

Two Kinds of Principle of Alternative Possibilities

Abstract

It is taken to be self-evident that freedom requires *being able to do otherwise*, by most incompatibilists, and some compatibilists; however, there are more than one way to interpret the meaning of “being able to do otherwise.” In this paper, two different versions of principle of alternative possibilities (*PAP*) are discussed: One of these *PAPs* is related to determinacy, and the other is related to supervenience. I defend that *PAP* which is about determinacy and, which is widely being used by incompatibilist has nothing to do with freedom, and the other *PAP* cannot be satisfied in a physicalistic world.

Key Words

Compatibilism, Determinism, Free Will, Freedom, Incompatibilism, Indeterminism, Principle of Alternative Possibilities.

Alternatif Olanaklar Prensibinin İki Türü

Özet

Başka türlü yapabilme olanağı özgür iradenin gereklilikleri arasında olduğu, çoğu *uyuşurcular* (*compatibilist*) ve bazı *uyuşmazcılar* (*incompatibilist*) tarafından tartışılmasına gerek olmayan bir gerçek olarak görülmektedir; ancak “başka türlü yapabilme olanağı”nın anlamı farklı biçimlerde yorumlanabilir. Bu yazıda iki farklı alternatif olanaklar prensibi (*AOP*) (principle of alternative possibilities) tartışılıyor: Bu *AOP*’lerden birisi *belirlilikle* (*determinacy*) ilgili, diğeri ise *metafizik bağımlılıkla* (*supervenience*) ilgilidir. Belirlilikle ilgili olan ve uyuşmazcılar tarafından yoğun olarak kullanılan *AOP*’nin özgür iradeyle ilgili olmadığını ve diğeri *AOP*’nin de fizikalist bir dünyada karşılanamayacağını savunuyorum.

Anahtar Sözcükler

Alternatif Olanaklar Prensibi, Determinizm, İndeterminizm, Özgür İrade, Özgürlük, Uyuşmazcılık, Uyuşurculuk.

PAP Concerning Determinacy and PAP Concerning Supervenience

Most champions of incompatibilism base their definitions of *free will* and *responsibility* on each other. Some of them believe that someone can be considered to be responsible for an action, only if she could have avoided performing this action.¹ That is, someone can be considered to be responsible for doing something, only if she could have done something else (otherwise). Likewise, thinkers favoring this principle believe that an action is performed freely, only if the performer might have avoided performing this action. That is to say, a thief's action of stealing a car is free and he is blameworthy, only if he could have chosen not to steal the car. Or a hero's saving the world is free and she deserves praise, only if she could have avoided her saving the world. Principles of this kind in general are called "*principles of alternative possibilities*" (PAP).

Most incompatibilists agree that freedom requires *being able to do otherwise*; however, it is usually not clear what is meant by "being able to do otherwise." A thinker may mean (1) "being able to do otherwise, *if they want to do so*" (*compatibilist PAP*), (2) "being able to do otherwise, *given that complete set of true propositions belonging to the past is the same*" (*PAP concerning determinacy [PAPCD]*), or (3) "being able to do otherwise in *exactly the same circumstances*" (*PAP concerning supervenience [PAPCS]*), by PAP.

Compatibilist PAP will not be discussed in this paper: It is a version of PAP which can be satisfied by mere volitional actions. No matter if determinism true, or false, it is evidently satisfied: It is satisfied, as long as there is a correlation between what we want and how we act, at least to a degree.

This paper focuses on the other two PAPs: PAPCD and PAPCS. Even if these two principles sound very similar, they should not be used interchangeably, since they have dramatically different implications. To illustrate the difference, suppose that an assassin is planning to kill the prime minister. Fortunately, the assassin may change his mind until he pulls the trigger. Suppose further that an indeterministic event, *E*, involved in the assassin's nervous system will determine whether or not he changes his mind. If *E* takes place, a physical structure, *P*, in his nervous system will get to a state, *S*, and this will cause the assassin to change his mind and leave the place without killing the prime minister. Eventually, *E* does not take place, and the assassin kills the prime minister.

In this case, given that the past had been exactly the same, the assassin could have done otherwise; since it had not been determined whether or not *E* would have taken place and the assassin would have changed his mind, before the time he pulled the trigger. However, given that circumstances were exactly the same, which involves the final physical state of assassin's nervous system (*P*'s not being in the state *S*), he could

¹ Peter van Inwagen, "Ability and Responsibility," *The Philosophical Review*, LXXXVII, 2 (April 1978): 201-24; Carl Ginet, "In Defense of the Principle of Alternative Possibilities: Why I Don't Find Frankfurt's Argument Convincing," *Philosophical Perspectives*, XXX (1996): 403-17; and Robert Kane, "Two Kinds of Incompatibilism," *The Significance of Free Will*, and "Responsibility, Luck, and Chance: Reflections on Free Will and Indeterminism."

not have done otherwise. Therefore, for the case of the assassin, *PAPCD* is satisfied, when *PAPCS* is not. I believe that the *PAPCD*, which is related to determinacy, is not a necessary or sufficient condition for free will and responsibility. Only *PAPCS*, which is related to the relation of supervenience, I claim, could be a necessary condition for a (very) hard-to-satisfy idea of free will and responsibility, which we do not enjoy.

With respect to the conceptualization shaped above, given that our world is physicalistic, no matter if determinism is true or false, we *may not* do otherwise in exactly the same circumstances. That is to say, we do not enjoy the freedom whose criterion is *PAPCS*. On the other hand, only if determinism is false, we *may* do otherwise, given that complete set of true propositions belonging to the past is the same. It seems more appropriate to me to use “*may* do” instead of “*can* do;” because we do not have any control over indeterministic physical events, which inevitably assigns our choices and actions. And since it does not give us any control over our actions, I defend that satisfying the *PAPCD* does not give us the freedom required for responsibility.

I defend that the *PAPCD* is irrelevant to the problem of freedom; however, most incompatibilists use *PAPCD* to decide if we have free will in deterministic or indeterministic worlds. The general form of the argument for *PAPCD* is in the following form:

- (1) If determinism is true, for every complete set of true propositions belonging to a time point, there is only one possible complete set of true propositions for each later time point. (From the definition of determinism)
- (2) There is only one complete true set of propositions for every past time points. (Premise)
- (3) If determinism is true, there is only one possible complete set of true propositions for each future time point. (From 1)
- (4) If determinism is true, we cannot do otherwise (with respect to *PAPCD*). (From 3)
- (5) We are not free. (From 4)

I think that first 4 steps of this argument is valid and its premises are true. Excluding proposition (5), this argument shows only that *PAPCD* can be satisfied, only if indeterminism is true. In other words, it shows *only* that given that the past is the same, we *may* do otherwise, only if the world is indeterministic. And it is not only us; the same is true for lifeless objects too: A die might have come up some value other than it did, only in an indeterministic world. However, this does not push us believe that a die is free in an indeterministic world. The reason why we believe a die satisfying this *PAP* is not free is simply that a die has no control over which value it comes up. Do we have any control over the behaviors of physical objects, which determines our choices in a deterministic world? If physicalism is true, no, we do not. We are just governed by physical laws. On the other hand, even if our world is indeterministic, as long as physicalism is true, we do not have any control over physical world, which governs us. Therefore, I think, any argument based on *PAPCD* does not prove any proposition favoring libertarian incompatibilism. *PAPCD* misses the point. We can be free (for the

compatibilist accounts of freedom based on *voluntariness*) without satisfying it, and our satisfying it does not show that we are free.

Ms. Determined

Let me introduce you Ms. Determined to support that the claims of this paper: Ms. Determined is a chess player who is very good at math, logic and has all the abilities necessary for being a *perfect* chess player. By considering all the relevant information in a game, she makes decisions with best pay off.

When you are watching her in a tournament, an incompatibilist comes by and tells you that Ms. Determined does not have free will.

You ask: “Why do you think so?”

“I am watching her for long.” the incompatibilist replies. “Whenever she has an opportunity to checkmate, she does so.”

“Isn’t it reasonable? Shouldn’t you checkmate when you can?”

The incompatibilist is tired of not being understood: “Of course, you should! But you don’t understand! Since she is so good at logic, mathematics, since she has such a good memory, and since she has such an enormous desire to play optimally, there is no way she would not checkmate when she can.”

“So?”

“So she cannot do otherwise, and this means she does not enjoy freedom. At least not when she is playing chess.”

“And me, as a rookie chess player,” you say. “...make inconsistent decisions. I may not checkmate when I have the opportunity. This *means*(!) that I am *freer* than her, when playing chess is concerned. Am I right?..”

This kind of thought experiments make me believe that the indeterminacy is not something a genuine choice *must* involve, contrary to the incompatibilists position. It may be claimed that I caricatured the defenders of the *PAPCD*. Perhaps, a libertarian incompatibilist would interpret the case of Ms. Determined in the following way: “Maybe there is no way for Ms. Determined not to checkmate when she can, given her passion and ability to win; but if she wanted not to win, Ms. Determined could prevent herself from checkmating.” However, such a defense should not satisfy an incompatibilist, since this conception of free will requires only volitional actions, it belongs to Humean compatibilist tradition and implies that compatibilism is true.² Ms. Determined could have prevented herself from raising, if she had wanted to do so; not

² *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, L. A. Selby-Bigge, ed., third edition revised by P. H. Nidditch (New York: Oxford, 1975), p. 95; see also G. E. Moore, *Ethics*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1912), chap. 6; and Alison McIntyre, “Compatibilists Could Have Done Otherwise: Responsibility and Negative Agency,” *The Philosophical Review*, CIII, 3 (July 1994): 453-88.

only in an indeterministic worlds, but also in a deterministic world. This would probably upset incompatibilists, wouldn't it?

PAPCD makes rookie players freer than perfect ones. In the same way, according to *PAPCD*, *perfectly* good willed angels are not free and praiseworthy unlike *fairly* good persons, since only the latter ones can do bad things. Note that *PAPCS* does not suffer from these problems, because in a physicalistic world neither rookie nor perfect chess players could do otherwise in exactly the same circumstances. Neither of them qualify to be genuinely free or responsible. This is evident: After all, in a physicalist world, given that complete set of true propositions about physical is the same, nothing could be different than it is.

Conclusion

Indeed, I agree with incompatibilists in that if causal determinism is true, no one has, or ever had, any indeterminacy in their choices. However, I do not believe that this proves anything they intended. Genuine choices necessitate a *plurality*; but this is not plurality of possible actions, it is plurality of options. In other words, a genuine choice necessitates more than one options; however it is not necessary that a genuine choice is indeterminate. A *perfect* chess player does not behave *indeterministically*, but since she has *options*, if her actions are in her control, then she is free.

There is one more point this paper intends to support: If physicalism is true, since we cannot satisfy *PAPCS*, we cannot be genuinely free. In a physicalistic world, we could do otherwise, if we wanted to do so; however, since everything we want is determined by our initial condition, the laws of physics and the probability involved in them, we do not have genuine control over our own actions.

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