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Thinking through Philosophy

An Introduction



CAMBRIDGE

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In memory of Kathleen Horner (1914–1999)

Preface

Consider these questions:

- When I make what feels like a free choice, am I really acting freely?
- What explains the astonishing progress of science in modern times?
- In the age of science, is it irrational to be religious?
- When we say that racism is morally wrong, are we stating an objective truth or are we just expressing our personal feelings?
- What is it about art that we value, apart from the pleasure it gives?

These are the kinds of questions that philosophers discuss. But almost everyone thinks about philosophical issues from time to time. Who has not, at some point in their life, wondered whether their mind could exist without their body, or whether there is a God, or whether we can ever be absolutely certain that we are not dreaming? Questions like these are enormously interesting. But they are not easy. Trying to think them through by ourselves, unassisted by the insights of others who have addressed the same questions, is a daunting prospect – a bit like setting out to scale a rock face without the benefit of other climbers' experiences and without any special equipment. The chances of getting 'stuck' a few feet off the ground are quite high.

This book is written for people who wish to begin thinking about philosophical issues like these. No previous knowledge of philosophy is assumed. Our primary purpose is to help readers come to grips with some of the most fascinating and important problems of philosophy. The book is not a history of philosophy, though at times we do discuss the ideas of some of the major thinkers in the Western tradition. Nor is it a catalogue of philosophical doctrines, though in the course of our enquiries we do identify, describe and appraise specific doctrines. What we try to do more than anything else is show what it means to *think philosophically*.

The eight chapters by no means represent all the branches of philosophy. It is not possible to do that in a book of this sort. We therefore had to make a selection, but the areas we chose to concentrate on are all areas that have been at the centre of philosophical enquiry for a long time – and they remain very exciting fields of research today.

Each chapter is a more or less self-contained enquiry and can be understood by itself, without any familiarity with the other chapters. However, issues in one branch of philosophy are often closely linked to issues in another area: for example, how we approach questions in political philosophy about the nature of justice is bound to be affected by how we answer questions in ethics concerning the nature of the good and the right. This means that sometimes the discussion of

a topic in one context overlaps with what is said elsewhere, but not to the extent of making one chapter dependent on another.

We begin each enquiry by raising a question or positing a thesis that is likely to be familiar to most readers. We then discuss the matter in a way that tries to stay in touch with the thoughts and questions likely to occur to someone who travels this road for the first time. To this end, we punctuate the text here and there with inset queries and assertions that express such thoughts. This approach also helps to give the discussions something of the structure and feel of a philosophical dialogue, which is very often the form that even solitary philosophical reflection takes.

No chapter tries to cover the whole of its field. On the contrary, each chapter generally focuses on a small number of closely related topics. The Metaphysics chapter, for instance, is largely devoted to two controversies: freedom versus determinism, and materialism versus idealism. Similarly, the Philosophy of art chapter is a sustained enquiry into the question of why we value art. This approach accords with our general aim of demonstrating the character of philosophical reflection as opposed to communicating information about the full range of philosophical options available.

However, the history of philosophy is certainly worth knowing about, both for its intrinsic interest and because it has decisively shaped the way in which we today conceive of and address our philosophical problems. We thus supplement our explanations of important philosophical positions with brief sketches of some of the major thinkers whose ideas we discuss. In order not to interrupt the philosophical discussion, these summaries are set apart from the main text. For the same reason, 'think critically!' boxes provide separate explanations of certain basic definitions and distinctions relating to aspects of reasoning referred to in the text, complete with illustrative examples.

While the book is aimed first and foremost at the general reader, it is also eminently suitable for use as a textbook or as a supplement to other readings in introductory courses at the secondary school and college level. But whatever the reason readers have for engaging with the issues discussed here, we hope the book gives them a sense of what it means to 'do philosophy', an appreciation of how absorbing it can be, and a desire to explore further those questions they find most exciting.

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1 Metaphysics

The term 'metaphysics' was coined by students of the great Greek philosopher Aristotle (384–322 BCE) who were editing his writings after his death. The literal meaning of the word in its original use was 'after the physics', the title that Aristotle's editors gave to the treatise they placed after the one entitled *Physics* in the master's collected writings. But the treatise in question also went *beyond* the physics in a philosophical sense, for it dealt with questions that in some ways lie deeper than physics and most other branches of human enquiry: questions concerning the fundamental assumptions and theoretical foundations of these other enquiries. Consequently, 'metaphysics' came to mean the branch of philosophy that addresses basic questions about the nature of reality. For example:

- Is there a difference between the way things appear to us and the way they really are?
- Does mental or spiritual reality ultimately depend on the physical world, or is it the other way round?
- Is everything that happens predetermined? If so, does this rule out the possibility of our making genuinely free choices?
- What makes something the same thing at two different times?
- What makes a person the same person throughout the course of his or her life?

As even this small sample shows, metaphysics covers quite a range of philosophical topics. But these questions often tend to be bundled together because they all relate directly to the question at the centre of metaphysics: What is the ultimate nature of reality? Particular sciences focus on some part or some aspect of reality. The various branches of philosophy deal with certain parts or aspects of human experience: aesthetics with art, epistemology with knowledge, ethics with moral life and values. But metaphysics takes in the whole – everything that exists in whatever form – and tries to reach conclusions about its basic nature. In this short chapter we cannot hope to cover all the issues that metaphysicians discuss, but we can try to think through a few of the most interesting problems that metaphysics raises and seeks to resolve. Let us begin with the debate over whether everything that happens is predetermined.

Fatalism: whatever will be, will be

To say that everything is predetermined sounds a lot like fatalism. A fatalistic attitude may sometimes be useful – when dealing with misfortune, for example – but is there any reason to suppose that there is a force, 'Fate', that dictates the course of events in the world?

We need to distinguish between fatalism and determinism. Fatalism, understood as a doctrine rather than just an attitude, can take more than one form. The idea that there is some sort of metaphysical force controlling our destinies is perhaps the most familiar to us because it is central to many Greek legends. As the Greeks saw it, fate decreed that Patroclus would be killed by Hector, who would be killed by Achilles, who would in turn be killed by Paris, and not even the gods could alter this sequence of events. This doctrine expresses a feeling of helplessness in the face of natural and supernatural forces over which people feel they have little control. It has less currency nowadays, presumably because we feel less helpless.

Fatalism has also been put forward as a doctrine about the timelessness of truth. Take the statement 'On 24 March 1603, Queen Elizabeth I of England died.' This was true on that very day. It has remained true ever since and will continue to be true for ever. By the same token, the statement was true at any time prior to Elizabeth's death. So millions of years before she lived, it was still true that she would die on that particular day. For that matter, it was true on the day Elizabeth died that you would read this sentence at precisely this moment in time. What, if anything, are we to conclude from this? Certainly, we can say that this kind of timelessness seems to be a feature of our concept of truth. But it is hard to see how this entails the dramatic conclusion that our lives are somehow predestined and that nothing we do can alter what has been preordained for us.

Fatalism can also be understood in a very general way as the view that the course of future events cannot be altered from what it is going to be. Our hopes, desires, intentions and actions are powerless to make any difference because they themselves are part of the inevitable sequence. This differs from the first form of fatalism mentioned above in that it does not posit fate as a supernatural force directing natural events. Indeed, it does not posit any explanation at all as to why the future is unalterable. It is thus compatible with, yet different from, determinism, which specifies why the future must be the way it will be.

Determinism: one thing leads to another

According to **determinism**, everything that happens is determined by prior causes. The word 'determined' here denotes a relation between two events or states of affairs. To say that A determines B is to say both that A *causes* B and that A *necessitates* B (that is, given A, B *must* follow). Determinism thus holds that every event is the necessary result of the chain of causes leading up to it, a chain that runs back indefinitely into the past. Put more globally, the state of the universe at any particular moment could not be otherwise, given the state the universe was in at the immediately preceding moment. One implication of this view is that from a given state of the universe there can only be one possible future. Another implication is that all future states of the universe are – in principle at least – completely predictable.

The idea that everything has a cause seems reasonable. But the idea that the entire history of the universe follows a necessary, predetermined path does not obviously follow from this principle and is not obviously true. So why should we believe it?

The principle that every event is caused is known as the **causal principle**. It is presupposed in science (except in some parts of quantum mechanics) and also in everyday life. If you start to feel a pain in your neck you assume that something is causing the pain. If your doctor tried to tell you that the pain was one of those rare occurrences, an event without a cause, you would immediately conclude that you need to change your doctor. It is possible to be a good doctor and not know what is causing a patient's pain; it is not possible to be a good doctor and believe that some pains are uncaused. Such a belief would immediately undermine one's credibility both as a scientist and as a person of common sense.

It is perfectly true that the causal principle by itself does not logically entail determinism. But the route from one to the other is fairly direct. An old version of the causal principle, first proposed by the Greeks, says that 'nothing can come from nothing'. This obviously excludes the possibility of objects suddenly popping into existence from nowhere and for no reason. But it also rules out the possibility that an effect could somehow contain more than was 'in' its cause or causes. For instance, a car cannot weigh more than the sum of its parts; water in a pan cannot get hotter than the burner that is heating it. These considerations lead to what is known as the **principle of sufficient reason** which, in its simplest version, states that everything has a complete explanation. This principle is intended to apply equally to events, things, and states of affairs. If, for simplicity's sake, we just speak of states of affairs (which we will allow to include laws of nature), the principle asserts that for any state of affairs (S), there is some other state or combination of states (C) which is *sufficient* to produce S. Saying that C is 'sufficient' to produce S means that given C, S will necessarily follow. The complete explanation of S is thus an accurate description of C.

Let us illustrate what we have just said with an example. Suppose S to be the sinking of the *Titanic*; C will be all the relevant factors that helped bring this about: the course and speed of the ship; the course and position of the iceberg it hit; the size of the iceberg; the thickness of the ship's hull; the physical structure of the ice and the steel that collided; the laws of physics that account for the fact that the ice broke through the steel rather than bouncing off it or crumbling before it; and so on. It is easy to see that this list could be extended infinitely; there is no limit to the number of things that could be included in the complete explanation. For instance, in a complete explanation we would have to mention the fact that the ship left port exactly when it did, the fact that there is ice at the earth's poles, and the fact that radar had not yet been invented.

Suppose, though, that S is the state of the whole universe at the present moment. According to the principle of sufficient reason, this too has a complete explanation. The explanation will be a description of the way the universe was at all previous

times together with the laws of nature that govern the way the universe changes over time. But if this really is a complete explanation, then the way the universe is right now was *necessitated* by its previous states together with the laws of nature. It could not have been otherwise. To say it could have been otherwise would be to say that some features of the universe in its present state cannot be explained; they just happen to be that way for no particular reason. This possibility is precisely what the principle of sufficient reason rules out.

Determinism thus seems to be implied by the principle of sufficient reason, which makes it theoretically very plausible. Its credibility is also bolstered by the fact that it has long been a basic presupposition of modern science. Most of the astounding progress that science has made over the past four centuries has been made on the basis of a mechanistic and deterministic view of the world, a view that treats the universe as a system of objects moving and interacting according to fixed laws, rather like balls on a pool table. This analogy is actually quite helpful, and brings out further implications of what we have said above.

Imagine a pool table without pockets. If I set a ball in motion on this table, it is possible to predict more or less where it will be in ten seconds' time. A well programmed computer, provided with accurate data about the dimensions of the table, the initial position, speed and direction of the ball, the level of friction between it and the table surface, the elasticity of the edge cushion, the presence and type of spin imparted to the ball, etc., could predict the position of the ball at any future time with great accuracy. Should another ball be introduced, also moving around the table, the computer would be able to take account of this added complexity and predict whether the balls would ever collide, and if so, where, when and with what result. In principle, no matter how large the table, and no matter how many balls are set in motion on it, a sufficiently powerful computer provided with accurate enough information should be able to predict where each ball will be and what it will be doing at any given future moment.

The scientific point of view, which has been so spectacularly successful over the last few centuries, sees the difference between the pool table and the actual universe we live in as quantitative not qualitative. The universe may contain many more objects; these objects may be less uniform and their interactions incredibly complex. But for all that, their behaviour is governed by a small number of basic, universal laws. A powerful enough computer, properly programmed and provided with enough information should, in principle, be able to predict with complete accuracy the state of the universe at any future moment.

Is this really still the way scientists view the world? What about such discoveries as the indeterminacy principle, or the more recent advent of chaos theory? Haven't they knocked determinism on the head?

To some extent, quantum mechanics has indeed dented determinism's prestige. According to the indeterminacy principle there are some events – the behaviour of individual electrons in certain circumstances – that are not causally determined

and therefore impossible to predict. We can predict that, say, seven out of ten electrons in a given situation will behave in a certain way; but we cannot be sure how any particular electron will behave. The natural response to this is to assume that our inability to predict what the electron will do is due to our ignorance of the causal factors that determine its behaviour. But most quantum physicists explicitly reject this idea. The indeterminacy, they say, is not simply a matter of our own uncertainty; it inheres in nature.

Two points about this claim are worth noting. First, there have always been some physicists who are suspicious of it, most famously Albert Einstein who objected that 'God does not play dice' (to which his fellow physicist Niels Bohr replied, 'Albert, stop telling God what to do!'). Just possibly, we will one day arrive at a different theoretical model that will provide an explanation for events which on our present model appear undetermined and hence inexplicable. Second, the indeterminacy in question only concerns subatomic particles; the behaviour of larger objects, which range in size from the microscopically small to the astronomically huge, is still thought to be thoroughly predictable – at least in principle.

Chaos theory is somewhat different, since it is not incompatible with determinism. It says only that there are some systems and subsystems that are so complex, and in which small variations in the initial conditions can lead to such massively different outcomes, that accurate predictions are impossible. Long-term weather patterns or trends in the global economy offer familiar examples of this kind of unpredictability. But complexity, no matter how great, is not the same as indeterminacy. Die-hard determinists can accept chaos theory because the limits it places on predictability arise from the limitations of our knowledge and reasoning abilities, not from the intrinsic nature of things themselves.

Freedom versus determinism

If we grant that outside the realm of subatomic physics determinism seems to be supported by the success of the sciences that presuppose it, doesn't this imply that human actions are just as predetermined and therefore as predictable as all other events? If so, isn't determinism obviously false, given the fact that we have free will?

Here we arrive at one of the great metaphysical disputes in the history of philosophy: the conflict between determinism and the belief in what is usually called free will. This controversy is actually one of several that arise when the scientific picture of the world conflicts with so-called common sense. As we have seen, the success of the sciences seems to provide a good reason for accepting determinism. But if determinism is true, then human decisions and action must, like all other events, be the necessary effects of prior causes. Yet most of us believe that at least some of the time we are responsible for our actions; we praise and blame ourselves according to what we do, just as we praise and blame others. In holding ourselves responsible, we

imply that we are in control of our actions, that we might act otherwise, and that in adopting one course of action over another we make a free choice. But determinism would seem to rule out the very possibility of this sort of freedom.

It is very important to be clear about the kind of freedom that determinism threatens. Let us make a distinction between 'metaphysical freedom' and 'practical freedom'. Practical freedom is the freedom to do what one wishes, to realize one's desires. This is the kind of freedom that people can have in differing degrees. Someone in prison has less of it than someone at liberty. Winning the lottery would increase my practical freedom: it would enable me to travel more extensively, attend more concerts and eat at more expensive restaurants. Losing both arms would reduce my practical freedom: it would prevent me from practising the violin, decorating my bedroom or playing tennis.

This kind of practical freedom is quite distinct from metaphysical freedom, often referred to as freedom of the will. To exercise this kind of freedom means being ultimately responsible for one's choices. I may be tied up in a prison cell, my practical freedom severely limited; but it is still up to me whether I fight against my situation or resign myself to it, whether I fraternize with my jailers or go on hunger strike, whether I spend my time daydreaming or humming my favourite songs or practising mental arithmetic or composing limericks. Although we might allow that young children and mentally impaired people do not have this kind of freedom to the same extent as normal adults, we generally think of it as something that, if we have it at all, we all have to more or less the same degree. However, free will is not usually ascribed to other animals. Compared to practical freedom, it is thus viewed as something that one either has or does not have, depending on one's basic mental capacities. It should be clear that it is this metaphysical notion of freedom – freedom of the will – that is threatened by determinism.

Given that we are committed to making our beliefs consistent with each other, there seem to be three obvious ways in which we can respond to this conflict:

Option 1: Accept determinism and reject the belief in free will.

Option 2: Show how determinism and the idea of free will are compatible.

Option 3: Endorse the idea that we have free will and reject determinism (at least as far as human actions are concerned).

Let us consider these options in turn.

Option 1: Determinism is true, freedom is an illusion

This view is often called **hard determinism**. Its proponents see themselves as taking a hard-headed attitude towards our precious but (as they see it) mistaken belief in freedom and responsibility. We have already seen that determinism is a plausible doctrine, supported by the success of science. An obvious question, then, is whether anything can be said against it by defenders of free will.

One reason for holding that freedom is real and not illusory is simply that this is how it feels. Samuel Johnson articulated this argument when he pronounced, in typically dogmatic fashion, 'Sir, we *know* the will is free, and there's an end of it.' When I make certain choices, whether they be trivial or momentous, it usually seems to me that I could have chosen otherwise and am thus responsible for my decision. When I order a drink I have it in my power to order either tea or coffee. If I give evidence at a trial I can choose to tell the truth or to lie.

This argument is essentially an appeal to intuition. It has the merit of being supremely simple and, for many people, extremely persuasive. But to those who are sceptical about free will it is too simple – even simplistic. What kind of argument consists of nothing more than an appeal to the way things *seem*? The sun *seems* to move across the sky, and for thousands of years the belief that the sun moved while the earth was at rest was common sense; but appearances were deceptive, and common sense was wrong. Feelings, too, can easily be misleading. Millions of people feel that they are being watched over by a divine power, but this hardly constitutes an argument for the existence of God. Hard determinists are thus unlikely to be moved by an appeal to unexamined feelings.

A second reason for upholding the idea that we have free will is that all our moral principles and institutions rest on the assumption that we are free. We routinely praise and blame ourselves and others for what we do. We think that at least some of the people who break the law are justly punished. And we believe that people who are acclaimed and rewarded for significant achievements deserve their laurels. But if determinism is true, the whole idea that anyone *deserves* anything is nonsense, since no one is truly responsible for any of their actions.

How strong is this argument? It certainly shows that determinism conflicts with some of our most deeply entrenched beliefs and practices. But it hardly proves that determinism is false. A determinist can reply: 'So much the worse for those beliefs and practices. It might be nicer if they were well founded; but they are not. The truth is sometimes other than what we would wish.' Moreover, so far as rewards and punishments are concerned, these can perhaps be justified from a deterministic point of view, since they help to determine actions in a beneficial way. Rewards promote good behaviour, punishments discourage bad behaviour. Indeed, the reason we all believe this is precisely because human behaviour is fairly predictable. Determinists could even argue that the sooner we accept the full implications of this idea the better, since we will then be encouraged to set about fine tuning the mechanisms we already use to condition and control people's propensity to act in certain ways. Of course, there may be some social benefits to keeping alive the whole mythology of desert; that is something else the social scientists will have to investigate. But this does not constitute an argument for the truth of the mythology.

These two arguments – from the way things feel and from morality – may help to explain why so many people believe in the reality of free will. But the arguments do little or nothing to *demonstrate* that we are free, and are thus unlikely to impress

serious determinists. But determinism may be vulnerable to a different, rather subtle kind of criticism, one that questions determinism's own internal coherence.

If someone espouses a philosophical doctrine we are always entitled to ask why we should believe it. Usually, we are then given reasons for believing this doctrine rather than some alternative theory. The reasons typically consist of empirical evidence, logical arguments, demonstrations that the doctrine in question follows from other beliefs we hold, refutations of rival positions, etc. The discourse in which these reasons are presented – whether it is spoken or written – implicitly presupposes that both the speaker and the audience should be swayed only by rational considerations of this sort (see the 'Reasons and causes' box).

How does all this relate to the debate about determinism? Well, according to the determinist, everything we do is causally determined. But if this really is a universal truth it must cover our acceptance of certain beliefs and our rejection of others. From the determinist perspective, it should be just as possible to predict which philosophical positions a person will embrace as it is to predict what kind of foods they will prefer or what kind of partner they will select. Determinists must

think
critically!

Reasons and causes

Always distinguish between reasons and causes when analysing an argument. This is a very important distinction. Suppose I ask someone why they believe abortion to be morally wrong. Here are two possible responses they might give:

- 1 I believe abortion is wrong because I was brought up as a Catholic.
- 2 I believe abortion is wrong because I think the foetus has the status of a person, and it is wrong to kill an innocent person.

In a sense, response (1) offers a reason for their belief; but it is not the kind of reason that has any persuasive power. With (1) they have, in fact, cited a *cause* of their belief as opposed to providing a rational justification for it. I can accept that what they say is true – their being raised as a Catholic did lead them to condemn abortion – while still rejecting the belief in question. If, on the other hand, they respond to my question with (2), then they have given a genuine reason for their belief in the sense of providing it with a *rational justification*. In this case, I cannot consistently accept what they say while still disagreeing with their conclusion.

This distinction between reasons and causes correlates to a distinction between justification and explanation. Our actions and beliefs can perhaps be *explained* by identifying their causes; but they cannot be *justified* in this way. Only reasons can justify. And only reasons are to be respected as having legitimate persuasive force.

therefore concede that although they play the game of supporting their deterministic philosophy with rational arguments, these arguments are not necessarily what led them to embrace determinism; their opinions, like all their other preferences, are merely the effects of causes over which they have no control. Moreover, similar considerations apply to their attempts to persuade other people to adopt their point of view. Whether or not their arguments are persuasive may have nothing to do with their intrinsic soundness. It is not even clear why determinists should care about whether their arguments are sound. Offering sound arguments is one method of persuasion; producing effective rhetoric is another. Does a determinist have any reason to prefer the former to the latter?

Determinists may try to wriggle out of this difficulty by claiming that rational justifications are still important in their eyes because good evidence and sound arguments have greater causal efficacy than weak evidence or invalid reasoning; our brains are so wired as to be more readily affected by rational considerations. But this response is weak in two ways. First, it just is not true that the stronger argument always – or even usually – defeats the weaker. Distressingly, good evidence and sound reasoning can easily be overwhelmed by effective rhetoric. Secondly, and more importantly, the response fails to recognize the depth of the problem. Causal influence and rational persuasion are two entirely different kinds of operation; the corresponding concepts belong to different spheres of discourse. The critical question that determinists must answer is: Why should we respect anyone's belief in determinism if their holding this belief is, ultimately, only the predetermined outcome of a long causal chain? Why should we take their arguments seriously if they themselves conceive of rational persuasion as just a form of causation?

Determinism thus seems to undermine a basic presupposition of rational discussion: ideally, at least, we ought to arrive at our theoretical beliefs solely on the basis of evidence and argumentation.

Option 2: Freedom and determinism are compatible

Why must determinism and the idea that we are free be viewed as incompatible? Doesn't the whole debate over freedom and determinism arise because freedom is being thought of as something mysterious, some weird breach in the natural order? But to be free simply means being able to do what one wants. And if we stick with this common sense notion of freedom there need be no problem, since it is perfectly compatible with determinism.

This attempt to reconcile the two positions is commonly called soft determinism. It has attracted many adherents, among them Thomas Hobbes, John Locke and David Hume. Soft determinism is, as its name indicates, a form of determinism; it does not allow for uncaused events. But it sees no need to, since it holds that even if all events are causally determined there is still a clear difference between free and unfree actions. I am free at this moment to leave my desk and go for a walk, but I