

Thomas Hobbes was the first great compatibilist, and he argued for compatibilism in something like this kind of way: he wants to focus on what we mean by "free." What do we mean by somebody being free? Well, liberty or freedom signifies properly the absence of opposition. By opposition, I mean external impediments of motion. A free man is he that, in those things which by his strength and wit he is able to do, is not hindered to do what he has a will to. And you can see that's a very commonsensical definition of freedom; the kind of notion that might match up to how we use the word in ordinary life. "I freely chose it; nothing hindered me from doing what I wanted to do." And you can see that if you define freedom in that way, it's entirely compatible with determinism. Not being hindered to do what I choose to do, in no way is interrupted by the fact that I am causally determined. The fact that I'm causally determined to choose as I do, to reason as I do, doesn't in any way mean that I can't do what I choose. So we end up with a compatibilist position.

Now, an argument that's very commonly used to support compatibilism, people like Hobbes but also people like Hume use this, in fact it's a very standard argument in the compatibilist tradition, we can call the contrastive argument. Now what the contrastive argument is doing is aiming to argue that the incompatibilist is making a fundamental mistake. They're drawing the wrong contrast. What is the contrast between things that are free and unfree? Well, the libertarian says it's the contrast between acts that are caused and those that are uncaused. But instead, the compatibilist wants to say the relevant contrast is between acts that are coerced, compelled, or constrained, and those that are free of such influences. So the suggestion is that when we distinguish in ordinary life between free acts and unfree acts, we do not do it on the basis of whether they were caused or uncaused, we do it on the basis of whether someone was holding a gun to my head or pushing me, or whatever it might be, compelling me or constraining me in certain ways to do one thing rather than another. So if I'm not coerced, compelled, or constrained, then I'm free.

Now, the contrastive argument seems quite persuasive, I think, because it aims to link free will very closely with moral responsibility. And it does seem plausible that I can be absolved of responsibility for something I do or don't do in these conditions. Well, suppose I didn't do it at all. In that case, I'm clearly not responsible for it. Suppose I was compelled to do it, I had to do it, someone had a gun to my head. Then I can be absolved of responsibility. Or suppose he pushed me. Or suppose I was coerced. In short, in all of these cases, we're inclined to say, "I didn't do it freely." So Hobbes uses the contrastive argument. Here's a brief quotation from him: "It is not, I think, causality that freedom is to be contrasted with, but constraint." So a very clear statement of the contrastive argument.

Now, some commentators on Hobbes think that he uses the contrastive argument as well, but in fact, he doesn't. I think that's a mistaken interpretation of Hume. If you read stuff on Hume, you will often find people mentioning "liberty of indifference" and "liberty of spontaneity." These are terms which are used in the "Treatise of Human Nature," which is not the text that you read on this course. I think that's a good thing, but that misleads some people. They think that Hume is drawing a traditional contrast, in other words employing the contrastive argument, but in fact, Hume's notion of liberty is rather a different one. So here is a quotation from the "Inquiry," which is the text that you are expected to read, and it's one of the classic contributions to the freewill debate. "By liberty, then, we can only mean a power of acting or not acting, according to the determinations of the will. That is, if we choose to remain at rest, we may; if we choose to move, we also may." Now, this hypothetical liberty is universally allowed to belong to everyone who is not a prisoner and in chains. Now, notice Hume is not saying anything about things like coercion

or compulsion. He's simply saying freedom involves doing what we choose to do or what we will to do, a power of acting or not acting according to the determinations of the will. And he consistently goes on to say that this belongs to everyone who is not a prisoner and in chains. So, if I'm a prisoner and in chains, then and only then I lack this. Actually, I don't even lack it, do I? Think about it. I could will to rattle my chains, in which case I am acting according to the determinations of the will. So this is a very minimalist notion of liberty or freedom, very minimalist indeed.

So let's distinguish three different concepts of freedom. First of all, contra causal freedom – that means non-causal libertarian free will, the kind of free will that the libertarians claim we have and claim is "terrifically important." In that sense, free will is opposed to determinism. Second concept, intentional agency. And this is what Hume's getting at, that in virtue of which a person is an agent in respect of what he or she does. So if I do something willingly, willing to do it, I decide to do it, I do it because my will leads me to do it, then I am an intentional agent. Third concept, and notice that this is a different concept, and that is the absence of unwelcome restrictions affecting my choice of action. So this is where we get coercion, compulsion, political influence -- something that one resents. And that is surely the most common use of "freedom," the word "freedom," in ordinary language. We think we're free if there are no unwelcome constraints on what we do. But what Hume is saying is the key to morality is the second notion, intentional agency.

So let's look at an example to focus our thoughts on this. Suppose I work in a bank. Someone takes my family hostage, comes to the bank, has photographs of the people, my family, locked up with brutal thugs around them. Maybe gives me a mobile phone on which I can speak to my wife, and she confirms, "Yes, they are being held," etc. They're clearly desperate gangsters. And I am told, and I am convinced that it's true, that unless I open the safe, my family is going to get killed. What do I do? I'm clearly acting under very significant coercion. But I do have a choice. I could choose not to open the safe. In fact, I would choose undoubtedly to open the safe. But one can imagine a different situation. Suppose the safe contains a nuclear weapon. In that case, I think most of us would say, "It's a very tough situation, but sadly the family has to die." I think most of us would judge that in that situation, where it was something like that, but if it's me and money, I open the safe, definitely. So notice what I'm choosing to do. I'm choosing to open the safe given that situation. Now, that's a different choice from the case where somebody comes in, they're not armed, they haven't got my family hostage, and they say, "Open the safe or I'll beat you up." That's a very different choice, and I think in that case, my decision would be quite different. So although we described the action, now opening the safe, in the same way, it's a different action, and it's subject to different moral censure or otherwise.

I want to say in the case where I opened the safe because my family is threatened, I am morally responsible for what I do, but I'm not guilty because what I did was the right thing. It was the right thing to open the safe in those circumstances. It was the right thing to save my family. I would not judge a bank employee worse for doing that. I would think of him as an object of pity rather than blame for having been put in that awful situation. So in that situation where we do not hold that person responsible for what they do, or at least we do not blame them, notice you don't have to say it's because it wasn't a responsible act. You can simply say it wasn't a blameworthy act.

So again, let's contrast four different situations in which I could leave a lecture. First of all, I don't know because of some student prank or whatever, people come into the lecture, they bind me hand and foot, and they carry me out. Well, in that case, I'm like Hume's prisoner and in chains. My leaving the lecture is something entirely beyond my power. Second case, somebody comes into the lecture waving a gun, tells me to leave the lecture straight away or they'll shoot me. Obviously, I leave. Third case, I come and stand here, see you all there, and suddenly I feel frightened, have a panic, and I run out, can't control myself. Fourth case, I feel the lecture isn't going very well, so I pretend that I'm ill. "Oh, got to leave, excuse me." So four different ways to leave a lecture. Now, notice that one's assessment of these is completely different. In the first case, where I'm bound and carried out of the lecture, my leaving the lecture is not an action of mine. You can say that I leave the lecture, but in a sense, I don't leave the lecture. It's something done to me, not something I do. I'm not an intentional agent. So I'm not to blame. In the second case, where I'm threatened with a gun, I leave of my own choice. I do have the choice to stand here and risk getting shot, but I take the choice to walk out. I'm not blameworthy for doing so. None of you would say, "Milligan's awful, he abandoned the lecture." You would say, "Poor Milligan, fancy being threatened. It's the right thing to leave." So you don't have to absolve me of responsibility. You don't have to say I'm not responsible. You can simply say, "Yes, you are responsible, and you did the right thing."

The third case, that's the one where I have the blind panic. I have arguably done something wrong. I've abandoned a lecture that I should have been giving. But there are mitigating circumstances. The mitigation is that I have a blind panic. So you might say that I'm not blameworthy, but it's not because I haven't done something wrong. It's because there are mitigating factors. Notice that that is a different case from the second one. The fourth case is where I deliberately calculate to leave the lecture. I pretend I'm ill. I've done something wrong and blameworthy.