

An Emergentist Defense of Incompatibility between Morally Significant Freedom and Causal Determinism

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Abstract : The common perception of morally responsible behavior is that it presupposes freedom of choice, and that free decisions and actions are not determined by natural events, but by a person. In other words, the moral agent has the ability and the possibility of doing otherwise when making morally responsible decisions, and natural causal determinism cannot fully account for morally significant freedom. The incompatibility between a person's morally significant freedom and causal determinism appears to be a natural position. Nevertheless, some of the most influential philosophical theories on moral responsibility are compatibilist or semi-compatibilist, and they exclude the requirement of alternative possibilities, which contradicts the claims of classical incompatibilism. The compatibilists often employ Frankfurt-style thought experiments to prove their theory. The goal of this paper is to examine the role of imaginary Frankfurt-style examples in compatibilist accounts. More specifically, the compatibilist accounts defended by John Martin Fischer and Michael McKenna will be inserted into the broader understanding of a person elaborated by Harry Frankfurt, Robert Kane and Walter Glannon. Deeper analysis reveals that the exclusion of alternative possibilities based on Frankfurt-style examples is problematic and misleading. A more comprehensive account of moral responsibility and morally significant (source) freedom requires higher order complex theories of human will and consciousness, in which rational and self-creative abilities and a real possibility to choose otherwise, at least on some occasions during a lifetime, are necessary. Theoretical moral reasons and their logical relations seem to require a sort of higher-order agent-causal incompatibilism. The ability of theoretical or abstract moral reasoning requires complex (strongly emergent) mental and conscious properties, among which an effective free will, together with first and second-order desires. Such a hierarchical theoretical model unifies reasons-responsiveness, mesh theory and emergentism. It is incompatible with physical causal determinism, because such determinism only allows non-systematic processes that may be hard to predict, but not complex (strongly) emergent systems. An agent's effective will and conscious reflectivity is the starting point of a morally responsible action, which explains why a decision is 'up to the subject'. A free decision does not always have a complete causal history. This kind of an emergentist source hyper-incompatibilism seems to be the best direction of the search for an adequate explanation of moral responsibility in the traditional (merit-based) sense. Physical causal determinism as a universal theory would exclude morally significant freedom and responsibility in the traditional sense because it would exclude the emergence of and supervenience by the essential complex properties of human consciousness.

Keywords : consciousness, free will, determinism, emergence, moral responsibility

Conference Title : ICCCHE 2018 : International Conference on Cognition, Consciousness and Human Evolution

Conference Location : Tokyo, Japan

Conference Dates : November 12-13, 2018