

Compatibilism and Knowledge: An Exploration of the Spectrum of Freewill

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Can we increase our own free will? Many philosophical discussions are concerned with whether or not we are free, and how the answer to that question impacts the way we live our life. In this paper, I take a different approach and consider the idea that the way we are conceiving of free will is not binary, but rather a spectrum. If we accept the intuition that knowledge increases our access to alternate possibilities, and that one can increase their free will with more knowledge, then we can accept the idea that we can increase our own freewill. I approach my argument from an epistemological standpoint and divide this paper into two parts. The first part will focus on supporting the idea that knowledge increases free will, and the second part will demonstrate the implications of this idea, namely, demonstrating free will as a spectrum. I provide four cases to demonstrate this spectrum, working under the assumption of traditional compatibilism, and I hope to show that if knowledge results in realizing alternate possibilities, then perhaps there is the capacity to increase one's own freedom.

Compatibilism: Internal and External constraints

I will begin with a brief explanation of traditional compatibilism. When we define freewill, the common conceptions in literature are “the ability to do otherwise,” or the “freedom to act on one’s desires.” The traditional compatibilist believes we retain some freewill despite living in a determined world. Assuming one is not compelled or coerced by forces outside of their control, and assuming one is acting on their own desires, then this can be considered free will despite determinism. In this paper, I will assume both determinism and traditional compatibilism are true. If determinism is true, there are obvious constraints to one’s freedom including: economic,

social, physical and mental aptitude, and knowledge. In this paper, I will focus on knowledge as a constraint to freewill, however each of the restrictions are important elements to free will as a whole.

An important distinction lies in the difference between external and internal constraints to free will. External constraints include social and economic limitations as well as physical and individual constraints. Because these are all factors that a person has little control over, I take these to be a part of determinism, and why I do not accept a libertarian conception of freewill which supposes that a person is completely free, and their actions are indetermined up until the moment of choice. The internal constraints have to do with one's intentions, desires, and character. These are what I believe we have some – though not full – control over. External constraints may be limiting in that intentions are not executed the way we intended. For example, I may intend to go to the store, but my car does not start, so I am restricted externally, though my desire is still free. In this paper, I will be primarily focused on knowledge as an element of internal free will.

Some may object that internal and external constraints may not be as clear as I have presented them here. For example, a person's genes may be the cause of their kindness. In this case, the person cannot help but to be kind, and therefore is not praiseworthy or blameworthy for their actions. If the person desires to be kind, and is in fact kind, then it seems that there is not always a distinction between internal and external constraints.

This discrepancy can be resolved with the idea of sourcehood, that is, the idea that we are the ultimate authors of our own actions. While it is true that internal and external constraints greatly influence each other, the two remain distinct. Internal factors, desire, intention, character, are in our direct control, while external factors remain in our control only indirectly by means of our

internal control. In the case above, the kind person's intentions align with their actions, but in many other cases, one's actions do not align with their intentions; for instance, someone who is convicted of manslaughter. Thus, it is important to distinguish the difference between one's internal constraints and one's external constraints, despite their interconnectedness.

Knowledge Increases Freedom

In this section I will explore why I believe knowledge is an important component to one's internal freedom. I will now explore an area that I think is often underestimated in its role in freewill literature: how a person's knowledge affects their freewill, and how more knowledge increases one's freewill.

Here is the argument put in its simplest form:

1. Knowledge increases one's access to alternate possibilities
2. More alternate possibilities result in more freedom
3. Therefore, more knowledge results in more freedom

The validity of this argument relies heavily on validity of premise one. Throughout the rest of this section, I hope to provide some thought-provoking arguments as to why I believe premise one is valid, and how this plays a role in the spectrum of freewill.

First, it is important to mention that knowledge need not be restricted to education, books, or formal schooling. Knowledge is also in the forms of real-life experiences, observation, introspection, and the testimony of others. We cannot say that a society without a formal educational institution does not have access to knowledge, because clearly there are many ways to receive information, and the information that gets encoded in the brain urges a person think

and deliberate on their options and consciously choose (in some, though not all cases under traditional compatibilism) which action to take.

Knowledge causes one to see the world in new and more in-depth ways, allowing a person to make connections between objects or events that were previously disjointed. The connections in the brain can begin to reveal to the person the way the world actually is, and new perspectives can give this person new ways to interact with their surroundings. Having access to more ways to see the world tends to result in new ideas, desires, intentions and character, the essential elements of the internal constraints. When a person gains more knowledge, they tend to have more or different desires and intentions, or they may better understand the internal and external constraints of others. When equipped with more knowledge, a person will be more informed about their choices and alternative ways of living. Modifications to the internal constraints often result in a change in external constraints, usually by means of change in habits, lifestyle, or patterns of thinking.

Knowledge may also result in certain skills or abilities. If someone has the ability to ride a bike or drive a car, they have access to more forms of transportation than just walking, thereby increasing their freedom to travel further distances. Similarly, a person who knows how to cook and knows how to program has the freedom to decide between two possible careers where a person who only knows how to cook is limited to one. Having more skills in this case can make one freer to practice skills that others may not have, though many philosophers may argue that having knowledge or abilities is not essential for free will because it does not amount to freedom of choice or sourcehood. Some of these concerns will be addressed in the next section, but it is important to note that knowledge is only one of many components involved in free will.

Limitations

It may be argued that one's intelligence does not have direct influence over their freedom, just as being witty does not make one wise. Knowledge can often be understood on a strictly theoretical level without there ever being a complete grasp of a concept on a deeper level by means of experience or application. For example, one may read a manual and understand perfectly how to perform heart surgery but few patients would be eager to have this person work on them without appropriate experience. This exemplifies an important distinction, not all knowledge will result in more freedom, and more often than not, knowledge in the form of real-life experience will be more valuable than theoretical knowledge.

Similarly, one can have knowledge but lack the ability to act on it, such as a person who understands that eating cake for dinner every night is not a good idea, but they lack the self-control to stop. Thus, when I say knowledge has the ability to increase one's freewill, I am not asserting that this is always the case. I am only suggesting that the awareness of opportunities or solutions increases the likelihood that the back and side doors are opened, so a person is not restricted to proceeding only through the front.

Additionally, having knowledge of your options does not automatically grant you the ability to choose one option over the other. Knowledge cannot, for example, give you large sums of money, a different body, or a different set of circumstances that permits you to be and do whatever you want just because you "know how to." I am suggesting, though, that increased knowledge provides one with the awareness of how to fulfill one's desires, even if it is not possible for every desire to be fulfilled. Neither am I asserting that knowledge is the best way to conceive of freewill. However, I believe that it is one component of free will that is worth observing.

Of course, it would be naïve to presume that cultures and societies of lower socioeconomic status would be fixed if they merely had access to more information or engaged in more introspection. There are certainly other fundamental problems in these societies that are hindering to freewill and their ability to rise up the social ladder. These limitations are primarily external, and include economic limitations, socialization, location, and obligation to other people among other things. However, I do think that education has an impact on informing members of a society as to what they are capable of and what they have the freedom to do.

My point in this paper is to take a different – though still compatibilist – view of freewill, the goal is to explore this intuition that knowledge increases one's freedom, and perhaps there will be more literature on this topic that will explore this idea in greater depth than this paper is able to.

Free Will as a Spectrum

The first part of this paper was concerned with how knowledge is a component of free will, this section will be concerned with the implications of this idea, and how we can conceive of free will as a spectrum rather than binary.

Here is the argument for free will as a spectrum:

1. Knowledge, among other elements (social, economic, genetics etc.) is one component that increases free will
2. If knowledge results in becoming freer, and we have the means to increase it, we have the means to increase our freedom
3. Everyone has the means to increase their knowledge through learning and experience,
4. Therefore, there is a spectrum of free will, and one's freedom can often be increased by knowledge

The first part of this paper was aimed at providing support for premises one and two. In the next section I will consider the validity of premises three and four.

Four Case Approach

In Pereboom's paper on hard incompatibilism, Pereboom constructs four cases to exemplify determinism and moral responsibility by demonstrating the difficulty in pointing out exactly where the differences lie in a case of obvious determinism to real life. I will take a similar approach and look at four cases where the spectrum of freewill is exemplified by the ability to increase knowledge. The cases show that increased knowledge often results in an increase in freedom of desire for alternate careers. I have specifically chosen to make these hypothetical situations a depiction of real situations in effort to show that the spectrum of free will is real, and not simply a matter of a philosophical thought experiment. Similarly, the cases are dependent on the premise that determinism is true, and some form of traditional compatibilism is true.

Case 1

Consider a person, call him Luke, who lives in a remote village far from civilization. His family and community do not read or write, and he grew up with the belief that he would become a farmer just like his parents. He has no access to books, and his only method of getting an education is through the oral tradition of his community members. Does Luke have free will to choose not to be a farmer?

Case 2

Instead of a remote village, Luke grows up in a slightly wealthier family and attends school through 6th grade. He can read and write and has access to a wide variety of books. His parents and community still encourage him to work as a farmer, but his education opens opportunities to

explore other avenues and consider different careers. Does Luke have more free will in this case to choose a different career?

Case 3

Luke is a person that lives in a remote rural area in the US. He goes to a small school and continues through high school. The community he grows up in does not believe education is a worthwhile pursuit, and instead they prioritize tradition and a hard work ethic. Luke completes a normal American education but is highly pressured to stay in his community and work with his family. Does Luke have more free will in this case than cases 2 and 3?

Case 4

Luke is an average person in the United States in 2020. He is educated in his youth and will probably continue his education in college. While he has been taught fundamental lessons, morals and values from his family and teachers, Luke actively seeks out opportunities to increase his knowledge by reading more books. As he learns, he continues to get more access to more information which provides him different perspectives and possible ways of seeing the world. He understands his place in society and his obvious constraints: economic, time and status. However, as Luke increases his education, he learns to navigate his constraints and consider alternate possibilities as ways to reach his goals.

Discussion

These cases are aimed at demonstrating traditional compatibilism. In each of the cases, Luke cannot decide where he is born, what experiences he has, or what social class he is born into. These events are determined, and it would be impractical to argue that we are the source of every

action in our lives. Instead, the cases are meant to reflect that one can increase their free will in these cases, by means of education, which could arise from both schooling and experience.

Thus, the free will in each of the cases varies significantly. Luke's freedom tends to increase based on where he lives, and how he grew up (social and economic constraints) as well as his mental capacities (genetic constraints) but perhaps more importantly, Luke's free will tends to increase when he is made aware of his situation and learns practical ways to see the world through different perspectives. Different perspectives or ways to see the world arise from more knowledge about the way the world is. It is easy to see how access to knowledge is tightly intertwined with economic and social constraints, however the purpose of the paper is to demonstrate knowledge as a significant constraint in addition to social and economic factors.

In case one, Luke has limited free will because he has limited knowledge of what he could do otherwise. However, unlike Pereboom's case 1 where Professor Plum is subjected to an unrealistic situation of an evil neuroscientist removing any hope of free will, Luke in case 1 lives in the real world, so he can see and judge the testimony of others and use his experiences and the experiences of others to judge the way the world is. Luke has access to the knowledge and resources necessary to "do otherwise," even if his freedom is more restricted than the other cases. Assuming determinism is true, Luke is not completely free, as he is constrained by the laws of nature and his past experiences. However, if we assume that Luke is not coerced, restricted by his physical abilities, and has adequate knowledge, Luke can use his previous past experiences and knowledge to consider different perspectives and outcomes to deliberate and make a well-informed, free decision.

Luke in case 3 has more free will than Luke in case 2, and Luke has the most Freedom in case 4. The spectrum of free will is evident in everyday life, as it is evident that people in more fortunate

situations have more access to alternate possibilities, which is the result of knowledge among other factors. If we assume some form of traditional compatibilism is true and there is some freedom, even if it is more restricted for some, then we can conceive of how one could increase their own free will by increasing their knowledge.

My point in exemplifying the spectrum of freewill is in effort to demonstrate the truth of the common notion that knowledge is power, and the increase of knowledge increases one's power. This idea is intuitive, a person with more access to information is typically more likely to be aware of what they can and cannot do; they know how to act upon their desires, and they do. A person with less knowledge is less likely to know the actionable steps to take to fulfill their desires and do otherwise. For example, an average person might be given the choice between action X and Y. A more knowledgeable person might be conscious of more options, so rather than choosing between X or Y, they can choose between W, X, Y, and Z as well. If freewill is a spectrum, and knowledge is power, and assuming traditional compatibilism, then one has the ability to increase their free will through increasing their knowledge. The starting point, then, is the realization that one can acquire knowledge to inform action, and therefore, one can take action to learn and increase their free will.

Objection and Reply

Suppose you have a person in a culturally isolated society, similar to Pereboom's cult-like culture in case 3. Let's say this culture exists in a city hub with hundreds of libraries, vast access to information and the locals are exceptionally knowledgeable. However, this specific culture is isolated from the rest of the inhabitants of the city, and actively refuse to read and learn the information readily available to them. As a result, they use only what they already know to make decisions and act in accordance with their lesser freewill.

Let's say there is a person in this society, call him Jack, that has an experience that causes him to question the way he was raised and as a result, he freely chooses to investigate the origins of his experiences and read books he was previously opposed to. As a result, Jack leaves the cult and exercises expanded freewill. Furthermore, let's suppose Jack has a twin brother named John. John, despite growing up under the exact same circumstances as Jack, never questions the way he grew up and instead he fully embraces and celebrates his origins, never striving to learn more about the real world. How could we explain the difference between Jack and John? Jack has an arbitrary experience that causes him to see through his cult as an outside observer. This experience was mere luck, and Jack just happened to be the luckier of the two brothers and he now exhibits more freewill than John.

Reply: Under a compatibilism, both luck and determinism do play a role in our actions and behavior, as we do not always have the freedom to do otherwise. However, if the future is a “garden of forking paths” and we are faced with a variety of choices, reflection on previous experiences will lead us to choose one path over the other.

I do think that luck influences a large part of our experiences, and if the experiences are determined, then we do not have control over them. Since we use experiences as the primary way to reflect on the past and plan for the future, luck certainly does play a role in the experiences we have. There are also restrictions to knowledge that derive from a person's worldview. Every experience is filtered through one's conception of how the world is, and without being aware of this, it is possible for one to “learn” facts that support their worldview without truly learning anything that may be contrary to what they already believe. In John's case, every explanation he has for his experiences might validate his beliefs about the world, resulting in a form of confirmation bias.

In this section, I hope to articulate the importance and validity of this objection, as I do not have all the answers. But perhaps the fact that Jack has more freewill than John speaks to the point that there is a spectrum of freewill, and perhaps some people have more experiences that result in more freedom than others for reasons that are arbitrary and not completely clear.

However, I do think the spectrum of freewill increases when we have more experiences that increase our knowledge, and thus, allow us to see the world in different ways. This, consequently, results in our ability to better understand our options and make choices that reflect our desires. Essentially, actively seeking out knowledge increases our chances of learning from experiences that arise out of luck. Though we may not have control over the experiences that arise in our lives, we have control over learning and seeking out more information and analyzing it to the best of our abilities. Even under a worldview like John's that filters information to validate previously held beliefs, there are many opportunities for one to question their beliefs, and with enough evidence, repetition, or reflection, people's beliefs often do change. If we learn the fundamental reasons why we hold our beliefs, who we are and who we want to be, and why the world works the way it does, we will be equipped with answers and possibilities that were not in reach before our awareness of them. Knowledge about the world will open opportunities for what one can do, who we can be, and how we can change. Under compatibilism, one is free when they have the ability to do otherwise, and knowledge is the gateway to providing a person with more alternate possibilities to think and act differently. When one's internal control results in action, knowledge can increase one's freedom.