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Determinismus und Freiheit

BA-Seminar
Freitags, 12-14 Uhr c.t.
Raum M109





Peter van Inwagen

The Mystery of Metaphysical Freedom (1988)



Peter van Inwagen: The mystery of metaphysical freedom. In Peter van Inwagen & Dean W. Zimmerman (eds.), Van Inwagen, P.; Zimmerman, D. *Metaphysics: The Big Questions*. Blackwell. pp. 365-373 (1998)



Fragen:

- Was versteht van Inwagen unter "metaphysischer Freiheit"?
- Was versteht van Inwagen unter einem negativen Begriff der Freiheit?
Was im Gegensatz dazu unter einem positiven?
- Wie versteht van Inwagen das Modalverb "können" ("can")?
- Inwiefern ist metaphysische Freiheit inkompatibel mit dem Determinismus und dem Indeterminismus?



“In one sense of the word, an agent is "free" to the extent that his actions are not subject to control by the state. It is, however, obvious that an agent may be free in this sense but unfree in other senses. However little the state may interfere with my actions, I may be unfree because I am paralyzed from the waist down or because I am subject to a neurotic fear of open spaces that makes it impossible for me to venture out of doors or because I am so poor that I am unable to afford the necessary means to what I want to do. These examples suggest that freedom is a merely negative concept, that freedom is freedom from constraint, that freedom consists in the mere absence of. If freedom is in this sense a negative concept, this explains why there are many kinds of freedom: there are many kinds of freedom because there are many kinds of constraint.”



“When we turn from politics and psychology and economics to metaphysics, however, we encounter discussions of freedom - discussions involving words like "freedom," "free," and "freely" - that it is hard to account for if freedom is no more than a negative concept.”



“I think it is fairly evident that the concept of freedom that figures in the discussions raised by these metaphysical problems is the same concept. I think it is not easy to see how this concept could be understood as a merely negative concept, as a concept that applies to any agent just in the case that that agent's acts are not subject to some sort of constraint.

Consider, for example, the problem of free will and determinism [...]. Although my present

actions may be determined by the laws of nature and the state of the world before my birth (indeed, millions of years ago), it does not follow that this state of affairs places me under any constraint. A constraint on one's behavior is an impediment to the exercise of one's will.”



“But it is certainly not inevitable that my will encounter an obstacle on any given occasion in a deterministic world, and even in an indeterministic world, my will must encounter obstacles on many occasions. Indeed, there is no reason to suppose that my will will encounter obstacles more frequently in a deterministic world than in an indeterministic world. Anyone who believes that freedom is a negative concept will therefore conclude that the so-called problem of free will and determinism is founded on confusion. (So Hobbes, Hume, Mill, and many other philosophers have concluded.)”



“The situation is similar with the problem of divine knowledge of future human actions. We are often told that there really is no problem about this, since the fact that God knows that one is going to tell a lie (for example) in no way forces one to lie. [...]

All this can sound very sensible. And yet one is left with the feeling that the freedom this leaves us with is, in Kant's words, a "wretched subterfuge." This feeling can be embodied in an argument. The argument is, to my mind, a rather powerful one. If the argument is correct, then freedom is not a merely negative concept. Or, at any rate, there is *a* concept of freedom that is not a merely negative concept, and this concept is a very important one. It is this concept, I believe, that figures in the metaphysical problems I have cited. I will call it metaphysical freedom.”



“One of the simple words that expresses the concept of metaphysical freedom in English is "can." What are we asking when we ask whether I am free to tell the truth tomorrow if it has been determined by events in the remote past and the laws of nature that when, tomorrow, I confront a choice between lying and telling the truth, I shall lie? Only this: "I am free to tell the truth" means "I *can* tell the truth," and "I am not free to tell the truth" means "I *cannot* tell the truth." Metaphysical freedom, therefore, is simply what is expressed by "can."”



“We must take care to avoid two possible sources of confusion: the ambiguity of the word "can" and false philosophical theories about what is expressed by certain sentences in which it occurs.”



“As to the first point, the word "can" is extremely versatile, and can be used to express many ideas other than the idea of metaphysical freedom (a fact illustrated by this sentence). One example must suffice. In negative constructions, "can" sometimes expresses an idea that might be called "moral impossibility." One might say to a hard-hearted son, "You can't refuse to take your own mother into your house" — even though one knows perfectly well that in the sense of "can" we have been discussing he certainly *can* refuse to take his own mother into his house because he has already done so.”



“We must take care that if we propose to use the simple word “can” as our means to an understanding of metaphysical freedom, we do not allow our understanding of metaphysical freedom to be influenced by any of the many other concepts this simple word can be used to express. The best way to avoid such influence is not to rely on the word “can” alone in our attempt to understand metaphysical freedom, but to examine also as many as possible of the other simple, ordinary words and phrases that can be used to express the concept of metaphysical freedom (or unfreedom). To illustrate what I mean, here are three sentences in which idioms of ordinary speech that do not involve “can” are used to express the concepts of metaphysical freedom and unfreedom:

- He will *be able* to be there in time for the meeting.
- You must not blame her for missing the meeting; she *had no choice* about that.
- It was simply *not within my power* to attend the meeting.”



“False theories about the meanings of philosophically important words and phrases abound, and the philosophically important word “can” is no exception to this generalization. There are those who, recognizing the importance of idioms like “I can do X” for the metaphysical problems of freedom, have simply insisted that this word means something that supports their favorite philosophical theories. An example of such a theory would be: “I can do X” means “There exists no impediment, obstacle, or barrier to my doing X; nothing prevents my doing X.” I will not argue specifically for the conclusion that this theory is false; the argument I will later present for the incompatibility of metaphysical freedom and determinism, however, will have the consequence that this theory about the meaning of “I can” is false - since, if the theory were true, metaphysical freedom would be compatible with determinism.”



“As Carl Ginet has said, our freedom can only be the freedom to add to the actual past - for the past is unalterable; it is what we *find ourselves with* in any situation in which we are contemplating some course of action. (Or to put this point in the terms I have been recommending, all we *can* do, all we are *able to do*, is add to the actual past.) And, unless we are bona fide miracle workers, we can make only such additions to the actual past as conform to the laws of nature.

But the only additions to the actual past that conform to a deterministic set of laws are the additions that are actually made, the additions that collectively make up the actual present and the actual future. This is simply a statement of what is meant by determinism, which is the thesis that the laws of nature and the past together determine a unique future. Therefore, if the laws of nature are deterministic, we are free to do only what we in fact do - that is, we are unable to act otherwise than we do and are ipso facto not free in the sense in which the term "free" is properly used in metaphysics.”



“If the argument is correct, as I have said, it refutes the idea that metaphysical freedom is a merely negative concept, for the past and the laws of nature are not impediments to the exercise of one's will. But, more generally, we may well ask what we are to say of this argument and its consequences, for these consequences go far beyond establishing that metaphysical freedom is not a negative concept.”



“One possible reaction to the argument would be to say [...] that, because determinism is true, we therefore do not possess metaphysical freedom. (An epistemologically more modest reaction would be to say that, because we do not know whether determinism is true, we do not know whether we possess metaphysical freedom.)”



“For the moment, let us see where the argument leaves those of us who would like to say that we are free and that we know this. Many philosophers have regarded it as evident that we are free, and have accepted something like our argument for the incompatibility of determinism and metaphysical freedom. These philosophers, therefore, have denied that the world is deterministic, have denied that the laws of nature and the past together determine a unique future.”



“These philosophers (among whom I count myself) face a difficult problem. They assert or postulate that the laws of nature are indeterministic. One might ask how they know this, or what gives them the right to this postulate. These are good questions, but I will not consider them. I want to consider instead another question that these philosophers must answer: does postulating or asserting that the laws of nature are indeterministic provide any comfort to those who would like to believe in metaphysical freedom? If the laws are indeterministic, then more than one future is indeed consistent with those laws and the actual past and present - but how can anyone have any choice about which of these futures becomes actual? Isn't it just a matter of chance which becomes actual? If God were to "return" an indeterministic world to precisely its state at some time in the past, and then let the world go forward again, things might indeed happen differently the "second" time. But then, if the world is indeterministic, isn't it just a matter of chance how things *did* happen in the one, actual course of events? And if what we do is just a matter of chance - well, who would want to call that freedom?”



“It seems, therefore, that, in addition to our argument for the incompatibility of metaphysical freedom and determinism, we have an argument for the incompatibility of metaphysical freedom and indeterminism. But the world must be either deterministic or indeterministic. It follows that, unless one of the two arguments contains some logical error or proceeds from a false premise, metaphysical freedom must be a contradiction in terms, as much an impossibility as a round square or a liquid wine bottle. We may in fact *define* the problem of metaphysical freedom as the problem of discovering whether either of the/ two arguments is defective, and (if so) of locating the defect or defects”



“The problem of metaphysical freedom, so conceived, is a very *abstract* problem. Although, for historical reasons, it is natural to think of the problem as essentially involving reference to the physical world and its supposedly intransigent laws (“man's life is a line that nature commands him to describe on the surface of the earth . . .”), it does not. For suppose that man's life is in fact *not* a line that nature commands him to describe on the surface of the earth. Suppose that nature presents us with two or seventeen or ten thousand lines inscribed on the surface of the earth, and says to us (in effect), “Choose whichever one of them you like.” How could it be that we really had any choice about which “line” we followed, when any deliberations we might undertake would themselves have to be segments of the lines that nature has offered us? Imagine that two of the lines that nature offers me diverge at some point - that is, imagine that the lines present the aspect of a fork in a road or a river. The common part of the two lines, the segment that immediately precedes their divergence, represents the course of my deliberations; their divergence from a common origin represents diagrammatically the fact that *either of two* futures is a possible outcome of my deliberations. My deliberations, therefore, do not determine which future I shall choose. But then what *does* determine which future I shall choose? Only chance, it would seem, and if only chance determines which of two paths into the future I follow, then how can it be that I have a choice about which of them I follow?”



“The concept of metaphysical freedom seems, then, to be contradictory. One way to react to the seeming contradiction in this concept would be to conclude that it was real: metaphysical freedom seems contradictory because it *is* contradictory. (This was the conclusion reached by C. D. Broad.)”



“But none of us really believes this. A philosopher may argue that consciousness does not exist or that knowledge is impossible or that there is no right or wrong. But no one really believes that he himself is not conscious or that no one knows whether there is such a city as Warsaw; and only interested parties believe that there is nothing morally objectionable about child brothels or slavery or the employment of poison gas against civilians. And everyone really believes in metaphysical freedom, whether or not he would call it by that name. Dr Johnson famously said, "Sir, we know our will's free, and there's an end on't." Perhaps he was wrong, but he was saying something we all believe. Whether or not we are all, as the existentialists said, condemned to freedom, we are certainly all condemned to *believe in* freedom - and, in fact, condemned to believe that we *know* that we are free.”



“I would ask you to try a simple experiment. Consider some important choice that confronts you. You must, perhaps, decide whether to marry a certain person, or whether to undergo a dangerous but promising course of medical treatment, or whether to report to a superior a colleague you suspect of embezzling money. (Tailor the example to your own life.) Consider the two courses of action that confront you; since I don't know what you have chosen, I'll call them simply A and B. Do you really not believe that you are *able* to do A and *able* to do B? If you do not, then how can it be that you are trying to decide which of them to do? It seems clear to me that when I am trying to decide which of two things to do, I commit myself, by the very act of attempting to decide between the two, to the thesis that I am able to do each of them. If I am trying to decide whether to report my colleague, then, by the very act of trying to reach a decision about this matter, I commit myself both to the thesis that I am able to report him and to the thesis that I am able to refrain from reporting him: although I obviously cannot do *both* these things, I can (I believe) do *either*. In sum: whether we are free or not, we believe that we are - and I think we believe, too, that we *know* this.”



“But if we know that we are free - indeed, if we are free and do not know it - there is some defect in one or both of our two arguments. Either there is something wrong with our argument for the conclusion that metaphysical freedom is incompatible with determinism or there is something wrong with our argument for the conclusion that metaphysical freedom is incompatible with *indeterminism* - or there is something wrong with both arguments. But which argument is wrong, and why? (Or are they both wrong?) I do not know. I think no one knows. That is why my title is, “The *Mystery* of Metaphysical Freedom.” I believe I know, as surely as I know anything, that at least one of the two arguments contains a mistake. And yet, having thought very hard about the two arguments for almost thirty years, I confess myself unable to identify even a possible candidate for such a mistake. My *opinion* is that the first argument (the argument for the incompatibility of freedom and determinism) is essentially sound, and that there is, therefore, something wrong with the second argument (the argument for the incompatibility of freedom and indeterminism). But if you ask me *what* it is, I have to say that I am, as current American slang has it, absolutely clueless.”



Vielen Dank für die Aufmerksamkeit!