

On Incompatibilist Free Will

Abstract:

We consider the possibility of defining some kind of activity which meets the intuitive requirements of incompatibilist free will. Our analysis of this will be done in a fashion which in some ways parallels the work of Pink on this matter. We will then consider the evidence of such free will, both from an introspective perspective and from a scientific perspective. In the latter we consider neurological and psychological evidence.

Defining Incompatibilist Free Will

The definition of free will is a highly nontrivial matter. In order to see why this is so, let us first make a definition for convenience. For a given event, we will say that the *antecedents* for that event are all those things which could potentially have some bearing upon that event.

With this definition, the following conundrum presents itself. Given an event which we call a choice, either that event is completely determined by its antecedents or it is not. Now, if it is, then this choice is not an instance of what we would call incompatibilist free will. There are some who would say that such a choice can still be an instance of free will, provided that the choice was able to be carried out, or in other words provided that the individual making the choice had the power to carry through with it. Locke, for example, believed that this was all that free will amounted to (1997). But according to our intuition, this is not what free will is; for this reason our definition of free will is called *incompatibilist*, because it is incompatible with the choice being determined by its antecedents, or sometimes *libertarian* (Pink, 2004).

Let us then consider the alternative, that the event lacks such determination. Now according to some philosophers, such as Hume, if the event of the choice is not determined by its antecedents, then the leftover part of it which is left undetermined is therefore simply random (1999). But randomness is also not what our intuition about free will seems to be about. If these are the only two alternatives, then clearly there can be no well-defined notion of incompatibilist free will.

However, it is not the case that these are the only two alternatives. Incompatibilist free will cannot be reduced to deterministic processes and randomness, but that does not mean it cannot be defined. Many things can only be defined directly. Even the notion of deterministic processes (which Hume also denied we can understand) can only be defined by grasping it directly. Our intuition about incompatibilist free will tells us that a choice which manifests such incompatibilist freedom must be neither determined by its antecedents, nor be arbitrary. But our intuition is not merely a negative intuition. If it were, then all it would tell us is that incompatibilist freedom is ‘neither of these things.’ The intuition says this, but it also says more. Unfortunately, as with the notion of causal activity, we cannot precisely express this. It can be ostensibly defined only; and such ostensible definition, unfortunately, cannot be given between people in a direct fashion (Pink, 2004). The fact that it cannot be defined in other terms should not trouble us, however. There are many things that cannot be reduced to other things directly: one cannot reduce redness to the other colours, or reduce hearing to sight. Some have argued that emotion cannot be reduced to sensation; the examples may be continued at length, but the essential point will remain (Lewis, 2001b; Whitehead, 1978).

Now it is certainly true that a choice, to be incompatibilistically free, must not be determined by its antecedents. But those antecedents must play some role in it. Nor can it be arbitrary or random in the full sense of that word. While on the one hand it must not follow with necessity from the antecedents it also is not random. Both these statements are true, but are only negations which tell us what incompatibilist free will is not. The fact that there is a third option can only be known directly.

Objections

First, it may be objected that science shows the world is deterministic, or else possibly random (as in some interpretations of quantum theory) (Einstein et al., 1935). But while it is clear that the results of various experiments on non-organic matter are predictable (either deterministically so, or else at least in a probabilistic sense) it does not follow from this that there are no exceptions to these laws which occur

in the brain. Not, that is, that there would be a failure of the laws of nature per se, but rather that in the brain a new feature could be coming into play, either because of the interworkings of the matter in the brain, or else because of the mind as something in addition to the brain (Lewis, 2001).

On the other hand, the behaviour of individuals is frequently predictable. But such predictability does not by any means indicate that the actions are determined by their antecedents. After all a person will ordinarily choose in accordance with their inclinations; a person will, for example, probably not decide to touch a hot iron. However, they could do so. Of course it could be maintained that if they did so, it was because there was some additional factor which made it necessary for them to do so. But such speculation is ad hoc; there is no particular reason to think that this is so without further evidence. So the fact that people often choose things in accord with certain inclinations, and that as a consequence it is often possible to predict their behaviour, does not mean that it is not possible for people to break with these patterns in certain circumstances. Therefore, we may say that the fact that all other things being equal, people tend to choose in accordance with certain inclinations, does not mean that they were not free to do otherwise.

Finally, we must consider the neurological evidence. This is rather extensive, so we will take only a cross-section of such results. The first we will take is the experiment in (Libet et al., 1983). In this experiment participants were asked to move their hand at a random time and to report the time when they chose to move it. It was found that the neurological activity began before they had a feeling of choosing to move the hand. It might seem, then, that this would indicate that there was no conscious choice involved. However, there are several points that we must mention about this.

First, Libet himself did not believe that the experiment demonstrated anything against incompatibilist free will, because he held that the action could still be consciously cancelled or refused after the unconscious neurological activity (Libet, 2003). Of course, it is not clear whether or not this is actually true. We mention it for completeness.

Another issue which must be raised is that this situation was rather contrived, in that the participants had already decided when the experiment began to raise their hand at a random time. It is quite possible that this choice was where the real freedom occurred, and that once this choice was made, the random time was unconsciously selected. This idea is also suggested by a variant of the experiment in (Haggard et al., 1999). In this variation, participants were asked to wait until they moved their hand to decide which hand to move. They found that the feeling of choice correlated much more closely with the choice of which hand to move than with the time of the movement. This is consistent with the idea that the freedom comes more in deciding what action to perform, rather than how or when exactly to perform it. In the experiment of Libet et al., the participants were being asked to *plan ahead* in some manner, so it is not surprising that some neural activity preceded the conscious decision to move.

For after all, in every action in which we feel there to be some choice, there are numerous parts of the action which clearly have no freedom in them. The action of walking, for example, is left mostly to the unconsciousness, although the choice *to* walk in general may be free. In any instance of muscle memory, the act in a general fashion is in consciousness but the details of the movements involved remain on an unconscious level (Dow, 2004). A person who walks, therefore, does not in general choose precisely where their feet will move or even the rate at which they walk. But they may choose *that* they walk. Therefore we should not look for freedom in the details of how movements are carried out, but rather in the general guidance of the actions as a whole. In fact, any free choice may be found only in the more general decisions in life, rather than in the details; at the very least, any detailed movement will involve a great deal of non-conscious action as well as conscious action, which may or may not be free. Therefore the experiment of Libet et al. is really too contrived to indicate anything about the incompatibilist free will in general.

In addition, it must be asked whether we should expect the consciousness of the free act to come at

the same time as the free act itself. In general, it does not seem to be necessary that we should be aware of our own free choice at the same time as we make it. To be aware of it somewhat later would be fine as well, or at least would not rule out all theories of incompatibilist free will.

While we are discussing the neurological evidence about free will, we must mention the work of Ammon and Gandevia (Ammon & Gandevia, 1990). Using magnetic stimulation of the brain, they showed that they could probabilistically alter the outcome of an experiment analogous to that of Libet et al. Furthermore, participants did not feel any less free in this process. But this is not surprising in the slightest. We have already said that the antecedents to a free choice have some influence upon that choice. All that we deny is that the result follows with necessity from the antecedents. Now when stimulating the brain, this is yet another antecedent which will of course alter the potential outcome. To be a free choice, it is not necessary that all the influences should be known to the chooser. Unconscious desires often play a role in our decisions, as psychologists have long studied (Freud, 2008). But the fact that not all the influences upon us are consciously known, whether those unknown influences are psychological or physical (as in the case of the magnetic stimulus of Ammon and Gandevia), does not indicate that there is no core of incompatibilist freedom within the choice. In the end a person will often choose in a given way in response to a given set of stimuli, including some unconscious stimuli, but these unconscious stimuli are often manifested as some vaguely-grasped desire, which is one of the antecedents to the choice. And choices usually move towards what is desired (although it is essential that incompatibilist free choices can also be *against* the 'desirable'). But of course even if some unconscious stimuli are not directly manifested, that does not mean they are not an influence upon the choice, without removing the fact that the choice is free to go either way. Therefore, that the magnetic stimulus had such a result says nothing essential about free will.

Other Arguments

Having shown that there is nothing in science, at least as it now stands, that contradicts the theory

of incompatibilist free will, we will consider several reasons for accepting such a theory.

The first reason to do so is discussed by Whitehead (1978). In his discussion he in fact attributes some sort of free decision-making to all things, conscious or unconscious. But in particular, he believed that we experience our own freedom. Such an experience, he believed, underlies our feelings of responsibility. Pink has also shown support for the idea that in introspection we find a direct awareness of our own freedom.

We will not dwell too much upon this, because introspection is inherently difficult to dialogue about. After all, personal experience is impossible to communicate to another who has not had the same experience, or who has not understood their experiences in the same way. Thus, while the present author agrees with Whitehead and Pink on this point, this argument will only be convincing to those who have had such experiences, or who have understood their experiences in this way.

Now it should be noted that one cannot argue that we must have free will in order for responsibility to be part of morality. The feeling of responsibility could be present even when there is no direct responsibility, or even when the forces involved extend back beyond the person who performed the deed. While it could potentially be argued that a person is not responsible for an action unless he chose to do it with incompatibilist free will, that is no argument for the existence of free will. A priori, it is equally possible that people are simply not responsible for anything that they do. And if they are not responsible, then we are also not responsible for punishing them. There are a number of subtle moral issues which could then be raised, largely relating to fatalism, but we will not pursue them here. Our concern is not about ethical values, but ontological fact.

There is one other reason to accept the idea of free will, which was proposed by Lewis (2001). Suppose that whatever we do is purely determined by the motions of physical matter or is random. Then what I write here, and what passes in my mind as I write it, and what the reader reads and what passes in the reader's mind in this process, is entirely determined or random. But if so, then the

opinions we form and express and dialogue about have nothing to do with reason. Now some philosophers, such as Hobbes, have thought that reason itself is a determining force in human thinking (Pink, 2004). But Lewis' argument extends to this as well. If we have no free choice in accepting and rejecting arguments, then we cannot *know* that we are following reason, or that we have only been determined to *think* we are following reason.

Of course, whether or not the above argument from Lewis is convincing, the fact remains that perhaps the world is so designed that we cannot have such certainty. Maybe even we are led into falsehood by necessity, and life would be impossible without it, as Nietzsche suggested (1968). Or one might argue that for something to *seem* reasonable, it is necessary that it should actually be reasonable, no matter how that thought comes about (just as 'yellowness' cannot be anything but 'yellow' no matter how it arises). However, we usually do not directly 'see' the reason involved in an argument, but only judge it to be reasonable based upon analysis of its parts. Therefore, unless we are independently free to make such analysis, Lewis' argument has not been answered in full.

But whether or not Lewis' argument is adequate to show that without freedom of will there can be no epistemological certainty (and surely it could also be argued that such certainty is hardly possible with freedom to perform various analyses, either), that does not change the ontological fact, and ultimately the evidence for or against that fact can only be obtained via empirical means.

Conclusion

The possibility of defining incompatibilist libertarian free will has been shown to hinge upon our intuition of this notion providing a third option for events, other than being simply determined by their antecedents or simply random. The idea that it is not possible to define incompatibilist free will is derived from the requirement that it should be explicable in those two terms (Pink, 2004).

We have considered a number of issues involved with scientific evidence. In particular we have considered the neurological experimentation carried out by (Ammon et al., 1990; Libet et al., 1983;

Haggard et al., 1999). Although such experiments do reveal some potential limitations on the extent of free will, we have argued that they do not contradict human freedom in general. In particular, while they confirm that various outside sources can become influences upon human choice, and while human choice is complex, they do not reveal anything further.

Finally we have considered some reasons for accepting that humans have free will. These reasons are of course not definitive. However, our intention was not to prove the existence of free will but rather to demonstrate that such a position is reasonable and tenable.

References:

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