

Handout: Earl Connee & Ted Sider — “Free Will and Determinism”

The Problem: How Can Free Will Exist in a Deterministic Universe?

Connee & Sider opens with a vivid scenario: you are kidnapped and forced to commit horrific crimes. You had no control, no freedom—and thus, no responsibility. This example introduces a key assumption in moral life: **freedom is required for moral responsibility**.

However, this assumption seems to clash with another deeply held belief: **determinism**, the thesis that every event—including human actions—has a cause governed by the laws of nature.

The central tension: If everything, including our choices, is causally determined by prior events, how can we be free? And if we aren't free, how can we be morally responsible?

I. The Threat of Determinism (pp. 115–119)

- **Determinism defined:** Every event has a cause. This is an empirical assumption supported by the success of science.
- Human actions, as part of the natural world, are **predictable, explainable, and caused**—just like weather or planetary motion.
- *Example:* Hitler's invasion of Poland was not an isolated moral choice, but, under determinism, was the inevitable result of a causal chain stretching back before his birth.

Determinism threatens to turn **moral responsibility into an illusion**, as our choices are not truly "ours" but merely links in a causal chain we don't control.

II. Hard Determinism: Abandon Free Will (p. 119)

- **Hard determinism** accepts determinism and rejects free will.
- Consequence: **No one is morally responsible**. Punishment becomes a tool of social engineering, not justice.
- Connee & Sider's critique: This position is *deeply counterintuitive*. We continue to hold people responsible—try punching a hard determinist and see if they refrain from blame!

“If you find someone who claims to believe hard determinism, try punching him in the face...” — Connee & Sider's humorous but pointed challenge.

III. Libertarianism: Reject Determinism (pp. 120–124)

- Libertarians maintain belief in free will by **rejecting determinism**.
- People are *special*—perhaps due to souls or indeterministic powers of choice.
- The problem: **Is uncaused action really freedom?**

Case: Mother Teresa and the Hand Grenade

- Her hand randomly throws a grenade. It's uncaused—but not free. She isn't responsible; it was a *freak event*.

Libertarian freedom must avoid equating *indeterminism with randomness*, or else it fails to ground responsibility.

- **Agent causation** is introduced: a special, lawless kind of causation originating in agents themselves—not reducible to laws of physics.
 - But: agent causation seems **mysterious, unscientific, and detached from character or reasons**.
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IV. Quantum Mechanics: Does It Help? (pp. 124–127)

- QM introduces **indeterminism** into physics—only probabilities can be known.
- But randomness \neq freedom (Mother Teresa redux).
- Connee & Sider critiques attempts to **wedge agent causation into QM**, showing it doesn't help:
 - If agent causation merely *follows* probabilistic distributions, it doesn't explain freedom.
 - If it *breaks* the distributions, it **clashes with science**.

Quantum physics might create *room* for freedom, but it doesn't *guarantee* or *explain* it.

V. Compatibilism: Freedom Without Rejecting Determinism (pp. 127–135)

Key Idea:

- **Freedom is compatible with determinism.**
- The problem arises from a **conceptual confusion**—like thinking "men don't cry" or that "contact" requires zero space.
- Just as science forced us to revise our understanding of contact, we should **revise our concept of freedom**.

What is freedom, then?

- **Not absence of causes**, but being caused **in the right way**.

Actions are free if they are caused by your own beliefs and desires—not by coercion or manipulation.

Compatibilist Challenges:

Connee & Sider works through several **failed definitions** of “caused in the right way”:

1. Caused by beliefs and desires?

- Fails: hypnotic desires would count as free.

2. Caused by self-chosen beliefs/desires?

- Circular: “free” defined in terms of “freely chosen.”

3. Not compelled by others?

- Still too vague or circular.

4. Not compelled at all?

- Too strong—many free actions are *caused*.

5. Caused by beliefs/desires that flow from “who the person is”?

- Promising: ties freedom to **character, values, self-conception**.
- You shape who you are over time; freedom = acting in line with that self.

Remaining Difficulties with “Who You Are”:

- **Out-of-character actions:** snapping at someone in irritation may be uncharacteristic but still free.
- **Moral transformation vs. brainwashing:** both can change “who you are” via others—but only the former seems to preserve freedom.

The challenge: distinguish between *transformative influence* and *freedom-undermining manipulation*.

VI. Conclusion: The Compatibilist Hope

- Defining freedom compatibilistically is **hard**, but the alternatives—hard determinism and libertarianism—are deeply problematic.
 - Connee & Sider lean toward **compatibilism** as the best way to preserve:
 - Our belief in science
 - Our moral practices of praise and blame
 - Our self-conception as free agents
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Key Vocabulary

- **Determinism**: every event has a cause.
- **Hard Determinism**: determinism is true, so no free will.
- **Libertarianism**: free will is true, so determinism is false.
- **Agent causation**: actions caused by agents, not events.
- **Compatibilism**: free will and determinism are compatible.
- **Character-based compatibilism**: freedom = acting from your character.