

## Chapter 22

### **Free Will Exists Though the World is a Mechanistic System of Cause and Effect**

#### *1. Soft determinism*

In this chapter we will investigate a position regarding the nature and reality of free will called “soft determinism.” According to soft determinism, all of the choices we make we make freely and all of what we do we do freely. Soft determinism, then, agrees with libertarianism that free will exists. (Importantly, soft determinism disagrees with libertarianism regarding the scope of free will. Libertarians tend to think that few choices are made freely and few actions performed freely. Soft determinists tend to think that most if not all choices and actions are made or performed freely. We will investigate this disagreement later in the chapter.) As well, according to soft determinism, the hypothesis of mechanism applies to people’s behaviour as much as it does to the behaviour of anything else. Soft determinism, then, agrees with hard determinism that our behaviour is entirely the causal product of prior events. All our choices and all our actions are determined to be the choices or actions that they are by features of our personalities. To hold both that some (indeed all) of what we do we do freely and that the hypothesis of mechanism is true of everything we do is to contradict a key thesis shared by libertarianism and hard determinism. It is to contradict the thesis of incompatibility, the thesis that if a person’s choices and actions are always determined by features of that person’s personality, then that person never chooses or acts freely. Hard determinism and libertarianism are varieties of incompatibilism; soft determinism is a variety of compatibilism.

Many people find strange and puzzling the idea that we could possess free will though everything we do is the result of prior causal factors. They almost cannot help but suppose that the reality of determinism would rule out freedom. It is difficult for them to understand soft determinism just because they cannot believe that anyone would say that determinism is true of people’s choices and actions and not, thereby, be implicitly saying that there is no free will. And so the very first thing to remember about soft determinism is simply that soft determinism does in fact proclaim that *free will does exist though the world is a mechanistic system of cause and effect*. Our personalities determine our actions and yet, even so, often we perform our actions freely.

Our understanding of soft determinism is not well served by the name “soft determinism,” though that name is too well established in philosophical writing for it to be wise to try to introduce another. People who find it difficult to imagine that someone could think the existence of free will is compatible with the truth of determinism, when they hear the name “soft determinism” and are told that soft determinists hold that free will exists, infer that the term “soft” modifies the term “determinism.” They think that that means that soft determinists do not subscribe to a rigorous reading of the hypothesis of mechanism. That soft determinists are *soft* determinists, these people mistakenly think, means that they are not really determinists (for how else could they accept that free will exists?). This is a mistake; soft determinists are as uncompromising and firm in their conception of the deterministic or mechanistic structure of events as are hard determinists. Human behaviour, say the soft

determinists, is no less a determined or mechanical product of prior events than is the behaviour of turtles, robots, or weather systems. Soft and hard, determinists are as one on this point.

We said at the end of the previous chapter that hard determinists and libertarians conceive of what free will is in the same way. It is because they conceive of free will in the same way that they agree that its existence is incompatible with the hypothesis of mechanism. Incompatibilists hold that free will consists either in the capability to do otherwise than one does or in having control over what one does. We said that soft determinists typically have a different conception of what free will is, and that it is in virtue of their different conception that they reject the thesis that the existence of free will is incompatible with the hypothesis of mechanism. What we need do now is to understand just how they conceive of free will.

For soft determinists, it is in the first place actions that are performed either freely or unfreely, and then, only derivatively, choices that are made either freely or unfreely. (This contrasts with what libertarians say, for libertarians hold that it is in the first place choices that are made either freely or unfreely.) So let us concentrate on what makes a freely performed action free.

The basic idea in the soft determinist's conception of free will is that one acts freely when one does what one wants to do. If a person does what she does because she wants to do it, maybe because she wants to do it more than she wants to do anything else, then she does what she does of her own free will.

Recall Sally. Sally is sitting at her favourite table in her favourite coffee shop. She wants to remain alone at her table and she believes that by leaving her table cluttered she will discourage others from sitting with her, and so she has a reason for leaving her table cluttered. But Sally also wants to be kind and considerate towards others and she believes that it would be unkind or inconsiderate of her to discourage others from sitting with her. And so Sally has a reason to remove the clutter from the table. Sally finds that she would rather remain alone at her table than do the kind or considerate thing. That is, Sally finds that she wants to remain alone more than she wants to do the kind or considerate thing. Sally decides, after weighing in her mind her reasons for and against clearing the clutter from her table, to refrain from clearing the clutter. Sally, as we have described her here, wants to remain alone more than she wants to be kind or considerate, and she does what she wants to do. According to soft determinists, Sally is acting freely.

## *2. Forces external and internal*

But if it is true that a person acts freely whenever they do what they most want to do, then are not people *always* acting freely? What would count as an unfree action? It is enough, say the soft determinists, that an action be intentional, that is, that it be an action performed because of one's reason for performing it, for that action to be performed freely. Since no movement would count as an action unless it were performed intentionally, all actions are performed freely. So, really, say soft determinists, there are no unfree actions. Consider: the concept of an unfree action is the concept of a person doing something intentionally but not doing it for any reason; but to do something for no reason isn't to do it intentionally; thus, the concept of an unfree action is internally inconsistent. (Wags will cite "army intelligence" and

“cafeteria food” as other examples of internally inconsistent concepts.) Therefore, there are no, and there could be no, unfree actions.

Soft determinists do not speak of unfree actions; instead, they speak of lacking freedom to do something. To lack freedom to do something is simply to be unable to do it, to lack the power to do it. Sally is not free to disappear, or to jump ten feet high, or to transform cappuccino into *café au lait*. Were Sally suddenly to want more than anything to have *café au lait* instead of cappuccino, she would yet be unfree to transform her cappuccino into *café au lait*. Alternatively, whatever we are physically able to do, we are free to do. When we combine a want or a desire with an ability, so that we do something we are able to do because we want to do it, we act freely.

There are no unfree actions, at least if the soft determinists are right. Where does this leave us with regard to all those things we might do, and do intentionally, but which in some sense are beyond our ability *not* to do? Do we not have here unfree actions despite what the soft determinists say? Take, for example, cigarette smoking. A person who lights up a cigarette is doing what he wants to do at that moment, if his lighting up a cigarette counts as an action he is performing. He has a reason for lighting up his cigarette, and that means that he is acting intentionally in lighting up. But he is addicted to cigarettes, he craves them. Surely, then, he is not acting freely, or not entirely of his own free will, when he lights up. Or so one might think. And what about the force of circumstance or peer pressure? Take, for example, a person who surrenders her wallet to an armed assailant rather than lose her life. She surrenders her wallet intentionally, but she doesn't really want to surrender her wallet. She is not freely surrendering her wallet. She does not freely surrender it, for she is not free *not* to surrender it. Or take a man who buys a new car because many of his friends have recently bought new cars. He does not really want to buy a new car; he's happy with the old one and he'd rather keep his money. The pressure to conform was too strong for him to resist it. Still, he bought his new car for a reason, and so he acted intentionally in buying it.

Each example would seem to be an example of some force compelling the person to do what he or she did. Each person did what he or she did for a reason, and so he or she performed an action in doing what he or she did. But because each was compelled by a force to do it, each acted unfreely in doing it. If this is right, then there are unfree actions after all, and the soft determinist is wrong to identify intentional actions with freely performed actions.

The force felt by the person in the first example is the force of addiction. He is forced by a physiological craving to light up, despite the fact that he would rather not smoke. We could have included examples of psychological compulsions and obsessions, of people who, say, compulsively comb their hair or obsessively weed their gardens. The force felt by the person in the second example is the force of circumstance. She is forced to do what she doesn't want to do by a credible threat to her life. The man in the third example is forced to do what he doesn't want to do by the pressure to conform to the ways of his peers. Addictions, compulsions, obsessions, the force of circumstance, social forces such as peer pressure—all these things rob us of our freedom, one might think. They rob us of our freedom for they are forces beyond our control that make us do their bidding.

The soft determinist is not moved by such examples to revise his claim that no action is performed unfreely. Yes, he agrees, there do exist addictions, compulsions and obsessions. But acting in the grip of an addiction or compulsion or obsession does not render one's action

unfree. It might, however, the soft determinist quickly adds, render it *less free* than an action not performed in the grip of an addiction or compulsion or obsession. Force of circumstance, on the other hand, in no way even diminishes freedom. And neither do social pressures.

In each example, the person seems both to want to do what he does (smoke, surrender her wallet, buy a new car) and not to want to do it. Understanding this point is the key to understanding why the soft determinist does not accept that these are examples of unfree actions. Let us begin with Naomi, the woman who surrenders her wallet to an assailant. Clearly Naomi does not want to surrender her wallet, in the sense that she wouldn't choose to surrender her wallet as something in itself worth doing. That is, she wouldn't choose to surrender it in the way she might choose to talk with a friend, or listen to music, or give a child an ice-cream cone, or work in her garden—just as something in itself worth doing. Naomi surrenders her wallet merely as a means to something else. She surrenders her wallet in order to stay alive, and staying alive is something she wants to do as an end in itself. Just as clearly, though, there is a sense in which she does want to surrender her wallet. Naomi wants to remain alive, she judges that surrendering her wallet will likely enable her to stay alive, so she wants to surrender her wallet. She wants to do that which in the circumstances as she finds them best promotes her interests or concerns. But, notes the soft determinist, we always find ourselves in some circumstance or another when acting to promote our interests or concerns. Naomi is doing what she wants to do, namely, keeping herself alive, the very best way she knows how, namely, by surrendering her wallet. She is in no significant way different than Sally, who is doing what she wants to do, namely, sitting by herself, the best way she knows how, namely, by refraining from removing the clutter at her table. Naomi is acting no less freely than Sally.

Let us now consider Frank, the man who buys a new car. Frank doesn't want to buy a new car in that he judges buying a new car less worth doing for its own sake than keeping his money. Still, Frank values being in step with his peers, and so he does want to buy a new car as a means to being in step with his peers. He is, then, says the soft determinist, doing what he wants to do in buying a new car, namely, serving his desire to be in step with his peers. And so Frank is acting freely in buying a new car.

Does Frank really want to be in step with his peers, though? Maybe he would rather not care as much as he does about others' opinions of him. Maybe he would rather be more independent in thought and action. Suppose that though he cares about how his peers think of him, Frank would indeed rather not care so much. Frank thinks that his need to be in step with others is actually a weakness of his personality. He admires independent people, people who do what they want whether it makes them popular or not, but he is unable to find the strength to be indifferent toward others' opinions of him. We might agree with the soft determinist that Frank bought his new car of his own free will. Still, the fact that he would rather not have the desires that led him to buy his car seems to make his buying the car less a free action than Sally's. In refraining from clearing the clutter, Sally was acting in accordance with desires of which she approved. Sally's actions were not out of keeping with her favoured image of herself. Frank, on the other hand, acted in accordance with desires he would really rather not have. Frank's actions were out of keeping with an ideal he has of himself, an ideal of himself as unconcerned with how others think of him.

Soft determinists can agree that while Frank bought a new car of his own free will, he did not act as freely as Sally did when Sally refrained from clearing the clutter. It is helpful here to introduce a distinction between levels of desires. First order desires are desires directed onto the world or onto other people. We want to have a coffee, we want to remain alone while sipping our coffee and reading our *New Yorker*, we want to have a cigarette, we want to surrender our wallet, we want to keep our wallet, we want to buy a new car, we want others to think well of us, and on and on. Second order desires are desires we have with respect to our first order desires. When we look critically or evaluatively at ourselves, at our personalities and desires, we find that we are happy to be the sort of person who enjoys cappuccino and *The New Yorker*, and unhappy to be the sort of person who buys a new car just because other people have bought new cars. Some of our desires we judge fine desires to have and to act upon, others of our desires we might judge to be desires we would rather be without.

How does this distinction between first-order and second-order desires enable soft determinists to recognize degrees of freedom in our actions? An action is performed entirely freely, says the soft determinist, when the first-order desire that motivated it is sustained by a second-order desire that one have that first order desire. An action is performed entirely freely, that is, when one approves of one's having the desire from which that action stems. Naomi surrendered her wallet entirely of her own free will, for she approves of her being the sort of person who values her life more than her wallet. Frank, on the other hand, acted less freely than Naomi in buying a new car. Frank does not fully approve of his being the sort of person who values his peers' opinions as much as he does. Frank's desire to go along with the crowd is a desire that Frank would rather not have. Whenever there is a discrepancy between the desire from which an action follows and the person's best image or ideal of himself, then that person did not act entirely of his own free will in doing what he did. On the other hand, a person of integrity, a person whose first-order desires are in line with her second order-desires, is acting entirely of her own free will whenever she does what she wants to do.

So for the soft determinist there are degrees of freedom in our actions, and an action is free to a greater or lesser degree to the extent that the desire behind it is a desire the person is happy to have. Let us consider in light of this idea of degrees of freedom the problems that actions performed out of addictions or compulsions or obsessions seem to pose for the soft determinist thesis that one acts freely just so long as one does what one wants to do. Considered at the level of his first-order desires, Martin is doing what he wants to do in lighting a cigarette. At the level of his second-order desires, though, we discover that Martin is not doing what he wants to do, for he desires not to be a smoker. Martin's action of lighting up a cigarette is out of keeping with Martin's ideal for himself. But Martin cannot just resolve to live according to his personal ideal. He is addicted to cigarettes, he craves them, not to smoke would be physically painful and disruptive to him. And Martin does not want to suffer or to disrupt his life. To live entirely according to his personal ideal would be very difficult for Martin. Martin's action of lighting up a cigarette is an action performed much less freely than even Frank's action of buying a new car. Martin is much less free than Frank to live up to his ideal of himself, and thus much less free in acting on his despised first-order desires.

### *3. Arguments for mechanism*

A person's behaviour is no less the mechanical product of prior events than is the behaviour of turtles, robots, or the weather. Or at least so say determinists, both hard and soft. What a person does, say determinists, is entirely a causal product of his beliefs and values at the moment of action. And those beliefs and values at the moment of action are entirely causal products of his prior state and his environment, and on and on all the way back.

We said earlier that for us the hypothesis of mechanism, and the idea that the hypothesis of mechanism applies to humans as much as to anything else in the world, will remain an hypothesis, and not a claim for which we will find conclusive support. But we ought not leave the hypothesis of mechanism simply as an arbitrary posit one can accept or reject as one likes. Determinists think that there are very good reasons for thinking it true, even if these reasons are not in the final analysis conclusive. In this section we will consider some reasons for thinking that the hypothesis of mechanism applies to persons and their actions, at least no less than it does to anything else.

First, one might hold that humans are entirely a part of the natural world, and that for that reason the hypothesis of mechanism must apply to them. Humans are entirely a part of the natural world in that they are a sort of animal, a species of ape closely related to bonobos and chimpanzees. They are also entirely a part of the natural world in that they are composed of organs and tissues, and in that their organs and tissues are composed of cells and then of molecules and atoms. The hypothesis of mechanism applies to all other animal species, and to all other things composed of organs, tissues, cells, molecules, and atoms. It must also, then, apply to humans.

Second, one might note that people are more or less predictable in their behaviour, and that for that reason the hypothesis of mechanism must apply to them. If you know a person well, you can often say with confidence what she will do next, given that you know what is going on around her. Further, psychologists and social scientists are pretty good at predicting how people will behave in one or another situation. Now if the hypothesis of mechanism did not apply to people, one might suppose, we would be unable to predict the behaviour of our friends and there would be no scientific studies of human behaviour. Since we can, and social scientists can, predict people's behaviour fairly well, it must be true that the hypothesis of mechanism applies to people and their behaviour. Of course, sometimes we and the scientists make false predictions, but that merely indicates that our knowledge of people at the moment of action is rarely complete. That we did not possess complete knowledge of how things were is the excuse we make when our weather predictions turn out to be false. We do not take a false prediction of the weather to indicate that the hypothesis of mechanism does not apply to the weather.

Third, one might hold that what makes a choice a choice and an action an action is that the person making or performing it makes or performs it for a reason, and that for that reason the hypothesis of mechanism applies to the relation between reasons and choices or actions. A change of state or a movement that does not follow on a person's reason for changing his state or moving could not count as a choice or an action. So, we make the choices or perform the actions we do because of the reasons we have. And this means that our reasons are mechanical causes of our choices or actions. Given this conceptual or internal relation between the reasons we have for choosing or acting and our choices or actions, we must conclude that the hypothesis of mechanism applies at least to what we choose and do.

We encountered these points in section 6 of Chapter 36, when we were investigating libertarianism. There they were presented as objections to the idea that sometimes the relation between reasons and choices is indeterministic, not mechanical. We said that the libertarian can respond to these objections. Here we are presenting these points in defence of the hypothesis of mechanism, and the libertarian can properly object that this defence is not conclusive. It is not conclusive because, first, even if we have no reason not to think of humans as entirely part of the natural world, that doesn't mean that they are entirely part of the natural world. Second, even if people are largely predictable by those who know them well, still they are not entirely predictable, and it is a simple article of faith to suppose that all false predictions result from gaps in our knowledge. Maybe there just is in the course of events a bit of indeterminacy and, for that reason, a lack of predictability. Third, to suppose that there is a mechanical relationship between reasons and choices or actions is simply to contradict, and not to argue against, the idea that sometimes the relationship is not mechanical.

#### *4. Responding to the first argument for incompatibilism*

The thesis of incompatibilism, again, is the thesis that if the hypothesis of mechanism applies to human behaviour, then there is no free will. If, that is, our behaviour is a mechanical product of our personalities, then nothing we do we do freely. The thesis of incompatibilism does *not* say that we never act freely. It is a conditional thesis: it says that we never act freely *if* it is true that our behaviour is fully caused by prior events. It is only because it is a conditional thesis that it can be accepted by both hard determinists and libertarians. Hard determinists think there is no free will; libertarians think that sometimes we do act freely. Both accept the thesis of incompatibilism. The hard determinists add to that thesis the claim that the hypothesis of mechanism applies to human behaviour, and so draw the conclusion that there is no free will. The libertarians add to it the contention that sometimes we choose or act freely, and so they must reject the hypothesis of mechanism when it comes to human behaviour.

Soft determinists, on the other hand, reject the thesis of incompatibilism itself. They hold that free will can well exist in a totally deterministic world. In Chapter 35 we looked at two different arguments that free will does not exist, the first of which we called the could-not-have-chosen-otherwise argument, the second the distant causation argument. Each of these arguments contained in its core an argument in favour of the thesis of incompatibilism.

If the soft determinist is right that mechanism does not threaten freedom, then something must be wrong with those arguments for incompatibilism. In this section we will see how soft determinists criticise the argument for the thesis of incompatibility found within the could-not-have-chosen-otherwise argument. In a following section we will see how they criticise the argument for incompatibility found within the distant causation argument.

What *is* the first argument for the thesis that free will cannot exist in a world of mechanistic causality? Unlike the could-not-have-done-otherwise argument itself, which has as its conclusion that free will does not exist, the conclusion of the argument that concerns us now is a conditional statement. Its conclusion is simply that *if* the world is a world of mechanistic causality, *then* no choice a person makes and no action a person performs is a choice made or an action performed freely.

The central idea in the argument is that in a world of mechanistic causality no one could choose or act otherwise than they do choose or act. Since it is a requirement on free choice that one could have chosen otherwise than one did, and a requirement on free action that one could have acted otherwise than one did, it follows that if the world is a world of mechanistic causality, then no choice or action is made or performed freely.

Let us go through this argument a little more carefully. For any choice any person makes, if that choice was a choice freely made, then it must have been true that at the moment of choice the person could have chosen otherwise than she did. This premise expresses the idea that it is a necessary condition of a free choice that one could have chosen otherwise. Now, the argument continues, if the hypothesis of mechanism applies to persons and their choices, then the reasons a person has for choosing one option rather than some other option are a mechanical cause of that person's choosing that option rather than some other option. But if a person's reasons for choosing one option rather than another option are a mechanical cause of that person's choosing that option, then, at the moment of choice, that person could not have chosen any other option. But that result violates the necessary condition on free choice stated as the argument's first premise. And so, the argument concludes, if the hypothesis of mechanism applies to persons and their choices, then no choice a person makes is ever a choice made freely.

There are two routes of criticism a soft determinist might follow. These routes exclude each other. If one takes one of them, one must entirely forsake the other. The first is to challenge the idea that if the hypothesis of mechanism is true, it follows that we cannot choose otherwise than we do choose. This route of criticism accepts that having been able to choose otherwise is a necessary condition of a person's having chosen freely. The second is to challenge the idea that it is any part of the concept of a freely made choice that if a choice was made freely, the person who made the choice could have chosen otherwise. This route of criticism consists in rejecting the argument's initial premise. (The two routes exclude each other, for the first accepts the first premise of the argument it criticises, while the second rejects it.)

1) How is it possible for a person to choose otherwise than she does when her reasons for choosing as she does cause her to choose as she does? Surely with just those reasons in mind, she cannot but choose as she does. A person confronted with chocolate and vanilla who wants chocolate more than vanilla will choose chocolate rather than vanilla and cannot choose vanilla rather than chocolate.

Well, replies a soft determinist, of course with *those* reasons in mind a person will choose accordingly. But that fact doesn't imply that she could not have chosen otherwise than she did. After all, had she *wanted* vanilla rather than chocolate, she *would have* chosen vanilla. To say that a person can choose otherwise is just to say that if she wants to choose otherwise she will choose otherwise. So it is always possible for a person to choose otherwise, for it is always the case that if a person wants to choose otherwise, that person will choose otherwise.

The soft determinist is here appealing to what can be described as the hypothetical or conditional interpretation of the phrase "she could have chosen otherwise than she did." According to the soft determinist, once we understand just what "could have done otherwise" means, we will see that the hypothesis of mechanism poses no threat at all to the idea that we

possess free will. Suppose it is true that if Sally had wanted to clear the clutter from her table she would have cleared the clutter from her table. That conditional can be true even though, as a matter of fact, Sally didn't want to clear the clutter from her table and she intentionally refrained from clearing it. Moreover, that conditional can be true even if Sally's personality and her behaviour are entirely mechanical products of prior events. What all this means, says the soft determinist, is that it is entirely possible that Sally could have chosen to clear the clutter even though she chose not to clear the clutter and even though her choice not to clear the clutter was a causal product of her personality at the moment of choice.

The soft determinist is absolutely right that if "she could have chosen otherwise than she did" means "she would have chosen otherwise than she did had she wanted to choose otherwise," then it is true that we always could have chosen otherwise than we in fact did choose. It is true, that is, that we always could have chosen otherwise than we did choose even if we always choose as we do because of our personalities at the moment of choice. Why, though, should we accept the hypothetical interpretation of "she could have chosen otherwise"? Why should we think that "she could have chosen otherwise" means nothing other than "she would have chosen otherwise had she wanted to choose otherwise"?

The answer to this question begins with the lesson that we understand the powers of ordinary objects and substances entirely in a hypothetical or conditional way. We learn this lesson by observing what we say, and how we understand what we say, when we talk about what can happen, or what could have happened, with this or that everyday item. We say of a piece of untarnished iron, "be careful with this, it can rust," and what we mean by "it can rust," we understand, is given by the conditional sentence "if it gets wet, it will rust." Likewise, "this pot can break" means, we understand, "if this pot is dropped (or hit or ...), then this pot will break." "This log can burn" means "if this log is ignited, it will burn." (The same works for the past tense. "This piece of iron could have rusted" means "Had this piece of iron been wet, it would have rusted.") It is hard to imagine, we might think, what could be meant by "it can rust" other than or in addition to "it will rust if it gets wet."

The lesson to be drawn from our observation is that we understand what everyday things *can do* only in terms of what they *will do should they come into some particular condition*. This lesson, says the soft determinist, is to be applied to persons and their choices and actions. Yes, it is true of a choice freely made that the person who made the choice could have chosen otherwise than he did. It is true that he could have chosen otherwise, for it is true that he would have chosen otherwise had he wanted to, and to say "he could have chosen otherwise" is to say nothing more or other than "he would have chosen otherwise had he wanted to."

How do incompatibilists (hard determinists and libertarians) respond to this line of reasoning? The soft determinist says that "can" and "could have" sentences are actually hypothetical or conditional sentences, that is, sentences of the form "if, then will" or "if had, then would have." What they observe with regard to "can" and "could have" sentences as applied to ordinary things seems right. How can incompatibilists deny that the hypothetical or conditional interpretation applies to "can" and "could have" sentences regarding choices and actions?

Incompatibilists respond to the hypothetical or conditional analysis of "can" and "could have" sentences in two ways. First, they say that we simply do *not* mean, when we say that

some one can do something, that they will do that thing if they want to do it. Check your conception of what you mean when you say “Sally can clear the clutter,” incompatibilists instruct us. You mean, they say, simply that Sally can clear the clutter, and what you mean is that Sally can clear the clutter whatever she most wants to do. You do not mean anything trivial such as that Sally will clear the clutter if she wants to. You mean that Sally, Sally as she is, can clear the clutter. To speak of what Sally would do were she to have different wants isn’t really to speak of Sally at all, but actually to speak of someone like Sally, like Sally in all respects save in what she most wants. But you don’t mean to speak of this other person.

You mean to speak of Sally, Sally as she actually is, with her personality just as it is. When you wonder whether Sally could have done otherwise, you are wondering about Sally herself, as she was at the moment of choice, with her personality as it was actually configured at the moment of choice.

Second, they respond to the hypothetical or conditional analysis of “she could have chosen otherwise than she did” by questioning whether being able to choose otherwise in the hypothetical or conditional sense is at all relevant to whether one is morally responsible for what one chooses. The issue whether we possess free will, recall, appears to be of practical significance, as well as of theoretical interest, just because possessing free will seems to be a necessary condition for being morally responsible for one’s choices and actions. It might well be true that to say “this piece of iron can rust” is to say nothing more or other than “if this piece of iron is exposed to water, it will rust.” But the piece of iron is not morally responsible either for rusting or for remaining unblemished. If a person has free will in virtue of the fact that she would have chosen otherwise than she did had she had different desires than she had, then it is hard to see how having free will has anything to do with a person’s being morally responsible for her choices or actions.

2) As we have just seen, some soft determinists respond to the argument for incompatibilism within the “could-not-have-chosen-otherwise” argument by appealing to the hypothetical or conditional analysis of the phrase “she could have chosen otherwise than she did.” These philosophers implicitly accept that a key ingredient in the concept of being free to do some one thing is possessing the ability to do some other thing instead. As soft determinists, these philosophers also accept that a key ingredient in the concept of doing something free is simply wanting to do that something, and doing it because one wants to do it.

Some soft determinists, then, think that the concept of free will contains at least two ingredients, that of intentionally doing what one wants and that of being about to do otherwise than one wants.

Other soft determinists say that there is but one ingredient in the concept of doing something freely, and that ingredient is intentionally doing what one wants to do. If you are doing what you most want to do, and are doing it because it is what you most want to do, then you are acting freely, and that is all there is to it. These soft determinists deny that it need be true that one could have done differently for it to be true that one did what one did freely. Their response to the argument for incompatibilism within the “could-not-have-chosen-otherwise” argument is to reject the principle that if a person does something of his own free will, then that person could have done otherwise than he did.

Imagine a man sitting in a room, reading an interesting book in a comfortable chair. Suppose Claire calls to this man through the closed door to the room, “Simon, come here, I

want you to see this!” Simon responds, “Not now, I want to remain here.” Simon, we are supposing, wants to remain in the room, and he is aware that he wants to remain in the room. Does Simon remain in the room of his own free will? According to soft determinists, yes he does, for he is doing what he most wants to do—at least between the two options offered him, remaining in the room and leaving it to join Claire. Now add to this scenario the fact that, unknown to Simon, the door to the room is locked, such that he could not leave the room even if he wanted to leave it. Does this fact matter to whether Simon remains in the room of his own free will? *Should* it matter?

The position we are investigating here says that it shouldn’t matter. If you judged that Simon remains in the room of his own free will before hearing that the room is locked against his leaving, then you should continue to judge that Simon remains in the room of his own free will. The topic of free will concerns the individual’s will, and Simon’s will is as it is independently of the state of the door to the room. Moreover, you had no good reason before hearing that the door is locked to think other than that Simon remains in the room of his own free will. Since whether the door is locked is irrelevant to whether Simon remains in the room of his own free will, you still have no good reason to think other than that Simon remains in the room of his own free will.

If this is right, that whether the room is locked or not is irrelevant to whether Simon remains in the room freely, then it is no part of the concept of doing something freely that one can do other than what one does. Simon can do no other than remain in the room, for the door to the room is locked from the outside. And yet Simon consciously wants to remain in the room, and so remains in it of his own free will. The upshot of these reasonings is that the argument for incompatibility according to which the hypothesis of mechanism rules out our ability to do otherwise than we do, doesn’t get even an inch off the ground. It doesn’t get even an inch off the ground for it presupposes that a necessary condition of doing something freely is being able to do something else instead, and that presupposition is false.

How do incompatibilists respond to this second route of criticism of their argument? (And how do the first sort of soft determinists respond to it?) It is a mistake, the incompatibilists say, to think that we were in a position to judge whether Simon remained in the room of his own free will before we were apprised of the fact that the door is locked and Simon doesn’t know that it is. Since the argument depends on the idea that however we judge before we know that the door is locked, we should continue to judge that way after we know, and that idea is false, the argument cannot show what it is supposed to show. We must suspend judgement until we know all the relevant facts, and that the door is locked is a relevant fact. Or, actually, what is a relevant fact is that the door is locked and Simon is unaware that it is. Indeed, Simon must mistakenly think that the door is unlocked. After all, his stated reason for remaining in the room is that he doesn’t want to leave it, not that he cannot leave it. And this fact about Simon’s mind is a fact relevant to the state of Simon’s will. Nothing in the example, then, incompatibilists maintain, tells against our initial thought that key to the idea of acting freely is having the ability to act otherwise than one does.

We might note that the example in this second route of criticism exposes the relevance of the way an action is described to whether that action is performed freely. Simon is doing many things all at once—or, better, the one thing that he is doing can be described truly in many different ways. Simon is sitting, Simon is reading, Simon remains in the room after

Claire's call, and Simon is reading while sitting in the room even after Claire's call. Simon's sitting while reading is the same event as Simon's sitting, which is the same event as Simon's reading. But maybe Simon is sitting unintentionally while intentionally reading. If that is so, then Simon is not sitting freely, while he might be reading freely. Perhaps Simon is of his own free will remaining in the room *in the manner in which he is remaining there* (sitting down, reading, comfortable), even though he is not of his own free will simply remaining in the room.

### *5. Responding to the second argument for incompatibilism*

The thesis of incompatibilism states that if the choices people make and the actions they perform are entirely causal products of prior events, then no one ever makes a choice or performs an action freely. In the previous section we looked at an argument for this thesis, and considered why soft determinists think that that argument is faulty. In this section we will look at a second argument for the thesis of incompatibilism. We have already encountered this argument. It forms part of a larger argument to the conclusion that free will does not exist, an argument called the distant causation argument. We discussed the distant causation argument in Section 6 of Chapter Sixteen.

The central idea in this argument for incompatibilism is that if the choices people make or the actions they perform are entirely causal products of prior events, then people are not in control of their choosing or acting. If that idea is true, and it is also true that a choice or an action is not made or performed freely unless it is a choice or action under the control of the person involved, then the incompatibilist thesis must also be true.

At the core of the argument is a defence of the central idea that in a mechanistic world people could not be in control of what they do. How is this idea to be defended? Incompatibilists who appeal to this argument begin with the thought that if a person's behaviour is the mechanistic product of earlier events, and those prior events are the mechanistic product of still earlier events, and on and on, then that person's behaviour is as it is because of events that occurred way before that person was born. Events that occurred way before a person was born, they add, are certainly events over which that person could not have exercised control. Now consider this principle: if a person had no control over whether a particular event occurs, and that particular event was the complete cause of some subsequent event, then the person had no control over whether the subsequent event occurred. Given this principle, the incompatibilist says, one must conclude that if a person's behaviour is the mechanistic product of earlier events, and on and on, then no choice made or action performed by that person is a choice or action over which that person had control.

In short, the argument is that it wouldn't be up to me what I choose or do if what I choose or do is a causal product of events that clearly were not up to me, for something that occurs entirely because of things that were not up to me cannot itself be something that was up to me. Now a choice or action is a freely made choice or freely performed action only if it is up to me what I choose or do. Therefore, if what I do is a causal product of events over which I exercised no control, then I do not do freely whatever it is that I do.

Soft determinists find one or two things wrong with this argument for incompatibilism.

First, some think false the principle according to which a person exercises no control over those events that are entirely the causal products of events over which he exercised no control.

A person exercises control over events through his personality and his abilities. When he does what he is able to do because he wants to do it, he is exercising control over events. That's all there is to being in control of one's choices or actions. Now if that point is true, the point that being in control of one's choices or actions is just to choose or do what is within one's ability on the basis of one's personality, then nothing about control depends on how one came to have one's abilities or personality. All of that is irrelevant to whether one is now in control. So it can well be true that though one exercised no control over the events that formed one's personality, still, one *is* exercising control over events that flow from that personality.

Soft determinists think that there is a misconception about the nature of the self behind this argument, a misconception in virtue of which the principle regarding lack of control appears sound. The misconception consists in thinking of the self, the entity that chooses and acts, as somehow apart from the world and events in it. But a person's self just is his personality. That personality can be entirely a product of events over which it itself exercised no control, and yet those events caused by it can well be events over which it did exercise control. That a person's personality is the result of a causal chain in which it did not itself participate does not mean that that personality is not exercising control over the events in the causal chain in which it is participating.

Second, some soft determinists criticise the argument for incompatibilism found within the distant causation argument on the grounds that one need not be in control of one's choices or actions for one to freely choose or act. This criticism rejects the tight link presupposed in the argument between the concepts of being in control and being free. The argument, recall, includes the premise that a choice or action is a freely made choice or freely performed action only if it is under my control what I choose or do. Let us suppose, then, say these soft determinists, that I am not exercising control over what I choose when my choice is determined to be the choice that it is by my personality. Still, I am choosing on the basis of my personality—on the basis, that is, of my values and desires. A person chooses freely when they choose the option they most like or want. Thus, a person is choosing freely when she chooses on the basis of her personality. Therefore, whether a person exercises control over her choices is irrelevant to the question whether a person chooses freely. The distant causation argument for incompatibilism fails because it assumes as a necessary part of freedom of will something—control—that actually has nothing to do with freedom at all.

#### *6. Soft determinism and moral responsibility*

Soft determinists say that one acts of one's own free will whenever one does what one does intentionally. A serious question we must ask is whether this minimal conception of free will can support the idea that one is morally responsible for one's actions if one performed one's actions of one's own free will.

To be morally responsible for one's actions is, among other things, to deserve to be treated in return according to one's actions. Good actions redound to the credit of the person morally responsible for them, while bad actions merit punishment or other sanctions. A person who steals deserves to be punished, one might think, but only so long as they stole of their own free will. And they deserve to be punished only to the degree required by their crime, whether punishment causes them to reform their ways or not. Likewise, a person who

performs an act of kindness or generosity deserves admiration and gratitude, and not in order to promote further acts of kindness or generosity. Contrast our feelings about moral responsibility with our thinking regarding how and why dogs, for instance, are to be trained. Dogs, let us assume (perhaps controversially), lack free will. As such, they cannot be morally responsible for their behaviour. For that reason, when we reward a dog for good behaviour or punish her for bad, we are not treating the dog according to how she *deserves* to be treated. The notion of desert simply doesn't gain purchase here. A dog doesn't *deserve* to be treated one way rather than another, whatever she does. All we can be doing by rewarding or punishing a dog is seeking to instil in her patterns of behaviour of which we approve or seeking to prevent her from acquiring patterns of which we disapprove. Now, of course, in rewarding and punishing people we might well be seeking to influence their behaviour. But that is not all that we are doing, we think. We are also giving them what is their due, what they merit according to their actions.

The problem for soft determinists is how on their minimal conception of free will we can make sense of the concept of moral responsibility, and the notions of desert and merit that go with it. How, if our behaviour is no less the mechanical product of prior events than is the behaviour of dogs, can we deserve to be treated one way rather than another according to our behaviour? Critics of soft determinism say that if we are free just in that we act intentionally, then we no more merit certain treatment in light of our own behaviour than dogs do in light of theirs. For both people and dogs, the only justification there could be to apply rewards or sanctions is the desire to influence behaviour.

The soft determinist replies that the concept of moral responsibility be founded simply on the concept of acting for a reason. Consider the difference between behaviour that follows on reasons for acting and behaviour the causes of which cannot be described as reasons. Dogs do all sorts of things, but, if they lack free will, they don't do what they do for reasons, or at least not as a result of reasoning. People, on the other hand, act after envisioning options, deliberating, and choosing from among the options they have envisioned on the basis of their deliberations. That people act for reasons supplies the ground of their moral responsibility for their actions, even though that they have the reasons for acting that they have is ultimately something beyond their control.

### *7. Mechanism is necessary for the will to be free*

Soft determinists are compatibilists: that is, they hold that free will can exist in a world in which all choices and actions are mechanical products of prior events. Soft determinists, though, are rarely simply compatibilists who hold both that free will exists and that all choices and actions are mechanical products of prior events. They tend to subscribe to a stronger thesis than mere compatibility. They tend to think that indeed a choice or an action must be a mechanical product of prior events if it is to stand a chance of being a free choice or action. That is, soft determinists tend to subscribe to the strong thesis that mechanism is necessary for the will to be free. Any choice or action that follows only indeterministically from a person's reasons or personality could not possibly be a free choice or action. Where incompatibilists think that escape from mechanical causality is a requirement of freedom, most soft determinists hold that freedom is impossible *without* mechanical causation.

We saw in Section 2 of Chapter Seventeen that mere indeterminacy does not suffice for freedom. If a randomizing device were inserted between our decision to go for an option and our going for that option, such that there was a 25% chance that we would go for a different option despite our decision (or a 5% chance, or a .05% chance), then we would not be acting freely whether we happened to go with our decision or not. The reason we would not be acting freely were such a thing to happen is that our actions would not be expressions of our personalities, not things that we did, but things that simply befell us. Libertarians, as we saw, agree with this. Their conception of free will, though it embraces indeterminacy, does not find freedom in mere indeterminacy. Soft determinists, for their part, think that the point that indeterminacy would rob us of freedom points us in the direction of an important lesson regarding freedom of the will. *Any* sort of indeterminacy at *any* point in the causal chain would rob us of freedom, they say. And so mechanism is a necessary feature of any world in which free will could exist.

For a person to be pursuing some course of action of his own free will, his pursuit of that course of action must not only be in line with his personality (his reasons, his desires, his values), it must also have been caused by his personality. Otherwise he would not be expressing himself in pursuing that course of action. If he is not expressing himself in pursuing a course of action, he is not pursuing that course of action of his own free will. It is for that reason, soft determinists conclude, that free will could not exist in a world marked by indeterminacy in the causal relation between a person's personality and his actions.