

Consequence Arguments for Incompatibilism

These are summaries, intended to show that the main ideas might be expressed in various ways. Possibly, these arguments are significantly different from one another.

Original Van Inwagen version

- Premiss 1: If your choices are causally determined by prior events and states that existed before you were born, then any choice you make now is logically implied by the combination of the laws of nature and accurate descriptions of the relevant prior events and states.
- Premiss 2: Events and states that existed before you were born are not up to you, and the laws of nature are not up to you.
- Conclusion 1: Any choice you make now is not up to you.

This conclusion might be restated as “You lack free will”. The motivation behind this argument is to continue it, as follows:

- Premiss 3: You are not morally responsible in virtue of any choice you make now unless that choice is up to you.
- Conclusion 2: If your choices are causally determined by prior events and states that existed before you were born, then you are not morally responsible in virtue of any choice you make now.

This conclusion is normally shortened to something like this: determinism is incompatible with moral responsibility.

Kane version

- Premiss 1: Same as above.
- Premiss 2: You do not have the power to change the events and states that existed before you were born, and you do not have the power to change the laws of nature.
- Conclusion: You do not have the power to change any choice you make now.

Note that in this version, if one tries to restate the conclusion as being about “free will”, “free will” means having the power to change the choice. This is sometimes called “leeway freedom”. Kane sees the argument as being about the incompatibility of determinism and leeway freedom.

- Premiss 3: You are not morally responsible in virtue of any choice you make now unless you either have the power now to change that choice, or if you now lack that power,

that lack exists only because of some prior choices you made that formed your character, and these prior choices were ones that you had the power to change.

Conclusion 2: If your choices are causally determined...[as above], then you are not morally responsible in virtue of any choice you make now.

Kane notes that compatibilists often deny that free will requires leeway freedom. Such compatibilists would presumably deny Premiss 3. Fischer, however, agrees that free will requires leeway freedom, but he denies Premiss 3, and he denies that MR requires free will.

My version

Premiss 1: Same as above.

Premiss 2: Events and states that existed before you were born are not under your control, and the laws of nature are not under your control.

Conclusion 1: Any choice you make now is not under your control.

I avoid making the argument be about leeway freedom. I think Van Inwagen's argument was not necessarily about leeway freedom, but about control. I think concerns about moral responsibility and determinism are concerns about what kind of control an agent must have in order to be MR.

Observation about all versions

Many authors have noted that arguments like these all employ a hidden assumption, or assume an unstated principle, called the "transfer of powerlessness" principle. This assumption would be worded differently, depending on the version of the argument in question. Here is the principle for VanInwagen's version:

If
 X is not up to you, and
 Y is logically implied by X
then
 Y is not up to you.

You can figure out for yourself the corresponding principle for the other versions of the argument. I think the versions of the principle for Van Inwagen's argument and for my version are both false, but that the version of the principle for Kane's argument is true. If that is correct, Kane's argument is significantly different from the others.