

Free Will:
Dennett, "Could Have Done Otherwise"

Dennett defends **compatibilism**: the view that free will and determinism are compatible.

1. Free Will and Moral Responsibility

Apart from their intrinsic interest, questions of free will are thought to be important because they bear on questions of moral responsibility. We commonly think: if person S is morally responsible for an act A, then S could have done other than A.

'could have done otherwise' principle: one acts freely only if one could have acted otherwise
(Frankfurt—who Dennett cites—calls this the *principle of alternate possibilities*.)

But, if determinism is true, could anyone do other than they actually do (or did)?

Dennett's claims: (i) when it comes to moral responsibility, it simply does not matter whether or not we could have done otherwise, in the incompatibilist's sense of 'could have done otherwise';
(ii) there is a sense of 'could have done otherwise' that does matter to us, but that the ability to do otherwise in this sense does not require the falsity of determinism.

2. Do We Care About an Ability to Do Otherwise?

The Nefarious Neurosurgeon

Jones hates Smith and decides, in full possession of his faculties, to murder him. Meanwhile Black, the nefarious neurosurgeon, who also wants Smith dead, has implanted something in Jones' brain so that *just in case Jones changes his mind* (and chickens out), Black, by pushing his special button, can put Jones back on his murderous track. In the event Black doesn't have to intervene; Jones does the deed all on his own.

Martin Luther

"Here I stand," Luther said. "I can do no other." Luther claimed that he could do no other, that his conscience made it *impossible* for him to recant.

According to Dennett, the cases of the Nefarious Neurosurgeon and of Martin Luther show us two related things:

- a. It refutes the claim that moral responsibility requires the ability to otherwise (as Van Inwagen takes it);
- b. It draws attention to the importance, for moral responsibility, of the actual causal chain of deliberation running through the agent.

Dennett doesn't deny that we ask questions of the form 'could S have done otherwise?' But, we rarely (if ever) care if a person could have done otherwise in the *exact same conditions*. And it doesn't matter whether a person could have done otherwise in the exact same conditions.

What *does* matter for moral responsibility, then? In section 2, Dennett gives us some hints. Through his 'torture for money' case (p. 85), we learn:

- that we care, not only that Dennett could not do otherwise in the specified situation, but also in any roughly similar case. This is the *restraint* we want. As Dennett says later: "a considerable part of being a responsible person consist[s] in making oneself unable to do the things one would be blamed for doing if one did them?"
- that we care whether Dennett would recognize the "one-in-a-zillion" case in which, thanks to that thousand dollars, not otherwise obtainable, the world could be saved. This is the *flexibility* we want. But notice that this kind of flexibility is not incompatible with determinism.

3. What's The Question, Then?

So, we care about something when we consider whether someone is a morally responsible person—that moral responsibility requires something. We also know that we ask questions of the form: 'could S have done otherwise?' What, then, *are* we asking when we ask those questions?

Dennett doesn't so much give us an answer as illustrate the answer with the example of the 'Mark I Deterministic Deliberator'. Our editors tell us that the Mark I Deterministic Deliberator is:

A robot with artificial intelligence, designed and constructed by scientists, that is sent to investigate another planet—Mars, say. DD is far more sophisticated than any robots that currently exist, and can think about options, make decisions, plan ahead, and so on—though in a pretty rudimentary way compared to humans.... As its name implies, DD is, by hypothesis, fully deterministic. However, it does sometimes employ heuristic procedures which depend on a 'pseudo-random number generator': a program that generates sequences of numbers that are apparently random—in practice there's no way to predict what the next number will be—but are in fact produced by a fully deterministic process." (p. 96)

According to Dennett, if the robot does something "unfortunate", it is perfectly reasonable to ask whether the robot could have done otherwise. And what they would be asking is *not* whether the robot would do otherwise in *exactly the same circumstances*. So far, so good. We know what the scientists would *not* be asking.

But, what *would* they be asking? According to Dennett, they are asking whether the robot's "misperformance is the result of a systematic weakness", and likely to occur again, or whether it was the result of the "coincidental convergence of fundamentally independent factors", and not likely occur again. Notice that, whatever the answer, the robot is fully determined and yet, according to Dennett, we can ask meaningful questions about whether the robot could have done otherwise.

Even if we take this to be true—that this is what the scientists are asking—is this case really analogous to the 'human case'? How exactly is it supposed to map onto the human case? Where does moral responsibility fit in?