A New Argument Against Compatibilism

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Abstract

If one's solution to the free will problem is in terms of real causal powers of agents then one ought to be an incompatibilist. Some premises are contentious but the following new argument for incompatibilism is advanced:

1. If causal determinism is true, all events are necessitated

2. If all events are necessitated, then there are no powers

3. Free will consists in the exercise of an agent's powers

Therefore, if causal determinism is true, there is no free will; which is to say that free will is incompatible with determinism, so compatibilism is false.

Does a powers-based solution to the free will problem require a commitment to either compatibilism or incompatibilism? One answer is that there is no connection at all. If so, then those who offer an account of free will in terms of the actions of powerful agents have a further decision to make on whether free will is compatible with determinism. But there are some who use a dispositional approach as part of a defence of compatibilism (Vihvelin 2004, Fara 2008 and Berofsky 2011), suggesting that powers are particularly suited to a compatibilist position. In contrast, we argue that, with the correct theories of powers and of free will, a powers-based solution should come down firmly on the side of incompatibilism. Free will as a power, we argue, should commit one to incompatibilism: such empowerment of agents being incompatible with determinism as it should be understood by those who are serious about powers.

The argument is, as far as we know, a new one. A reason for this is that it invokes the idea of a dispositional modality involved in the exercise of powers. Although this idea is itself an old one, being found in Aristotle and Aquinas, it has only recently been revived and promoted in the Mumford and Anjum (2011) theory of causation. The argument differs from van Inwagen's well-known consequence argument, which is also for incompatibilism (van Inwagen 1983; ch. 3). The new argument is as follows:

1. If causal determinism is true, all events are necessitated

2. If all events are necessitated, there are no powers

3. Free will consists in the exercise of an agent's causal powers

Therefore, if causal determinism is true, there is no free will,

In other words, free will is incompatible with causal determinism, which is to say that compatibilism is false.

Given that the argument employs some controversial premises, we will explain and to an extent defend each one. We think that every premise is indeed true and defensible though a full defence would be an involved matter and cannot be given here. Our current aim is to draw attention to the incompatibilist consequences of having a certain view of powers – one that we believe to be perfectly right – coupled with a powers-based theory of free will.

Premise 1: If causal determinism is true, all events are necessitated

We take it that this premise is one of the main reasons why free will is considered to be a problem under an assumption of determinism. Determinism brings with it necessity. We find articulations of determinism like this in authorities such as Watson (1982: 2), who speaks of determinism meaning that every state or event is causally necessitated by preceding states or events, and Kane (1996: 8) who says similarly that an event is determined just in case there are conditions whose joint occurrence is sufficient for the occurrence of that event.

We acknowledge that there are some accounts of determinism that do not have causation as its vehicle: so perhaps there is determinism that is not causal determinism. Müller (2009: 49), for instance, articulates determinism in terms of there being only one possible future. Perhaps that suffices for some purposes but it is not our preferred account. The concern raised by determinism is not just about there being only one future but that the past determines or necessitates it. Without this latter component, it is not clear that determinism is sufficiently distinguished from fatalism, for instance. We take it that the real problem of free will resides in concern that the past fixes the present and the future. Causation is often the way some think it does so, as Watson says.

There is, of course, a half-way position in which we can have the notion of the past fixing the future but remain agnostic as to how it does so. A Lewisian might articulate determinism, for instance, by saying that if two worlds with the same laws of nature coincide in their histories until time *t*, then they will do so after *t* (this is suggested, not exactly in this form, in Lewis 1983: 32-3, for example). Our argument does not concern determinism articulated in that manner but it should be noted that this is unlikely to be an attractive way of understanding determinism for anyone who proposes real causal powers of agents as the solution to the free will problem. Determinism understood in a Lewisian way is conducive to a package of Humean metaphysics that the realist about causal powers will reject. It seems quite plausible, in contrast, that the powers theorist would have our kind of determinism in mind, with it residing in an all-encompassing web of causation.

Premise 2: If all events are necessitated, there are no powers

Premise 2 is likely to be the most controversial, even among powers theorists. We think this a crucial claim, however. It seems a plausible conjecture that those who base free will on the powers of agents have not committed to its incompatibility with determinism primarily because they have not appreciated the special modal character of powers, which Mumford and Anjum (2011) call the dispositional modality. The key feature of the dispositional modality, in relation to the present argument, is that it entails that if an event or state of affairs is a matter of necessity then it cannot be the manifestation of a power (thesis D in Mumford and Anjum 2011: 177).

The basis of the dispositional modality is the thought that causal powers are essentially capable of prevention and interference (Mumford 1998: 87), which shows that they do not necessitate their effects or manifestations. Even in the cases of successful causal production, for instance when a

struck match lights, manifesting its disposition of flammability, it was not necessary that it did so. Something could have interfered with the process – water could have been thrown on the match before flame took hold – even if as a matter of fact it did not do so. Mumford and Anjum (2011; chs 3 and 8) argue that this feature is essential to something being a causal power and it follows that if all is necessitated then nothing is genuinely powerful in this sense.

What is controversial about this claim is that it goes against a well-established tradition of understanding powers as being about or involving necessity: a tradition that we think nevertheless misguided. It may simply be that Hume's characterisation of powers as involving necessary connections in nature (see Hume 1739: 161) was taken up and defended by anti-Humeans. We find statements of the necessity of powers in Harré and Madden (1975), for instance, as well as Ellis (2001) and Bird (2007). But necessity, we argue, is going too far. Powers certainly add something modally stronger to the world than the pure contingency of Humeanism, but they evidently cannot add something as strong as necessity. Powers can be held back and prevented from manifesting themselves even when receiving their appropriate stimulus. Indeed, it is this feature that leads to problems whenever a conditional analysis of dispositions is offered in terms of their antecedent stimuli and consequent manifestations. Something can be added to the stimulus that prevents the effect, which is why such conditionals always have to be taken *ceteris paribus*, and a huge literature has been generated by a series of attempts to produce an analysis that avoids this issue (for just one example see Gundersen 2002).

The mistaken idea that powers are about necessity may be what convinces Vihvelin (2004: 175) to say that 'Everyone agrees that dispositions are compatible with determinism'. We do not agree with this, certainly not given our first premise that causal determinism involves necessity. We note also that some other dispositionalist accounts of free will come close to the dispositional modality, without quite grasping it fully. Steward (2012), for example, takes two-way powers as the basis for an account of free will (see also Alvarez 2013). A two-way power is one that we can choose to exercise or not, which we would take to be the expression of the dispositional modality in the special case of agential powers.

Premise 3: Free will consists in the exercise of an agent's causal powers

Although capable of a host of different formulations (see O'Connor 2000, Ellis 2012, Groff 2012: ch. 5, Lowe 2012 and Steward 2012), this should be the least controversial premise, given that our argument concerns a powers-based solution to the free will problem. The solution is simply that agents are suitably empowered with a set of mainly psychological powers that enable them to deliberate, choose, plan, imagine, intend, and so on. Even where the language of powers is not used explicitly, it may be possible for the approach to claim a natural allegiance with any account that emphasises the special abilities that agents have to make choices (with Frankfurt 1971, for instance, though Frankfurt is a compatibilist).

A positive account of free will, we think, is absolutely essential. It is not simply enough to show that determinism is false in order to establish the existence of free will. The free will debate is sometimes

presented as if it is a simple choice between three options: determinism, compatibilism and libertarianism. But there is a fourth option that is arguably the least desirable of the lot. The world could be indeterministic but there be no free will either. Necessity is not freedom (see Berofsky 2011: 166) but nor is pure chance. We don't want to be slave to either. This is why we think it vital to have the correct metaphysics of powers in play: one in which the dispositional modality allows us to steer a clear path between the twin perils of modal dualism.

When we are presented with a stark choice between necessity and the absolute contingency of Humeanism, which is what we mean by modal dualism, freedom seems bound to be problematic. If anything really can follow anything else, then we are no more in control of our actions than if events are strictly necessitated. But, we would argue, nature is not like that. There are more or less reliable tendencies in play, including in the cases of the causal powers of agents. These powers are seen as modally irreducible in nature, neither necessary nor purely contingent, and thus avoiding the hopelessness of each. But if our world has a degree of indeterminism – not completely the indeterminism of pure randomness – then the door is open for a form or libertarianism provided we can show there is a positive theory of free will. This is what the powers account seeks to deliver.

Conclusion

We take it that the validity of the argument is unproblematic. We have accepted that the premises are contentious, to varying degrees, and that full arguments in their defence would have to be developed in more length. However, we maintain that the argument provides a new perspective on what would count as a genuinely dispositional, powers-based theory of free will. Equipped with it, we argue, that solution has to be an incompatibilist one.

We do take causal determinism to be false. One might think that even if it were true, this would not affect free will. Free will is about the exercise of powers and there's no reason why they should be affected just because one has been caused to exercise those powers. Compatibilism looks to be an option for a powers-based theory. But we have argued here instead that a genuine powers approach should take the dispositional modality seriously. If it does so, and premise 2 is granted, then we claim that there is a conclusive reason to be an incompatibilist.

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