Human Freedom

A Problem—
a Metaphysical Problem

An Inconsistent Triad

1. Every event has a cause.

2. If every event has a cause, we are not free.

3. We are free.

Causal Determinism (CD)

❖ Let causal determinism be the thesis that every event has a cause.

   ❖ By *cause* let us understand an *antecedent sufficient condition*.

      ❖ To illustrate: if domino D^1 falls, then domino D^2 will fall; if D^2 then, D^3; if, D^3, then D^4; and so on.

         ❖ D^1 falling is sufficient for D^2 falling, which in turn is sufficient for D^3 falling. . .

   ❖ One thought: if CD, then our universe is a line of dominoes, each event necessitating the one which follows.

Why suppose CD?

- Nothing can change or alter unless it's *made* to change or alter.

    - Nothing, in fact, *simply happens*.

    - Aristotelian formulation: only something actual can make something potentially φ become actually φ.

        - Thus, a grey fence is potentially white. Only something actual—e.g., a painter painting it with white paint—can make it actually white.

- Further, CD seems to be a presupposition of all scientific and rational inquiry: to understand something is in part just to know what brought it about.

    - To come to understand, e.g., what illness an afflicted group suffers, one must come to know how it is they came to be ill—to know, that is, what caused their illness.

- Finally, one might argue: if not CD, then any given event might be uncaused; but that result is intolerable; so, CD must be accepted, at least as a unavoidable hypothesis.

Why suppose if CD, we are not free?

- If CD, then every event is necessitated; and if every event is necessitated, then it is made to happen.
    - Yes, one might say, 'tis I myself who makes certain events happen: that is what happens when I freely choose one alternative among others.
    - Yet, a choosing is itself an event. So, if CD, that event too is made to happen.
        - If I choose to go left rather than right, then, if CD, something caused me to choose to go left rather than right. So, going left was necessitated.
            - If it was necessitated, my choice was not free, but determined.
                - So, it was a choice in name only.
- If CD, in fact, the chain of causes extends back before the time of my birth.
    - Obviously, I cannot change things that occurred before I was born.

More Expansively

1. If CD, then every event has a cause.

2. If every event has a cause, then the chain of events in which my actions are implicated is but part of a causal chain extending back to the time before I was born.

3. If so, then I could not have done otherwise than I actually now do.

4. If I cannot do otherwise than I actually now do, then I am not free.

5. So, if CD, I (we) am (are) not free.

    ❖ In sum, if CD, we are but dominoes falling in a row.

Why suppose we are free?

❖ A special theological reason: the free will defense to the problem of evil obviously presupposes free will.

❖ A perfectly neutral reason: we experience ourselves as free.

    ❖ Let us call this the *phenomenology of agency*.

❖ In general, freedom seems a condition on the ascription of responsibility.

    ❖ All practices of praise and blame seem to presuppose freedom.

       ❖ This suggests a simple argument:

          1. We are right to praise/blame S with respect to *a* only if S is responsible for *a*.

          2. S is responsible for *a* only if S could have done otherwise with respect to *a*.

          3. S could have done otherwise with respect to *a* only if S is free with respect to *a*.

          4. We are in fact sometimes right to praise/blame S.

          5. So, for at least some actions *a*, S is free with respect to *a*.

Our Problem

- So, we have a problem: (1), (2), and (3) all seem well-motivated.

- Yet (evidently) at least one of them must be false.

  - Our first question: which?

Maybe (3)?

❖ Might we be unfree?

❖ Consider the Dilemma of Determinism:

    1. Either determinism is true or it is not true.

    2. If determinism is true, then we are not free.

    3. If determinism is not true, then we are not free.

    4. So, we are not free.

DD 1

❖ This is evidently analytic.

   ❖ Either universal causal determinism (CD) obtains or it does not obtain.

      ❖ That is, either every event is caused or at least one event is uncaused.

DD 2

1. We could have done otherwise with respect to *a* only if it was in our power to refrain from *a*.

2. If determinism is true, then there are causal chains stretching back to the times before our births which eventuate in our doing *a*.

3. We are powerless to effect changes in events which occurred before we were born.

4. Hence, if determinism is true, we could not have done otherwise with respect to *a*.

DD 3

1. If determinism is false, then there is at least one uncaused event a.

2. We are free with respect to a only if a is not random.

3. If an event a is uncaused, then a is random.

4. Hence, we are free with respect to a only if a is caused.

5. Hence, if determinism is false, then we are not free.

Perhaps (2)?

* (2) If every event has a cause, we are not free.

    * Compatibilism: CD is correct, but we are none the less free.

        * Free will and universal causal determinism are compatible.

            * How?

Two Thoughts

* We should not conflate *determinism* and *fatalism*.

* We need only reflect cogently on the thought that freedom requires that "S could have done otherwise."

Determinism and Fatalism

❖ Determinism: every event has a cause (CD)

❖ Fatalism: Since whatever is true is necessary (it's *already* true that *a* will happen in the future), and since it is pointless to deliberate about what is necessarily already the case, it is pointless to deliberate about the future.

The Lazy Student

❖ Consider the Lazy Student:

1. Since every event has a cause, it's already causally determined that I will get an A in this seminar or that I won't.

2. If it's already causally determined that I'm going to get an A, then there's no need for me to study.

3. If it's already causally determined that I'm not going to get an A, then there's no point in my studying.

4. If studying is either unnecessary or pointless, then (since studying is otherwise disagreeable to me), I should simply avoid studying.

5. So, I should simply avoid studying. (Party time!)

Something Amiss

- The lazy student conflates determinism and fatalism.

  - Determinism is simply CD.

  - Fatalism contends that my actions make no causal contribution to the world.

    - Perhaps the world is such that the lazy student will get an A only if her studying causes her to do well on her final examination.

      - So, the lazy student should study after all.

Could have done otherwise?

❖ We have been supposing: S is free with respect to action *a* only if S could have done otherwise (e.g. S could have done *b* instead of *a* or simply refrained from doing *a* and done nothing).

❖ So, here is an argument:

1. S is free with respect to *a* only if S could have done otherwise.

2. If CD, then S can never do other than *a* (for any randomly selected *a*).

3. So, if CD, then S is not free.

Challenges to (1) and (2)

- (1) S is free with respect to *a* only if S could have done otherwise.

  - Suppose you go to the theatre and see a fabulous play. You are wholly engaged and have no interest in leaving. Still, it is possible that you have been locked in the theatre for the last entire second act without your knowing it.

    - If so, you could not have left.

      - Still, that is consistent with your having remained there freely.

- (2) If CD, then S can never do other than *a* (for any randomly selected *a*).

  - Even if S was caused to do *a*, it does not follow that it was necessary that S did *a*.

    - Consider an ancient fortune teller, correctly predicting that you would have come to class late today. Does it follow *from that fact alone* that you could not have done otherwise?