

SPACETIME SYMMETRIES AND THE PROBLEM OF FREE WILL

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Abstract. Intuition dictates: if the universe is deterministic – if the laws that govern its evolution are deterministic – then we are unable to act any other way than we actually do, and there is no such thing as free will. In other words, intuitively compelling reasons seem to suggest that determinism and free will are incompatible.

But of course, in current philosophy, many, if not most, are eager to resist such incompatibilist intuitions, and, often, free will is thought to be compatible with determinism. Here, however, this traditional dispute between compatibilism and incompatibilism is set aside; instead, the incompatibilist account is examined from within, and a critical analysis of some of the intuitions it is based on is presented. The focus is on the consequence argument – the argument challenging in a systematic and precise way the idea that free will could be compatible with determinism. According to this argument, if determinism holds, then our actions are consequences of the initial conditions of the universe, and the laws that govern its evolution, and hence acting some other way than we actually do would entail a change either in the initial conditions, or the laws, or both, and since it is absurd to think that we could change either, it is impossible we could act any other way than we actually do, and hence we are not free.

It is argued here that the consequence argument equivocates between two different, contrary notions of consequence. On the one hand, in defining determinism, it relies on a logical or mathematical notion of consequence. On the other hand, in assuming that we (our decisions) can be sources – causal initiators – of our actions (that result in outcomes in the world), it relies on a causal notion of consequence. Although the former reading is typically explicitly favoured by the proponents of the argument, it is argued here that in that reading the argument loses its status as a *reductio*: there is nothing absurd in holding that different actions would entail different pasts, for the fundamental laws of nature are temporally symmetric, and it follows from this that different futures entail, logically or mathematically, different pasts. Therefore, to be a *reductio*, the argument must in fact be relying on the latter, causal reading of the notion of consequence. But in that case, it is the complete initial state of the universe together with the laws of nature that causes our actions. Not only would this sound absurd to many, but more importantly, it would contradict the basic assumption of the consequence argument itself, namely the idea that *we* can be sources of our actions.

Thus, it is argued here, the consequence argument is in fact inconsistent: it assumes, tacitly, both that we are sources of our actions and that we are no such things. The only way around this inconsistency,

it seems, would be to find a reconciliation between fundamental spacetime symmetries and causal asymmetries, but such has not been offered by the incompatibilist argumentation, and no ready-made solution is on offer in current metaphysics or philosophy of science.