

3 Freedom and determinism

3.1 The Problem of Freedom and Determinism

Suppose that on your way home one day you discover someone else's wallet on the sidewalk. It's full of cash, credit cards, and so forth. But it also contains a driver's license, from which you can tell that the wallet belongs to a fellow who lives nearby, in a house that you'll pass on your way home. You deliberate about what to do. You could return the wallet to its owner with all of its contents intact, of course. Or you could return it after taking out some of the cash, or return it after taking out all of the cash, or just leave it where it is, or take out the cash and then leave it where it is. Suppose that while deliberating, you keep thinking about how you would really like to use the money to buy a bunch of new computer games. So in the end, even though you feel a little guilty about doing so, you decide to take all the cash and then leave the wallet where you found it. And that's what you do.

Now let's shift gears for a minute. We all know that the future is to some extent influenced by the past. For example, pink elephants don't just appear out of thin air. In order for a pink elephant to appear in a place, there has to be some sort of history leading up to that elephant's being in that place. (Normally this would involve a series of events such as the elephant's walking over to the location in question. Not to mention something that accounts for the elephant's being pink.) So we know that the future is to some extent shaped by the past. But to what extent? Well, suppose it turns out that the future is *entirely fixed* by the past. That is, suppose it turns out that *every* event in the history of the world is completely determined by antecedent conditions. This supposition certainly seems like the kind of thing that might be true, and it also fits with the way we ordinarily think about events as always having causes.

OK, now let's return to the example of your finding a wallet and keeping the money it contains. On our current supposition (that the future is entirely determined by the past), it turns out that, given the way things were way back when, it was guaranteed that you would find the wallet just as you did, go through the same thought processes that you in fact went through, and then decide and act as you did. In fact (given our current supposition) all of this was in some sense determined to happen long before you or any other humans walked the face of the earth.

One question that such a 'deterministic' model raises is whether you were really acting freely when you took that money from the wallet. And in fact it is easy to appreciate the thought that you would *not* be acting freely when you took the money (or did anything else) in such a deterministic world. You would be more like a machine: a wind-up toy, or a robot, or a computer. Moreover, it seems to follow that you would not in that case be morally responsible for your action (any more than wind-up toys or computers are morally responsible for their actions).

But now consider the possibility that the world is not deterministic in the way mentioned above. And suppose that in fact there was some 'randomness' in the causal history of your action of taking the money from the wallet. (For example, suppose that your deliberation process consisted of a series of neuron-firing events in your brain, and also that a certain crucial one of those events was not determined by everything that came before it, so that there was literally a 50 per cent chance that you would decide to take the money and a 50 percent chance that you would decide to return the wallet intact.) Now it might be easier to see how you could be acting freely, in such an 'indeterministic' universe. But it is still difficult to see how you could be *morally responsible* for your action in that case. After all, why should you be responsible for something that just happened randomly and was not, in any sense, up to you?

We seem to have a dilemma. On the one hand, if we say that your action was completely determined by the past, then it looks like we have to say that you are not acting freely and are not morally responsible for your action. But, on the other hand, if we say that there was some randomness in the causal history leading up to your action, then it appears that we have to say that your action is not really up to you and, hence, that you are not morally responsible for the action. Thus either way it seems difficult to give an account of your action according to which you are morally

responsible for it. This is The Problem of Freedom and Determinism, which is the subject of the present chapter. We will begin our examination of this problem with a discussion of the notion of freedom.

3.2 Freedom

There are many different kinds of freedom. There is freedom to go and to do more or less as you please. (This is a kind of freedom that those in prison do not possess.) There is freedom from oppression by your government. There is freedom from financial worries. There is freedom from nagging by your parents. There is freedom to write and publish whatever you want.

Meanwhile, there is one particular kind of freedom that is especially relevant to the topic of freedom and determinism: the kind of freedom that is required for moral responsibility. For even though moral responsibility requires none of the other kinds of freedom mentioned above, there is nevertheless *some* type of freedom that is a necessary condition for moral responsibility. After all, we don't take a person to be morally responsible for what she has done if we think that she was not acting freely in any way at all. (And this goes both for cases in which we think a person is morally responsible for performing an action that is morally wrong as well as cases in which we think a person is morally responsible for performing an action that is morally right.)

So there is a type of freedom that is relevant to moral responsibility – that is, a type of freedom that can be defined in terms of the role that it plays in our thinking about moral responsibility. For the purposes of this chapter, we will understand *moral freedom* to be the kind of freedom that is a necessary condition for moral responsibility. And for the remainder of the chapter, when we discuss freedom, it is this particular kind of freedom – moral freedom – that we will be talking about.

What can we say about this kind of freedom? Well, it is natural to think that people often are morally responsible for their actions. Which means that it is natural to think that people are at least sometimes free (in the sense required for moral responsibility). Here, then, is a very natural and intuitive thesis that most people would endorse.

Free Will

People sometimes act freely.