

## *The Consequence argument and the Mind argument*

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The Consequence argument for the incompatibility of freedom and determinism is stated eloquently by Peter van Inwagen in his *Essay on Free Will*:

If determinism is true, then our acts are the consequences of the laws of nature and events in the remote past. But it is not up to us what went on before we were born, and neither is it up to us what the laws of nature are. Therefore, the consequences of these things (including our present acts) are not up to us. (1983: 5)

Van Inwagen, like many other libertarians, is convinced by the argument. But there is a problem: one of the presuppositions of the Consequence argument seems to yield a powerful argument for the incompatibility of freedom and *indeterminism*, an argument van Inwagen calls the *Mind* argument.<sup>1</sup> It seems, then, that what many have taken to provide the most powerful reason to reject compatibilism also provides reason to embrace scepticism about the very possibility of freedom. Since van Inwagen is a libertarian and would like to reject both compatibilism and scepticism, he recognizes the need to respond to this problem. His solution is to identify and reject a premiss of the *Mind* argument not shared by the Consequence argument, but he admits that he does not know '*how it could be*' that the premiss in question is false.

<sup>1</sup> Van Inwagen uses the name '*Mind* argument' because he finds it in a number of articles of that journal. Strictly speaking, the argument I discuss in this paper is what van Inwagen calls the 'third strand' of the *Mind* argument. But he claims that the 'point' of all three strands is basically the same and that they stand or fall together. For the sake of simplicity, I will refer to the 'third strand' as the *Mind* argument in what follows.

Recently, Alicia Finch and Ted A. Warfield (1998) have taken up the libertarian's conundrum and come to van Inwagen's aid in an ingenious and unexpected way: they argue that the common presupposition behind both arguments is indeed false, but that the Consequence argument can be reformulated so as to make it sound while the *Mind* argument cannot. In this paper, I argue that Finch and Warfield's strategy ultimately fails to save the libertarian position, and that van Inwagen is right to worry that the two arguments stand or fall together. Nevertheless, I argue that the implications of this conclusion for the freedom that we care about are much less threatening than has been thought.

### 1. *The Consequence argument and the Mind argument*

In setting out the Consequence and *Mind* arguments, I follow Finch and Warfield, who in turn follow van Inwagen, while making slight changes in the abbreviations and order of presentation.

Let me begin with the Consequence argument. Determinism is the thesis that the conjunction of the past and laws of nature fixes a unique possible future. More formally, let  $F$  be any truth, let  $P$  be a proposition expressing the complete state of the world at a time in the distant past, and let  $L$  be a conjunction of the laws of nature. Where ' $\Box$ ' expresses broad logical necessity, it is a consequence of determinism that

$$\Box\{(P \ \& \ L) \rightarrow F\}$$

Now let ' $Np$ ' abbreviate ' $p$  and no one ever has, or ever had, any choice about whether  $p$ ', and understand one's having a choice about whether a truth  $p$  as one's being able to act to ensure  $p$ 's falsity.<sup>2</sup> Finally, the following inference rules are required:

Alpha:  $\Box p$  implies  $Np$

Beta:  $\{Np \ \& \ N(p \rightarrow q)\}$  implies  $Nq$ .

The Consequence argument can now be stated as follows:

#### *The Consequence argument*

- |   |                             |
|---|-----------------------------|
| (1) $\Box\{(P \ \& \ L) \rightarrow F\}$      | Consequence of Determinism  |
| (2) $\Box\{P \rightarrow (L \rightarrow F)\}$ | 1                           |
| (3) $N\{P \rightarrow (L \rightarrow F)\}$    | 2, Alpha                    |
| (4) $NP$                                      | Premiss, fixity of the past |

<sup>2</sup> This is the only place where a question might arise whether Finch and Warfield have precisely captured van Inwagen's intention, and they themselves acknowledge it. When van Inwagen introduces the ' $N$ ' operator, he says only that, '[f]or any sentence  $p$ , the result of prefixing  $p$  with ' $N$ ' may be regarded as an abbreviation for the result of flanking "and no one has, or ever had, a choice about whether" with occurrences of  $p$ ' (1983: 93). However, passages elsewhere in the same chapter clearly support Finch and Warfield's further cashing out of the lack of a choice about a (true) fact as the lack of an ability to ensure the falsity of the fact (1983: 67–68 and fn. 31, 233–34).

- |                          |                             |
|--------------------------|-----------------------------|
| (5) $N(L \rightarrow F)$ | 3, 4, Beta                  |
| (6) $NL$                 | Premiss, fixity of the laws |
| (7) $NF$                 | 5, 6, Beta                  |

Each premiss seems difficult to deny, and both inference rules appear to be valid. The problem for libertarians is that Beta also seems to undergird the *Mind* argument. The basic idea behind the *Mind* argument is this:

In a world in which events relevant to the formation of free actions are undetermined, actions are caused by, but not determined by, the prior states of mind (e.g. desires and beliefs) of agents. But, in such an indeterministic world, no one has a choice about whether one's state of mind will have a particular result or not. Similarly, one's state of mind, being an ultimate result of earlier events over which one has no choice, is also not something one has a choice about. Thus, since one has no choice about anything that is relevant to the bringing about of one's actions, one has no choice about those actions themselves.<sup>3</sup>

To see just how the *Mind* argument is related to the Consequence argument, it will be helpful to turn to a more formal rendering of this basic idea. Suppose that we are in an indeterministic world and that actions are caused by, but not determined by, particular sets of agents' desires and beliefs.<sup>4</sup> Let '*DB*' represent the particular belief/desire complex of some agent, and let '*R*' represent an action brought about exclusively by *DB*. Thus, *DB* is the only thing causally relevant to the occurrence of *R*.

Now, since *R* is an indeterministic consequence of *DB*, it seems that no one has a choice about whether or not *R* follows *DB*. That is,

$$N(DB \rightarrow R).$$

Similarly, since *DB* seems to be an indeterministic consequence of earlier facts over which the agent has no control, it seems that no one has a choice about having *DB*.<sup>5</sup> Thus,

<sup>3</sup> This passage is based on an informal reconstruction of van Inwagen 1983: 126–27 and 142–48.

<sup>4</sup> It is important to note that van Inwagen (1983: 126–27) provides an argument that if indeterminism is to be relevant to the formation of free actions, it *must* be that actions are caused by, but not determined by, agents' mental states and deliberations. (It cannot be, for instance, that there is, say, a single undetermined particle in the universe that is unrelated to any rational agents, while the rest of the universe is governed by strict deterministic laws.) Mele (1995: 211–20 and 230) offers (although he does not endorse) an alternative point in the formation of free actions for events to be undetermined, but he suspects that many libertarians will find this 'modest' alternative less than satisfying. I believe that Mele's suspicion is right, and that van Inwagen's position is one that libertarians should endorse. In what follows, then, I assume that van Inwagen's position on this point is correct.

<sup>5</sup> As Finch and Warfield (1998: 518, fn. 6) argue, echoing van Inwagen, 'one could have a choice about *DB* only if one had a choice about the earlier state of affairs from

$N(DB)$ .

Now we have all that is needed to set out the *Mind* argument:

*The Mind argument*

- |                            |              |
|----------------------------|--------------|
| (P1) $N(DB)$               | Premiss      |
| (P2) $N(DB \rightarrow R)$ | Premiss      |
| (C1) $N(R)$                | P1, P2, Beta |

Although (P1) and (P2) are represented as premisses, in a way parallel to the Consequence argument, they are intended to be seen as consequences of an agent's being situated in an indeterministic world.<sup>6</sup> Thus, if the reasoning behind the *Mind* argument is accepted, then the argument generalizes and it seems to follow that freedom is incompatible with indeterminism.

Once again, the premisses appear difficult to deny (on the assumption that the relevant agent inhabits an indeterministic world), and the inference rule appears valid. Further, libertarians who have embraced the Consequence argument will be particularly reluctant to reject Beta. Van Inwagen (1983: 147, 151), for one, chooses to reject (P2), but he cannot see any reason why (P2) should be false, and offers a positive reason in support of it.<sup>7</sup> He writes, 'I must choose between the puzzling [rejecting (P2)] and the inconceivable [rejecting Beta]. I choose the puzzling' (1983: 150).

Enter Finch and Warfield with their quite different libertarian solution.

## 2. *A counter-example to Beta and a reformulated Consequence argument*

Despite the intuitive appeal of Beta, McKay and Johnson (1996) offer a persuasive counter-example to it.<sup>8</sup> Their strategy is to show first that Alpha and Beta entail 'the principle of Agglomeration':

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which  $DB$  followed, in which case proponents of the *Mind* argument will simply raise their worries about this earlier state until we reach an initial state about which the agent in question had no choice'.

<sup>6</sup> To be more precise, they are consequences of an agent's being situated in an indeterministic world in which there are undetermined events relevant to the formation of free actions (see fn. 4). In what follows, I will use 'indeterministic world' or 'indeterminism' as shorthand for 'indeterministic world in which there are undetermined events relevant to the formation of free actions'.

<sup>7</sup> In fact, van Inwagen (1983: 149) explicitly rejects the conditional that 'if an agent's act was caused but not determined by his prior inner state, and if nothing besides that inner state was causally relevant to the agent's act,' then (P2). Since van Inwagen takes the antecedent to follow from the agent's being in an indeterministic world of the sort required by incompatibilism, this amounts to an implicit denial of (P2).

<sup>8</sup> See O'Connor 1993 for an interesting discussion of previous attempts to provide counter-examples to Beta.

$Np \ \& \ Nq$  implies  $N(p \ \& \ q)$ .

They then offer a counter-example to this principle, and since they, like van Inwagen and Finch and Warfield, take Alpha to be ‘beyond suspicion’, they conclude that Beta is invalid.

The counter-example to Agglomeration is as follows: Suppose one does not toss a coin, but one could have. Let  $p$  = ‘the coin does not land on heads’ and  $q$  = ‘the coin does not land on tails’. Now suppose also that no one can ensure that the coin lands on tails (or heads), so that  $Np$  and  $Nq$  are true. But, by hypothesis, one *could have* ensured that  $(p \ \& \ q)$  is false, simply by flipping the coin. Thus,  $N(p \ \& \ q)$  is false. It follows that Agglomeration is false, and Beta is the most likely culprit.

Does this leave the libertarian in the lurch? Finch and Warfield say ‘no’. For there is an inference rule, closely related to Beta, that can do all the work required of Beta in the Consequence argument, namely:

Beta 2:  $(Np \ \& \ \Box(p \rightarrow q))$  implies  $Nq$ .

Employing this new principle, Finch and Warfield propose the following revised Consequence argument:

*The Improved Consequence argument*

- |      |                                      |                             |
|------|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| (P1) | $\Box\{(P \ \& \ L) \rightarrow F\}$ | Consequence of Determinism  |
| (P2) | $N(P \ \& \ L)$                      | Fixity of the past and laws |
| (C1) | NF                                   | P1, P2, Beta 2 <sup>9</sup> |

Beta 2 claims only that ‘one has no choice about the logical consequences of those truths one has no choice about’ (1998: 522). In addition to its intuitive plausibility, Beta 2 avoids McKay and Johnson’s counter-example to Beta. Thus, Beta 2 is extremely difficult to deny.

Finch and Warfield also persuasively defend the plausibility of (P2), which, as they acknowledge, is formally stronger than the conjunction of (4) and (6) in the original Consequence argument. They suggest that the conjunction of  $P$  and  $L$  ‘offers a description of what might be called the ‘broad past’ – the complete state of the world at a time in the distant past including the laws of nature’ (1998: 523). Intuitively, it seems that the broad past is fixed in just the way that the past is. We have no choice about either.

Given the plausibility of (P2) in the Improved Consequence argument and the strengths of Beta 2, Finch and Warfield have provided a powerful argument on behalf of libertarians. In addition, they claim to have offered in place of Beta an inference rule that works in a reformulated Consequence argument but does *not* work in a reformulated *Mind* argument.

<sup>9</sup> See also Widerker 1987 for a similar proposal. Unlike Finch and Warfield, Widerker does not defend (P2) or consider the implications of his discussion for the *Mind* argument.

They reason that in order to employ Beta 2 in place of Beta and retain a valid argument, 'N' in (P2) must be replaced by '□'. But then (P2) would be false on the assumption of indeterminism, and the argument would be unsound.<sup>10</sup> They conclude that the Improved Consequence argument is sound, that the *Mind* argument cannot be revived, and that libertarianism is unthreatened by the worries that the two arguments stand or fall together.

### 3. *Why the Consequence and the Mind arguments stand or fall together*

Despite the appeal of this solution for libertarians, it ultimately fails in its attempt to dissociate the Consequence argument from the *Mind* argument. For the *Mind* argument *can* be reformulated so as to employ Beta 2 instead of Beta. The key is that it must be reformulated in a way different from that envisioned by Finch and Warfield.

Let me begin by returning to the intuitions behind each argument. By focusing on their informal renderings, it is perhaps easier to see that there is indeed a common assumption driving them both. It is this: if we lack a choice about the things that constitute all that is relevant to bringing about our actions, then we lack a choice about our actions themselves. One way of capturing this is by means of Beta 2, which says that if we lack a choice about a total state of affairs that logically entails a second state of affairs, then we lack a choice about the second state of affairs.

I propose that we reformulate the *Mind* argument in a way exactly parallel to the Improved Consequence argument. Recall that the Improved Consequence argument rests on the plausibility of the claim that one lacks a choice about the conjunction of the past and the laws of nature (and not just about each individually). In a similar way, it is also plausible that, in an indeterministic world, one lacks a choice about the conjunction of the proposition specifying one's state of mind and the proposition that one's state of mind causes the actions it actually does (and not just about each individually). Thus, (P1) and (P2) in the *Mind* argument can be replaced by:

$$(P^*) \quad N\{DB \ \& \ (DB \rightarrow R)\}$$

With (P\*) in hand, here is a reformulated *Mind* argument:

#### *Improved Mind argument*

(P*)	$N\{DB \ \& \ (DB \rightarrow R)\}$	Premiss
(P**)	$\Box\{(DB \ \& \ (DB \rightarrow R)) \rightarrow R\}$	Premiss (logical truth)
(C1)	$N(R)$	(P*), (P**), Beta 2

<sup>10</sup> Finch and Warfield (1998: 525–26) consider a number of alternative inference rules that might be used to try to preserve the core idea behind the *Mind* argument, but they rightly reject each attempt to use them in a reformulated *Mind* argument.

Is there reason to think that  $(P^*)$  is true in an indeterministic world? In fact, there is exactly the same kind of reason as there is supporting  $(P2)$  in the Improved Consequence argument. Just as we can think of the conjunction of  $P$  and  $L$  as the 'broad past,' we can think of the conjunction of  $DB$  and  $(DB \rightarrow R)$  as the 'broad nature of our mental states'. In other words, the conjunction of  $DB$  and  $(DB \rightarrow R)$  represents the nature of an agent's mental states, including (some of) their causal properties. And, just as in a deterministic world the broad past is not up to us, in an indeterministic world it is not up to us what the nature of our mental states is.

In fact, the same reason why we accept that no one has any choice about the broad past applies equally to the broad nature of our mental states. Why are we inclined to accept  $(P2)$ ? I believe that the reason we are inclined to accept  $(P2)$  is that no one has any choice about either part of the broad past, namely, the past or the laws of nature. This sounds like an implicit appeal to Agglomeration, but it need not be. For we cannot think of anything that anyone could possibly do (analogous to the flipping of a coin in McKay and Johnson's case) that would ensure the falsity of the conjunction of  $P$  and  $L$ , while lacking both the ability to ensure the falsity of  $P$  and the ability to ensure the falsity of  $L$ . Thus, it seems that we are implicitly appealing to a restricted version of Agglomeration when we accept  $(P2)$ , even though we do not fully articulate it.

Now turn to  $(P^*)$  in the Improved *Mind* argument. Similar reasoning is available in the case of the broad nature of our mental states. We have no choice about either  $DB$  or  $(DB \rightarrow R)$ . Further, we cannot think of anything one could do to ensure the falsity of the conjunction of  $DB$  and  $(DB \rightarrow R)$  itself, while lacking the ability to falsify the first conjunct and the ability to falsify the second conjunct. Thus  $(P^*)$  is just as plausible as  $(P2)$  in the Improved Consequence argument and, together with a logical truth and a single application of Beta 2, yields the conclusion of the *Mind* argument.

Now one might object that there is a unity to the broad past that is lacking in the broad nature of our mental states, and that as a result  $(P2)$  has stronger support than  $(P^*)$ . Indeed, Finch and Warfield suggest that there is more to the intuitiveness of  $(P2)$  than I have suggested. They claim that our acceptance of premiss (4) and our acceptance of (6) in the original Consequence argument are both motivated by the same core intuition, and that core intuition can also be used directly to motivate our acceptance of  $(P2)$ . They describe the core intuition as that 'the past is fixed and beyond the power of human agents to affect in any way' (1998: 523). And, in a note, they explain that because we think of the laws of nature as unalterable and unchanging, we think of them, 'in a sense, as part of the past' (523, fn. 15). If we accept Finch and Warfield's claim here,  $(P2)$  might be

thought to be more strongly supported than if it rested on the appeal of premisses (4) and (6), together with our inability to see (P2) as analogous to the McKay and Johnson case.

I believe that this is stretching our intuitive idea of the past too far. For, by parity of reasoning, mathematical truths, which are also unalterable and unchanging, should be counted as part of the past. Yet, this is unintuitive. Although I would accept that I have no choice about the truth of mathematical truths and the past, my reason is not simply that I find it intuitive that I have no choice about the past. This reply does not impugn Finch and Warfield's claim for the intuitive plausibility of (P2); rather it shows that there is no *more* reason to accept (P2) than to accept (P\*).

#### 4. *Where we are*

I conclude that if the core idea behind the Consequence argument is right, then so is the core idea behind the *Mind* argument. It is possible that both arguments fail. However, as long as we understand the ultimate conclusion in the way van Inwagen does, it is difficult to see *how* they could. For it is difficult to deny that if one cannot ensure the falsity of anything relevant to the bringing about of one's actual actions, then one cannot ensure the falsity of the proposition that one acts as one actually does. At the same time, it seems clear that whether the world is deterministic or indeterministic, one lacks the ability to *ensure* the falsity of true propositions, including those relevant to the bringing about of one's actual actions. Thus, we cannot ensure that we act other than we actually do.

But is the ability to ensure that one does other than what one does required for freedom, or, at any rate, the freedom we care about? I do not believe so. Compatibilists can certainly deny that the idea of having a choice about – cashed out as the ability to ensure that one does not act as one does – captures the sense of freedom that is required for moral responsibility and that we ultimately care about.<sup>11</sup>

There is also some room for libertarians to deny that freedom requires an ability to ensure that one acts differently from the way one does in fact. For it is strictly consistent with libertarianism that we act freely as long as our states of mind cause our actions and that indeterminism is true, even if we lack the ability to ensure that we do otherwise. However, libertarians face the challenge of explaining why the truth of indeterminism should endow someone with free agency. For, if indeterminism is unsupplemented by a story about the kind of control free agents have over their actions, then the mere fact of indeterminism would seem merely to *undermine* freedom by making our actions a matter of chance. In claiming that freedom

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Frankfurt 1969, Wolf 1990, Mele 1995, Fischer and Ravizza 1998. For a survey of the recent discussion of Frankfurt's argument, see Fischer 1999.



requires the ability on the part of agents to ensure that they do other than they do, van Inwagen offers such a story, and addresses this difficult challenge for libertarians. Perhaps there is another way for libertarians to address this challenge, in which case they could also avoid embracing scepticism about the freedom that we care about. But if not, then it appears that the only way to reject compatibilism is to embrace scepticism, a price I believe it is not necessary to pay.<sup>12</sup>

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