

Notes on Kane - part I

Kane defines incompatibilism as the view that free will conflicts with determinism.

Free will is initially defined as a person's having genuinely open alternative paths to the future where it is up to the individual which path to the future is taken.

He allows for any number of different views about determinism, but seems to define it as the future being entirely the result of factors in the past.

My short expression for this: All facts about the future are a function of facts about the past

Another common way of thinking about determinism: given the past, plus all the laws of nature, everything about the future is inevitable.

So, why might it seem reasonable to Kane or to you that determinism with regard to human choice-making might conflict logically with the idea that humans have free will?

Kane also claims that MR is incompatible with determinism about human choice-making. Why?

So, incompatibilism might also be thought of as the view that MR and determinism about human choice-making are logically incompatible.

Be careful about this the rest of the term. People often claim to be incompatibilists. But what are they saying is incompatible?

Don't conflate MR with free will. Later, we'll read Fischer, who thinks free will is incompatible with determinism, but MR is not.

Kane briefly talks about compatibilism, defining it in terms of free will's compatibility with determinism. I find this confusing, since the phrase "free will" is used differently by different people.

He mentions that Fischer is a compatibilist. He doesn't mention that Fischer thinks free will is incompatible with determinism. So how can Fischer be a compatibilist?

Would it be better to say that the compatibilist thinks that MR is compatible with determinism?

What seems to be the driving force behind compatibilism? Why do libertarians resist?

Kane gives us the two big jobs that he thinks libertarians have to accomplish – bottom of p. 9.

Let's clarify: what kind of free will is he talking about in the first job? Would it be better to say that this task of the libertarian is to show that determinism is incompatible with the sort of free will that grounds individual responsibility for choices?

Note that Kane's task number two is actually two tasks. So, there really are three tasks for the libertarian in all:

The Compatibility Problem

The Intelligibility Problem

The Agreement with Science Problem

(Kane is not coming from a religious perspective that says if science fights with my views, then science is wrong. In fact his respect for science makes him combine Problems two and three.)

The Compatibility Problem and the Consequence Argument

The Consequence Argument from Van Inwagen captures, I think, the heart of common concerns about why determinism might be seen to be incompatible with the kind of free will that is needed for MR.

So, I think the full argument ought to have some additions:

If our own acts (and omissions) are not up to us, then we are not responsible for them.
Therefore, if determinism is true, then we are not responsible for any of our acts or omissions.

Feel the force of the argument! It ought to seem quite convincing.

Be very careful about exactly what the argument is saying. It does NOT say that if determinism is true, we are puppets. It does NOT say we are forced to do what we do. It DOES say our choices are not UP TO us (in Van Inwagen's phrasing). Kane changes that phrasing so that the argument says that there is NOTHING WE CAN DO to CHANGE what we choose to do – that is, our futures are already determined and beyond our control.

Both ways of putting it seem to me to be about the CONTROL we have over our intentional actions. I think the Van Inwagen incompatibilist argument is basically this:

If our choices are all caused by prior events and states, which in turn are all caused by prior events and states, and so on back in time, then our choices are all caused by events and states in the past over which we have no control. In that case, we have no control over our choices, and so we are not ever MR.

I have made the argument be explicitly about our choices, rather than about our actions. Is that fair?

Kane rightly points out that the validity of this line of argument has often been questioned by compatibilists, although I find his discussion of TP a little confusing. What is the issue?

Look at the short version of the argument above. How do you get from the premise to the conclusion? There needs to be another premise – something like this:

If our choices are all caused by events and states over which we have no control, then we have no control over our choices.

This is the so-called transfer of powerlessness idea – TP.

Is it right?

After all, as some compatibilists argue, even if everything in our lives is caused by prior events and states, very frequently we would make different choices if our choice-making processes were different. Doesn't that mean we do have control over our choices in those cases?

Kane suggests a way of seeing this:

If determinism about our choice-making is true, then we can't do anything now to CHANGE the course of our histories.

So he sees it as being about the possibility of someone's doing something now that will make the future come out differently from what it has been determined to be by the past. (Recall the garden of forking futures picture at the beginning of the chapter.)

Putting it this way, the incompatibilist is arguing that determinism rules out MR because determinism implies that there are no alternative futures – there is just one way things are going to turn out for you.

The compatibilist is saying that MR doesn't require alternative futures be physically possible. MR only requires that we have the right sort of control over our choice-making. Control doesn't mean that there are actual alternative futures available. Instead, control involves something like this: if we were to choose differently, then a different outcome would ensue.

Kane's ultimate verdict about this dispute: it can't be settled. The libertarian doesn't win. But the worry over alternative futures isn't the real issue anyway. Ultimate responsibility for one's actions is the issue.

I'd put it a little differently:

The real issue is about what sort of control over one's choice-making one needs to have in order to be MR.

Can our choice-making be fully caused, with the outcome fully determined by causal chains stretching back in time, without that implying that we lack the kind of control over our lives necessary for MR?