

The Compatibilist's Second Burden: Responding to the Consequence Argument

Tim Lewis

1. Assumptions of the Argument

DET: The laws of nature, plus the state of the world at a given time, necessitates a single unique future. Put formally, DET is:

(DET) $\Box[\text{If } (LN \ \& \ P_1), \text{ then } P_n]$,

where P_1 is a true proposition giving a complete description of the world at a time t_1 , P_n is a true proposition giving a complete description of the world at a later time t_n , and ' \Box ' stands for 'it is necessary that'.

The No-Choice Principle (NCP):

(NCP) Given that **P** is true and the conditional **if P, then Q** is true, then if no one has or ever had any choice about whether **P** or the conditional **if P, then Q** is true, then no one has or ever had any choice about whether **Q** is true.

We shall symbolize the expression 'No one has, or ever had, any choice about _' by ' N '. We shall also assume a certain principle, which (in another work¹) van Inwagen calls 'Principle (α)':

(α) If $\Box(P)$, then $N(P)$.

This principle allows us to infer from the necessary truth of a proposition that no one has, or ever had, any choice about its truth. We'll invoke (α) in our sub-argument for premise 3.

2. The Argument

P: Things were thus-and-so ten million years ago.

["thus-and-so": a true and complete description of the state of the world 10 million years ago]

LN: A complete enumeration of the laws of nature.

Q: Tim votes for candidate X.

1. (P & LN), and if (P & LN), then Q
2. $N(P \ \& \ LN)$

¹ *An Essay on Free Will* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1983).

3. $N[\text{If } (P \ \& \ LN), \text{ then } Q]$
∴ 4. So, $N(Q)$.

Sub-argument for Premise 3:

(i) $\Box[\text{If } (P \ \& \ LN), \text{ then } Q]$

(ii) $\text{If } \Box[\text{If } (P \ \& \ LN), \text{ then } Q], \text{ then } N[\text{If } (P \ \& \ LN), \text{ then } Q]$

Thus, (iii) $N[\text{If } (P \ \& \ LN), \text{ then } Q]$.

Sub-premise (i) is a straightforward consequence of (DET). Sub-premise (ii) is an instance of (α) : if it is necessary that the conjunction of P and LN entails Q, then no one has, or ever had, any choice about the fact that the conjunction of P and LN entails Q. Sub-premise (iii) follows directly from (i) and (ii) by modus ponens.

What the Argument Demonstrates

The argument appears to show that, given the NCP, no one has, or ever will have, any choice about any of the actions that they commit. If we also grant the following plausible principle (*):

(*) If no one has or ever will have a choice about the truth of a proposition **P** (such as the proposition that Tim votes for candidate X), then no one is free with respect to the action **P** is about (like the action of Tim's voting for candidate X),

then it seems like the argument shows that no one is ever free with respect to the actions they commit (!) But if that's true then Compatibilism must be false, since it is false that we have free will.

3. Responses on behalf of Compatibilism

There are two basic responses open to the Compatibilist: (a) they can deny the NCP, or (b) they can keep the NCP, and attempt to show that by itself it is perfectly consistent with Compatibilism. Option (b) attempts to show that the first premise of our Argument Against Compatibilism (AAC) is false:

If Compatibilism is true, then the NCP is false.

With respect to option (a), the prospects don't look good. If someone has a plausible counterexample to the NCP, tell me about it!

With respect to option (b), there are two ways in which the Compatibilist can go about showing that the first premise of the (AAC) is false. First, they could deny principle (α) . A successful counterexample to this principle would have to be a case where a proposition is necessarily true, but that is such that someone has or has had a

choice about its truth.² If there are counterexamples to (α) then it is an invalid inference rule and one cannot validly infer from the necessity of a proposition that no one has or ever had a choice about its truth. This route preserves the NCP itself but blocks the sub-argument for premise 3 of the Consequence Argument. Thus, if successful, it shows that the first premise of (AAC) is false.

The second route on option (b) is to give an account of choice and free will that allows for the consistency of the NCP and DET, and thus for the consistency of NCP and Compatibilism. If there is such an account, then the Compatibilist may deny the first premise of (AAC).

² I believe (α) may indeed be vulnerable to counterexample, but the issues are rather technical. If you wish to discuss this please see me.