** (that is, metaphysical, as opposed to political, libertarians), deny the claims of determinism outright. We have free will; antecedent conditions do not determine the actual freedom to choose what to do and our choices. Libertarians often suggest that there is a “gap” in the sequence dictated by causal laws so that, no matter how many causes operate on our decisions, there is always at least a little bit of room within which we are free to make choices. This may seem to fly in the face of scientific views, but some have found support for libertarian views in contemporary science. Quantum mechanics is based on probabilistic models of reality that do not presuppose that every event has a cause. Some libertarians conclude from this that there is no longer any reason to suppose that the scientific view of things is incompatible with belief in free will.

Determinism Versus Indeterminism

Are the libertarians right? Why should we accept the determinist’s opening premise? Without it, determinism cannot get to first base. Well, in earlier lessons we have already seen the arguments traditionally advanced, even by philosophers who are not themselves determinists. The most general argument is that only by assuming from the outset that every event has its sufficient natural explanatory cause(s) can we ever understand anything. A much stronger argument was made by Kant, who said that the basic rule of determinism, the principle of universal causation, is one of the rules by which we must interpret every experience. But even Hume, who denied that this principle can be justified either through reason or through experience, insisted that it is a “natural habit” that is indispensable to us and that we could not give up even if we wanted to. The consensus, then, has been that the principle itself is inescapable.

Without the assumption that every event has its sufficient natural explanatory cause(s), human knowledge would seem to be without one of its most vital presuppositions. Not only scientific research but even our most ordinary, everyday apprehension of what is happening would be forced into an intolerable skeptical standstill. Our every experience would be unintelligible, and our universe would appear to be nothing but a disconnected stream of incoherent events, from which nothing could be predicted, and nothing understood. So the answer to the question, “Why should we accept the determinist’s first premise?” seems to be, “We cannot give it up; how could we possibly do without it?” For no matter how it is rephrased or philosophically altered, the assumption that every event in the universe, including our own actions, can be explained and understood, if only we know enough about it and its earlier events and conditions, is a presupposition of all human thinking that we cannot imagine doing without.

But even if the determinist’s premise seems undeniable, it is not yet clear how we are to understand that premise. Many philosophers would defend determinism only as predictability based on probability. To say that every event is determined, according to this view, means only that it would be predictable if we know enough about earlier conditions.

But it has been objected, against the determinist, that the fact of such predictability is not sufficient to defend determinism. It is one thing to say that all events, including human actions, are actually caused or compelled by physical forces. It is something quite different to say that all events, including human actions, are predictable. They might be predictable, for example, only based on certain statistical probabilities. “Most people in this circumstance would do that.” “The odds are for it,” in other words. Or, in the case of human actions, predictability might still result from human choices; we can predict each other’s actions because we know how we would probably choose in the same circumstances. But there is no need here to talk about “causes” or compulsions. Nor, it has been argued, should we even talk any longer about “determinism,” if this is all that we mean by it.

Another antideterminist argument has been made by defenders of a view called **indeterminism**. Indeterminism explicitly rejects determinism; it holds that not every event has a cause and thus that determinism is false. The advantages of this theory are obvious, for it would seem that, once we allow that some events are uncaused, human actions might be among them. And that means we can be held properly responsible for our actions rather than explain them by appealing to certain antecedent conditions. Or does it? Is someone responsible for behavior if that person does not cause it?

The indeterminist argument has received a boost from recent physics, the very science that gave rise to the determinist threat in the first place. Newtonian theory, which accounts for the behavior of physical objects in causal terms, gave determinism its strongest claims. The French Newtonian philosopher Pierre-Simon Laplace boasted that if he knew the positions and motions of every particle in the universe, he could predict its future state at any time. But recent physics has shown that such knowledge is impossible. One of the most important discoveries of modern physics is that we cannot know both the location and the momentum of a subatomic particle. According to the Heisenberg uncertainty principle (named after Werner Heisenberg, the German theoretical physicist who discovered it), there is enormous uncertainty in the measurement of anything as tiny as an electron. If one can ascertain the position of the particle, its motion will be unknown. Or one can measure its motion, but then one will not know its position. So this means that, at a subatomic level, it is impossible to predict the future. From this principle, the British physicist-philosopher Sir Arthur Eddington advanced the indeterminist argument that determinism is false on physical grounds. Not every event in the universe is predictable. Thus, Laplace’s bold conjecture that he could predict the entire future of the universe if only he knew the present position and motion of every particle was an empty gesture.

But does the Heisenberg uncertainty principle refute determinism, or does it simply show that we cannot predict what may in fact be determined? Indeterminists use Heisenberg’s principle to argue that the determinist premise, “Every event in the universe has its sufficient explanatory natural cause,” is false. Some events—namely, those involving some subatomic particles—are not caused, not predictable, and therefore not determined by any interpretation. And because all events and objects involve subatomic particles as their basic constituents, it can therefore be argued that no event is caused or strictly predictable, or determined. But being caused and being predictable are not the same thing. And, of course, the indeterminacy–uncertainty thesis applies only to events with subatomic dimensions. What does this imply about macro events—a person deciding whether to marry, for example? At most, it appears, the Heisenberg uncertainty

principle means that not all events are causally explicable. But if this is the case, perhaps human actions are among those events that cannot be completely explained by antecedent causal factors, not just because we don't know all the factors, but because some events are not caused. In that case, our actions would not be determined, but free.

The object of indeterminism is to deny the determinist position to make room for human freedom. There are, unfortunately, two serious objections to the indeterminist argument.

First, even if we suppose that the conclusions of modern physical ("quantum") theory are correct (a matter still in dispute among physicists), it is clear that determinism is of importance to us primarily as a theory of macroscopic bodies (that is, of visible size—people, trees, cars), not subatomic particles. And no one has ever concluded that quantum theory and modern physics actually refute Newton's theories, which were formulated to explain the behavior of macro things. It might be true that it is impossible to predict what a subatomic particle in our bodies might do. But it does not follow that it is impossible to predict what our bodies will do. Falling out of a plane, we still fall at the same speed as a sack of potatoes. And that is all that determinists need to continue their attack on our conception of freedom.

Second, even if the indeterminist view is correct, indeterminism is not the same as freedom. Suppose all of a sudden your legs started moving and you found yourself kicking a fire hydrant; surely this is not what we mean by a free action. Freedom means, at least, that we are free to choose what we will do and that our decisions are effective. Indeterminism, by suggesting that some events are uncaused, robs us of our freedom just as much as determinism. If we freely choose our actions, our choices themselves are causes. But if an action is uncaused, our choices are ineffective. The argument against determinism, in any case, is not yet sufficiently persuasive to allow for the indeterminist's conclusions.

On the other hand, although indeterminacy in the motion of subatomic particles may not help us understand how freedom of the will is possible, scientists' acceptance of it does have philosophical significance. When the scientific view of things was thoroughly deterministic, those who defended the idea of free will clearly contradicted the scientific attitude. They could therefore reasonably be accused of being antiscientific. But the acceptance of indeterminacy has required scientists to limit their predictions, at least in some spheres, to probabilistic statements.

Such probabilistic prediction is much closer to the sort of prediction we can and do make about people without thereby denying the possibility of individual freedom. We can safely predict, for instance, that a higher proportion of people from affluent backgrounds will attend college than will people from economically deprived backgrounds or that people from this latter category are more likely to spend time in prison. We even quantify such predictions, saying, based on a person's class, race, or sex, what his or her chances are of eventually living past age 65, owning a home, having more than three children, committing a crime, or being addicted to cigarettes. This way of describing groups of people resembles probabilistic reasoning in the physical sciences. It is scientifically defensible, but it allows us to maintain that, for each individual within a given group, what they do is not determined by virtue of their group membership, but is, to some extent at least, up to them.

The Role of Consciousness

Determinism seems to hold of us as physical bodies. But, you might insist, we are not just physical bodies. We are also conscious; we can make decisions; we have wills of our own. Whatever we are besides physical bodies, our physical bodies are still subject to all of the laws of Newtonian physics. At this point, you can see the problem. If our bodies are just cogs in the mechanism of the universe, what does it matter whether we are conscious or not? Our bodies are composed of bits of matter, various molecules that undergo chemical interactions and are subject to the laws of physics. Once all the parts are determined in their various movements and activities, what is left for consciousness to do?

There are two possible replies to this problem, but both seem to support the determinist position and leave us without the freedom that we are trying to find room for. One possibility is that consciousness, unlike our physical bodies, is not part of the scheme of determinism. Consciousness, unlike our bodies, is free, free to make decisions, free to choose what to do. The problem with this response is that if our bodies are determined in their movements, then what can consciousness do, even if it is “free”? Whatever consciousness decides cannot affect the movements of our bodies; in other words, it cannot affect our actions. Every human action has its sufficient natural explanatory causes apart from consciousness, and consciousness can make no difference whatsoever. If consciousness could intrude on the physical order of cause and effect, it would seem to violate the most basic physical laws (for example, the conservation of energy). Here we return to the mind-body problem (considered in Lesson 6). What is their relationship? How can the one affect the other?

Most determinists, in any case, would probably not agree with the idea that any event, even a nonphysical event such as an act of consciousness, could be “outside” the determinism of nature. Most determinists would argue that our thoughts and feelings, even our decisions, are caused by the states of our brains and nervous systems. Our decisions are nothing but the conscious effects of complex causal antecedents, most of which we still don’t understand, but which are definitely embedded in the deterministic scheme of things. Consciousness itself might be a cause of our behavior—including the decisions we (seem to) make. Still, because earlier events and conditions cause consciousness itself, this does not make us free. At most, it explains why we might think that we are free. (Indeed, the thought that we are free may itself be wholly determined by earlier events and conditions—including the fact that we have always been taught to think of ourselves as free.)

Physiologist **Benjamin Libet** provided experimental evidence challenging the idea that our sense of making free, conscious choices is illusory. He measured the brain activity of subjects performing simple motor tasks, such as pressing buttons. These actions would appear to be voluntary, but Libet found that an electrical charge in the brain (which he calls the “readiness potential”) always preceded such an act, and that it consistently occurred before the subject became aware of intending to perform the act. Libet concludes that the action was begun before the conscious awareness that would be necessary for it to be entirely a result of “free” choice. Free will, at best, can halt an action already in progress; it cannot initiate it in the first place.

Libet's results are certainly interesting, but one can question whether they demonstrate what he claims. Perhaps the charge in the brain is not the originating cause of the action but itself a consequence of some choice. Libet is assuming that whatever initiates the action will appear as some activity within the brain, but what if free choice does not originate in the body but in an immaterial soul? In this case, the electrical charge could be a consequence of the choice. Even if one does not accept the idea of an immaterial soul, one might still argue that our awareness of making a choice is not decisive for whether or not we are making one. There could be a temporal gap between choosing and being able to register that choice. Nevertheless, this evidence is daunting for libertarians who take consciousness to be essential to our making free choices.

Compatibilism, or Soft Determinism

There have been many attempts, needless to say, to slip around determinism and defend the existence of free choices and actions. The basic principle of determinism, the principle of universal causation, seems too undeniable to give up. Still, the need to hold people responsible for their actions is also too important to abandon. Thus, a series of views has developed that accept the determinist thesis and seek to show that free will and determinism are compatible; these positions are sometimes called **compatibilism**. Those who accept determinism but refuse to accept its harsh conclusion are also referred to as **soft determinists** (as opposed to the **hard determinists**), who accept both determinism and the implication that we are not free or morally responsible. Soft determinists defend compatibilism in several ways. Two of them are worth mentioning in particular:

1. Even if we accept the determinist thesis, it can be argued, we can still believe in freedom. In fact, we must believe in freedom because we can never know all the earlier events and conditions that brought about a particular decision or action. Thus we can never establish that actions are completely determined. It may be true that if we knew everything, we could predict a person's actions with certainty (or at least, a very high probability). But this big if, which is the heart of the determinist thesis, turns out to be unobtainable in practice; so although in theory we can be determinists, in practice we can continue to believe in free will and hold people responsible for their actions.
2. Even if we accept the determinist thesis, we can still distinguish between those causes that make a person's action free and those that make it unfree. There have been a great many suggestions of this kind. Aristotle long ago claimed that an act would be called free if it was not performed (a) from "external compulsion" (the actor was pushed or forced) or (b) out of ignorance (the actor didn't know what he or she was doing). Some philosophers have said that an act is free if it is caused by reason; others have said that it is free if it is caused by consciousness or by the will. David Hume, who was a soft determinist, believed that we could say that an act was free if it followed from a person's "character." This had the practical advantage of also explaining the purpose of praise and blame—namely, to mold or change a person's character so that he or she would, in the future, tend to perform more desirable actions. This is still determinism, but it is soft in that it carves out an area that can be called freedom. Thus it allows us to talk meaningfully of our actions both as being completely determined and as being our own responsibility.

A key motivation for defending compatibilism is to preserve the notion that we are morally responsible for your choices. Recall the objection to compatibilism that unless there is a set of (at least two) alternatives from which we can choose, the apparent choice is not a choice at all. Deciding to go to the movies is a decision only if you can choose whether to go or not. If you are already determined by earlier events and conditions to go, then there is no decision, no matter how long you spend deliberating about whether or not to go. Thus the (hard) determinist concludes, presumably because he himself had no choice but to do so.

Philosopher **Harry Frankfurt** has challenged the view that one must have real options to be morally responsible (sometimes called the **Principle of Alternative Possibilities**). Frankfurt thinks that we have control of and responsibility for our actions even in cases in which we aren't able to do otherwise. He considers a case in which one man plans to pull the trigger to kill someone and does so, even though a third man would have intervened if the gunman had hesitated to ensure that he fired the shot. Even though there is no situation in which the trigger will not be pulled, the gunman has acted freely because his shooting was the result of his own choice. What is decisive is whether I act from my own motives, not whether an alternative possible scenario is actually available.

Even if genuine alternatives are not essential for saying that someone has made a choice and is responsible, it would still seem odd to say that we would be free if we never had genuine alternatives. Many philosophers continue to seek ways to show determinism compatible with free choice among real options.

In Defense of Freedom

Compatibilists claim to defend freedom, calling an act free if the agent wills it. But defenders of both hard determinism and libertarianism question whether it can deliver what it claims: both a determined world and the moral freedom to choose among alternatives. These critics argue that the agent's will is either determined or undetermined. If it is, then the situation is as the hard determinist describes it. All the compatibilist has done is apply the label "free" to a particular class of actions that are, at bottom, as fully determined as every other action or event. If it is not, then the compatibilist in fact recognizes that what we need is a breach in determinism, a conception of our actions, or at least our decisions, as truly free of determination by antecedent causes.

The classic statement of this claim to freedom and responsibility is to be found in the philosophy of Immanuel Kant. We have already seen that Kant (in his Critique of Pure Reason) gave an unqualified endorsement of determinism, arguing that the principle (of universal causation) on which it is based is nothing less than a necessary rule of all human experience. And this includes human actions:

Actions of men are determined in conformity with the order of Nature, by their empirical character and other causes; if we could exhaust all the appearances, there would not be found a single human action which would not be predicted with certainty.

This is surely a statement of the hardest of hard determinism. But Kant also appreciated, as much as any philosopher ever has, the importance of unqualified freedom for human responsibility. (He called freedom, as he had called God, a “postulate” [or presupposition] of **practical reason**, that is, reason applied to practical problems, especially moral ones.) But how could he defend both universal determinism and human freedom? Determinism is true of every possible event and object of human knowledge, Kant said, but it does not follow that it is the only way of viewing things: our acts of will can and should sometimes be viewed differently. Action is a wholly different matter from knowledge. Kant said that we adopt two different standpoints toward the world—one theoretical and the other practical. Insofar as we want to know something, we adopt the standpoint of science and determinism. From that standpoint, every event, including human actions, is determined by sufficient natural explanatory causes (including the states of our brains and various psychological factors). But when we are ready to act, we switch to a practical standpoint.

The main point is this: when we are acting or deciding to act, we must think of our own acts, will, and decisions as the sufficient explanatory causes of our actions, and we cannot continue the causal chain backward to consider whether those acts of will are themselves caused. When we act, in other words, we cannot think of ourselves except as acting freely.

You are about to make a decision: You are finally going to give up smoking. A friend offers you a cigarette on the second day. Yes or no? Do you smoke it? Now it might very well be that, given your personality, your weakness for past habits, and any number of other psychological factors, you are clearly determined to accept the cigarette and thus break your resolution. Your friend, who knows you quite well, may even know this. But you can’t think of yourself in this deterministic way, for you have to make a decision; you can’t simply “find out” what you will do. In other words, you can’t simply predict your own behavior, no matter how much you know about the various causes and factors that allow your friend to predict your behavior. If you were to predict, “I’m going to start smoking again anyway,” you would not be simply predicting; you would be, in that very act, breaking your resolution—that is, deciding to break it. So, when it comes to your own acts and decisions, you have to act as if you were totally free. This, in a way, denies determinism. For, as you are the one who has to make the decision, determinism isn’t relevant. (Kant said, “And to have to think yourself free is to be free.”)

Kant’s suggestion has been taken up in a very different way in more recent European philosophy, in particular by the existentialists. Like Kant, they accept (or at least do not bother to reject) determinism in the sciences. But they insist that, even if determinism is true, we must always view ourselves as agents as necessarily free. When we have to decide what to do, all the knowledge of the possible factors determining our decision is not sufficient to cause us to decide, for we cannot predict our own decision without at the same time making it.

Jean-Paul Sartre, a leading proponent of existentialism, defended the Kantian claim for human freedom as far as it can be defended. In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre argued that we are always absolutely free. This means, as Kant had insisted, that insofar as we act (and Sartre said that we are always acting), our decisions and our actions cannot be viewed as having any causes whatsoever. We must make decisions, and no amount of information or number of causal circumstances can ever replace our need to do so. We can of course refuse to make decisions,

acting as if they were made for us. But even in these cases, we are making decisions, “choosing not to choose,” in a classic Sartrean phrase. We are “condemned to be free,” he says. Again, desires may enter into our deliberation about what to do, but only as “considerations.” We can always act against a desire, no matter how strong, if only we are sufficiently decided that we will do so. A starving man may yet refuse food, if, for example, he is taking part in a hunger strike for a political cause to which he is dedicated. A mother may refuse to save her own life if it would be at the expense of her children. A student who has resolved to study for tomorrow’s test may miss a favorite television show. Whether trivial or grandiose, our every act is a decision, and our every decision is free. And even if we fail to live up to them or find that we “cannot” make them, we are responsible nevertheless. There is no escape from freedom or from responsibility. But as Sartre reminds us, freedom is also always an opportunity.