

Free will and the necessity of the past

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1. Introduction

In *An Essay on Free Will* (1983), Peter van Inwagen offers three arguments for incompatibilism, the view that the free will thesis is incompatible with the thesis of determinism. All are formal versions of the Consequence Argument (1983: 56).

If determinism is true, then our acts are the consequences of the laws of nature and events in the remote past. But it is not up to us what went on before we were born, and neither is it up to us what the laws of nature are. Therefore, the consequences of these things are not up to us. (1983: 16)

I critique the Third Argument (1983: 93–105; 1989: 223–24; 2000: 2–10). My criticism centers on premiss (4), which claims that the past is necessary in some sense:

(4) NP_0 .

' NP ' stands for ' p and no one has, or ever had, any choice about whether p ' (1983: 93; 1989: 224).¹ P_0 is a proposition that expresses the state of the world at some instant in the *remote past*, 'before there were any

¹ An interesting counterexample by McKay and Johnson (1996) has led van Inwagen to revise his definition of ' NP ' (2000: 2–10). This is irrelevant to the topics discussed in this paper, so I use van Inwagen's original formulation.

human beings' (1989: 224). According to (4), no one has, or ever had, any choice about whether a proposition about the remote past is true.

There are two distinct, though related, lines of support for premiss (4): argument (a) and argument (b).

- (a) NP_0 because P_0 is a true proposition about the past and 'no one can change the past' (1983: 92);
- (b) NP_0 because P_0 is a true proposition about the remote past, 'before there were any human beings' (1989: 224).

Loosely speaking, argument (a) suggests that premiss (4) is true because of the *pastness* of P_0 while argument (b) suggests that premiss (4) is true because of its *remoteness*.

I show that argument (a) is invalid (§ 2). A response to this criticism is offered: the move to argument (b). I note that if premiss (4) is supported by argument (b), then the Third Argument does not establish incompatibilism, for having a remote past is not an essential feature of deterministic worlds (§ 3). After extending these considerations to van Inwagen's First Argument (1975; 1983: 68–78), I close with some brief comments about the significance of these results (§4).

2. *The necessity of the past*

According to the free will thesis, some person has or had a choice about whether a true proposition is true.² The thesis of determinism is the conjunction of these two claims:

- For every instant of time, there is a proposition that expresses the state of the world at that instant;
- If p and q are any propositions that express the state of the world at some instants, then the conjunction of p with the laws of nature entails q . (1983: 65)

In the Third Argument, van Inwagen constructs a modal operator, 'N', such that, ' Np ' stands for ' p and no one has, or ever had, any choice about whether p ' (1983: 93). He claims that according to the logic of this operator the following inference rules are valid:

- (α) From $\Box p$ deduce Np ,

² Van Inwagen adopts the traditional view of free will, which holds that a person has free will only if he has alternative possibilities of action (1983: 8). However, nothing I say in this paper presupposes the traditional view of free will. The phrase 'S has a choice about whether p ' is consistent with other accounts of free will, as well. One may hold, for instance, that S has a choice about whether p iff S is the source of the fact that p .

where ‘ p ’ stands for ‘ p is broadly logically necessary,’ and

(β) From $N(p \supset q)$ and Np deduce Nq (1983: 94).

P_0 is a proposition that expresses the state of the world at some time in the remote past, L is the conjunction of the laws of nature, and P is any true proposition (1983: 94–96).

Here is van Inwagen’s Third Argument (1983: 94–95; cf. 1989: 224, 2000: 2).

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|--|------------------------------|
| (1) $\Box ((P_0 \ \& \ L) \supset P)$ | df. ‘determinism’ |
| (2) $\Box (P_0 \supset (L \supset P))$ | from (1) by exportation |
| (3) $N(P_0 \supset (L \supset P))$ | from (2) by (α) |
| (4) NP_0 | premiss |
| (5) $N(L \supset P)$ | from (3), (4) by (β) |
| (6) NL | premiss |
| (7) NP | from (5), (6) by (β) |

The conclusion is that no one has, or ever had, any choice about whether any true proposition is true. Thus, the argument seems to prove incompatibilism: the free will thesis is incompatible with the thesis of determinism.

In support of premisses (4) and (6) van Inwagen writes: ‘I do not see how anyone can reject “ NP_0 ” or “ NL ”. My reasons are essentially those that I gave in support of MAA and MAB in the Second Argument and in support of premisses (5) and (6) of the First Formal Argument’ (1983: 96). Earlier, when discussing the Second Argument (1983: 78–93), he writes: ‘MAA may be regarded as a statement of the familiar principle that no one can change the past’ (1983: 92). In support of premiss (4), van Inwagen is appealing to argument (a) from §1.

- (a) NP_0 because P_0 is a true proposition about the past and ‘no one can change the past.’

If argument (a) supports premiss (4), it should equally support a similar claim about *any* true proposition about the past.

However, the fact that no one *can* change the past is irrelevant to whether anyone ever *had* a choice about whether some true proposition about the past is true. To see why, consider the following example.

Drunk Driver: Smith begins drinking at t_1 and a few hours later he gets in his car and drives home down a dark road in the middle of the night. At t_2 he is driving well over the speed limit and he is so drunk that both his vision and his reaction time are greatly impaired. A moment later, at t_3 , he strikes and kills Jones who is walking in a crosswalk. (cf. van Inwagen 1989: 236)

Suppose that Smith later argues that, given his drunken state and the speed at which he was traveling at t_2 , he had no choice about whether he killed Jones at t_3 . Smith is correct that he had no choice at t_2 about whether he killed Jones at t_3 but this does not mean that he had no choice about whether he killed Jones at t_3 . Prior to t_2 , for instance, Smith apparently had several choices available to him, e.g. whether or not to drink, whether or not to drive, etc. (cf. Taylor and Cahn 1965; Lehrer and Taylor 1965; and Lehrer 1990: 243).

Argument (a) rests on an invalid inference rule. Let ' Pp ' stand for ' p is a true proposition about the past.' Here is the rule:

(χ) From Pp deduce Np .

Suppose that no one can change the past. Thus, from Pp it follows that no one *has* any choice about whether p . Nonetheless, it does not follow from Pp that no one *ever had* any choice about whether p . Consider again our example, Drunk Driver. Let P_2 be a proposition about the entire state of the world at t_2 and let P_3 be the proposition that Smith kills Jones at t_3 . Smith argues as follows.

NP₂
 $N(P_2 \supset P_3)$
 Therefore, NP₃

Suppose Smith claims that the first premiss is true by appeal to rule (χ) and the fact that no one can change the past. Though this may establish that Smith *has* no choice about whether P_2 , the mere pastness of P_2 is irrelevant to whether Smith ever *had* a choice about whether P_2 . Inference rule (χ) is invalid and so is argument (a).

3. *The necessity of the remote past*

The proponent of the Third Argument has an easy response. P_0 is a proposition about the remote past, a time prior to the existence of human beings. Though Smith had a choice about whether P_3 , neither he nor anyone else ever had any choice about whether P_0 . Accordingly, premiss (4) is supported by argument (b) from §1 rather than argument (a).

(b) NP₀ because P_0 is a true proposition about the remote past.

The proponent of the Third Argument might argue that since P_0 describes the state of the world at a time prior to the existence of any human beings, no one has, or ever had, any choice about whether P_0 . No one was around back then to have had such a choice.

It is not the *pastness* of our past that gives it its necessity, according to argument (b). Rather it is the *remoteness* of some of our past – the

fact that our past continues back to a time prior to our existence. If determinism is a threat to our free will, it is so only because there are true propositions about the remote past. If this is the case, though, then the Third Argument cannot provide a general argument for incompatibilism. That there is a remote past is a *contingent* truth about the actual world, one that is not essential to the thesis of determinism.

Consider, for instance, the possible world W . Suppose that W is a determined world such that some adult person exists at every instant. Thus, W has no remote past. At its first moment of existence lived Adam, an adult person with all the knowledge, powers, and abilities necessary for moral responsibility. Shortly after Adam comes Eve, and the rest is history.³ For each of the propositions that comprise W , someone is such that he has, or had, a choice about whether that proposition is true – at least there is no reason to doubt this claim. The Third Argument is not a general argument for incompatibilism. At most, the Third Argument proves the weaker claim that persons cannot have free will in determined worlds with a remote past.

In response, one might offer another version of the Consequent Argument: the First Argument (1975; 1983: 68–78). In the First Argument, P_0 is a proposition that expresses the state of the world at some time prior to the birth of some arbitrary person, J , who happens not to raise his hand at some time t . The conclusion is that if determinism is true, J could not have raised his hand at t . The First Argument does not assume that there is a remote past, so it seems immune to my criticism.

The First Argument does assume that every person has a *remote individual past*, that is, that for each person there is an earlier time when that person failed to exist. Adam is such that he has no remote individual past. There is no true proposition about the way that W was prior to Adam's existence, for there is no way that W was prior to his existence. Since W is, by hypothesis, a determined world, the First Argument is not a general argument for incompatibilism either.

4. Concluding remarks⁴

How significant are my results? Van Inwagen distinguishes between the Traditional Problem and the Compatibility Problem (1983: 2). The first deals with whether or not the free will thesis and the thesis of determin-

³ Jason Turner noted that I might have supposed a world in which time was circular.

⁴ Thanks to Eddy Nahamias and the *Analysis* referee for raising issues that led to the addition of this final section.

ism are true. The second is concerned with whether or not the free will thesis is compatible with the thesis of determinism. Most philosophers believe that the Consequence Argument provides a compelling argument for incompatibilism, and a potential solution to the Compatibility Problem (cf. Warfield 2000: 167). Yet neither of the most popular versions of the argument – the First and Third Arguments – offer general reasons for endorsing incompatibilism. In the context of contemporary discussions of the Compatibility Problem, this is a rather startling and significant result.

On the other hand, Ted Warfield (2000) has already proposed that the Consequence Argument offers a weaker conclusion than is needed, though for reasons very different from mine. According to Warfield, the conclusion of the Consequent Argument is a contingent claim: if determinism is true, then the free will thesis is false. What is needed is a stronger claim: *necessarily* if determinism is true, then the free will thesis is false. The incompatibilist may also argue for something ‘strictly weaker than the proper incompatibilist conclusion’: ‘Necessarily, all deterministic worlds with *C* contain no freedom,’ where *C* is some contingent claim (Warfield 2000: 170).

Following Warfield’s last point, the principles of the Third Argument may be used to show that the thesis of determinism *together with* some other claim – e.g., that *every person has a remote individual past* – is inconsistent with the free will thesis. This Weaker Argument is immune to my criticism.⁵ Two responses are worth mentioning.

First, given only the Weaker Argument, we should judge that Adam is free in *W* but that Eve is not free. Yet it is hard to see how Adam and Eve differ in any important respects. Good arguments for incompatibilism are supposed to expose the tension between the thesis of determinism and the free will thesis. If the Weaker Argument is the best that the incompatibilist has to offer, it remains a mystery why it cannot show that Adam lacks free will in determined world *W*.

Second, my results suggest that most philosophers have failed to identify the conclusion of the Consequence Argument. We thought it proved, or attempted to prove, incompatibilism but at most it proves something weaker. We should be careful not to draw hasty conclusions about the Weaker Argument, as well. Consider thesis *C* of the Weaker Argument: the thesis that, when conjoined with the thesis of determinism, entails that no one has free will. What is the full content of *C*? It might be that *C*, or some other proposition that entails *C*, is incompatible with the free will thesis *independent* of the thesis of

⁵ Randy Clarke and the *Analysis* referee offered versions of the Weaker Argument.

determinism (Turner 2005; Nahmias 2006). Perhaps deterministic models help to expose our worries about free will but these worries persist whether or not determinism is true. It could even be the case that there is a *necessarily true* proposition that is incompatible with the free will thesis (Strawson 2004). Here the incompatibilist's victory is a mere technicality, so the compatibilist should be able to live with this result, too.⁶

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