

Determined, Yet Deciding: Defending Soft Determinism Against Hard Determinism's Counterarguments of Free Will and Morality

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Can we truly be free in a world characterized by cause and effect? Hard Determinism, rooted in Incompatibilism, argues that all human actions are entirely predetermined by prior causes, rendering Free Will an illusion and undermining the basis for moral accountability. Conversely, Soft Determinism, a Compatibilist theory, contends that Free Will is compatible with Determinism when actions are guided by internal desires and reasoning, free from external coercion. Drawing on the works of philosophers such as David Hume, the essay defends Soft Determinism against Hard Determinism's critique that causal determination negates genuine freedom. It emphasizes the distinction between causation and coercion, arguing that Soft Determinism allows for meaningful choice and moral responsibility, even within a deterministic framework. The paper further critiques Hard Determinism's rejection of Free Will, highlighting its implications for ethical systems and justice. Ultimately, Soft Determinism is presented as a more practical and coherent approach to reconciling human autonomy with a causally determined universe.

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Hard Determinism argues that Free Will does not exist because all actions are completely predetermined by prior causes, meaning that our choices are not truly free because their antecedent causes can be traced back. It is part of Incompatibilism, which states that Free Will and Determinism can't both be true at the same time. It should not be confused for fate, which is the view that what happens is meant to happen, beyond the control of the individual (Karofsky et al, pg. 146).

Soft Determinism maintains that Free Will is compatible with Determinism; while all actions may be caused by previous events, we still have the ability to make choices based on our desires. Philosophers David Hume and John Stuart, alongside many Soft Determinists argue that human actions can be free even if they are causally determined, as long as those actions align with one's desires, intentions or rational deliberations with the absence of external coercion. Soft Determinism is part of Compat-

ibilism which states that Free Will can exist alongside Determinism, specifically, Free Will: some human behavior is compelled by external forces, but there are other elements of human behavior that are the result of humans own desires and choices - as long as nothing prevents humans from acting accordingly or contrary to their desires (Karofsky et al, pg. 138).

What is important for the Compatibilist is recognizing that Free Will doesn't mean being able to do anything without any influence, but rather making choices based on our own desires, beliefs and reasoning. It is not important whether humans 'could' choose differently from an action they made, but rather that decisions made are made freely, based on these internal desires and reasoning. Free Will is recognized as the ability to independently choose one's actions. There are two types of causes, the first being Internal causes that states that we are the internal source of our actions. The second type, External causes state that there is an exter-

nal source that influences our actions.

In this paper, I will defend Soft Determinism against the strongest counterargument that Hard Determinism offers to it, which claims that Determinism renders Free Will an illusion and undermines moral responsibility.

The Theory of Soft Determinism

Soft Determinism asserts that Determinism, the concept that all events, including human actions are causally influenced by prior actions, does not eliminate Free Will. Rather than contradicting freedom, Soft Determinism or Compatibilism provides the structure within which meaningful choices free from external coercion can be made. To illustrate this, imagine a student who has been invited to two events on the same evening: partying at this week's Java music night and a writing session to write an important philosophical paper due the next day. From these choices, they choose to attend the writing session. While this choice is influenced by prior causes such as their academic values, the pressure of writing a good philosophical paper, their personal goal of maintaining a high GPA in their philosophy class, maybe even their past experiences of attending Java night leading to poor academic performance, the student's decision is still made freely in a compatibilist argument. They are not coerced to attend the writing session by anyone; rather, their internal motivations and reasoning for wanting to perform well led them to choose writing over partying. Soft Determinism holds that this kind of decision, though causally influenced, is a free act because it aligns with the student's character, values, and desires.

The absence of external coercion, such as if the student were physically forced to attend the writing session and write the paper while being held at gunpoint, ensures that this decision was freely made while being causally determined. Even if they end up writing the paper, the action is no longer free since the presence of external coercion would override their internal motivations and no longer being an authentic

expression of their will, making the action un-free despite being causally determined. This distinction illustrates how, under Soft Determinism, Free Will does not require the absence of causality, but the absence of external compulsion.

For Soft Determinists, actions are still fully determined by humans' present condition, but in the same breath humans are still the writers of said actions. Due to this emphasis on human's specific role in causing a free action, Soft Determinists therefore argue that humans can be held morally responsible for actions they make (Karofsky et al, pg. 143).

The Hard Determinist Counterargument

Hard Determinism, under Incompatibilism, states that Determinism is incompatible with Free Will. Under Hard Determinism, every human action is predetermined by prior causes, leaving no room for moral responsibility. Hard Determinists counter-argue that Soft Determinism fails to adequately address the implications of causation. To Hard Determinists, if all actions are determined, the idea of genuine freedom is incoherent. For instance, if I claim to act freely in choosing what career I will pursue after finishing at St. Lawrence University, my decision is ultimately the result of traits I inherited, environmental factors and prior causes, like a puppet that is controlled by strings. As a result, my future career is the inevitable outcome of determined causes stretching back to before I was even born.

Let us take the example I had in my earlier scenario mentioning the student choosing to write a philosophical paper instead of going to Java music night. According to Hard Determinism, writing is not a choice that is freely made, despite appearing so. While Soft Determinism might view the student's action as freely made because it reflects their values and goals, a Hard Determinist would counter-argue that the student's so-called 'decision' is fully determined by prior causes: perhaps they grew up in a household that emphasized academic achievement in

philosophy, had past failures in philosophical writing that instilled fear of underperformance, or has an ingrained sense of duty not influenced by the social expectations of attending Java nights on campus. The very factors that led the student to value writing the paper over going to Java were causally determined by previous events and influences. All of these influences shaped their identity and preferences, leaving no room for a truly free choice. According to the Hard Determinist, the fact that the student feels like they are choosing doesn't change that: it only reinforces the illusion of Free Will which has no place in a deterministic framework.

The student's decision to show up and write the philosophical paper, then, was determined long before they consciously made it, and they had no real ability to choose otherwise. Had they made a different decision, that choice, too, would have been the result of the same causal chain. Since moral responsibility requires that a person could have chosen differently, within the theory of Hard Determinism no one can then be praised or blamed for their actions. The Hard Determinist will argue that there is only one predetermined future, while also emphasizing that the future doesn't simply unfold; it occurs because of the causes and events that shape it.

Implications of Hard Determinism's Counterargument

Looking at the implications this counterargument by Hard Determinism brings up, it challenges Soft Determinism by highlighting causal chain that predetermines human actions. By framing Free Will as an illusion rather than a reality, Hard Determinism undermines the notion of personal accountability. If people lack control over their actions, moral responsibility becomes a baseless construct. For example, punishing a criminal might be like blaming a Community Assistant for telling their residents to quiet down during quiet hours week; they are both just following what was already determined to happen based on their respective

values and roles. This critique weakens Soft Determinism by suggesting that it relies on a superficial notion of freedom that ignores the deeper implications of Determinism.

Refutation of the Counterargument

While Hard Determinism raises valid concerns about the nature of Soft Determinism, the theory overlooks a key distinction central to Soft Determinism: the difference between causal determinism and actions being forced by something external. Soft Determinists agree that actions are causally determined but argue that this does not negate Free Will as long as individuals act according to their internal motivations free from coercion (past experiences, personal values, etc.). The position that Hard Determinists assume is that freedom requires breaking away from causation, but Soft Determinists argue that breaking away isn't needed to understand freedom or hold people accountable for their actions.

Looking at Hume's view, his writing in 'An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding' mentions liberty as "a power of acting or not acting, according to the determinations of the will; this is, if we choose to remain at rest, we may; if we choose to move, we also may" (Hume, pg. 321). Breaking down what he says, a person is free when they act according to their desires without external interference. Even if Determinism governs the underlying causes of those desires, the individual's ability to deliberate and choose remains intact. This argument connects Compatibilism to moral responsibility, to which Hume claims that the Compatibilist view is the only one that explains how a person can be held morally responsible for their past actions, as it allows society to distinguish between a thief coerced to steal by threats and one who steals out of greed (Hume, pg. 321).

This highlights how Soft Determinists rationalize; in order to hold people morally responsible for their actions, they must have real freedom to choose. Moreover, the Hard Determinist's denial of Free Will leads to unjustifiable

conclusions. If we accept that moral responsibility is an illusion, we undermine ethical systems that rely on holding individuals accountable due to Hard Determinism's lack of moral responsibility. This extreme conclusion shows a big flaw in Hard Determinism, making Soft Determinism more reasonable and useful especially in courts of law.

Conclusion

As I have shown clearly, Soft Determinism provides a solid foundation for connecting Free Will with Determinism by distinguishing between causation and coercion. While Hard Determinism challenges Soft Determinism's position through the counterargument that Determinism negates genuine freedom, it ultimately fails to account for the practical realities of human deliberation and moral responsibility. Soft Determinism clarifies the nature of freedom as acting in accordance with one's own motivations, emerging as a strong philosophical position.

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