

# “The Incompatibility of Free Will and Determinism” by Peter van Inwagen

## DETERMINISM

van Inwagen’s definition, quoted from page 64.

- (a) For every instant of time, there is a proposition that expresses the state of the world at that instant.
- (b) If *A* and *B* are any propositions that express the state of the world at some instants, then the conjunction of *A* with the laws of physics entails *B*.

*In other words: the past, plus the laws of physics, completely determines the present and the future.*

## FREE WILL

“the *power* or *ability* of agents to act otherwise than they in fact do” (66)

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“To deny that men have free will is to assert that what a man *does* do and what he *can* do coincide.” (66)

van Inwagen tries to prove that **either** determinism is false, **or** we don’t have free will.

His argument is called the **Consequence Argument**, which is reproduced on the back of this page.

### THE GIST of the Consequence Argument:

- If determinism is true, then:
    - You *could not have acted differently* at any time than you actually did, because:
      - That would require you to have been able to do at least one of the following:
        - Change things that happened before you were born, or
        - Change the laws of physics
- ...and surely you're never able to do either of those.

van Inwagen considers and rejects the following responses to his argument:

- i) We already have criteria for deciding whether a person “could have” done otherwise than they did. Those criteria don’t reference determinism, so there must be some mistake in van Inwagen’s argument. (71-72)
- ii) Free will actually requires determinism (72-73).
- iii) If we interpret the phrase “could have” using **conditional analysis**, so that “S could have done X” is interpreted to mean “If S had chosen to do X, S would have done X” (73), free will is compatible with determinism.

# The Consequence Argument

## Definitions

$J$	Some person (in van Inwagen's example, the person is a judge, but that's irrelevant)
$T$	Some point in time
"raised his hand"	An action that $J$ chose not to perform at time $T$ (in van Inwagen's example, the judge raising his hand at time $T$ would have prevented someone's execution; but these details are irrelevant)
$P$	"the proposition that expresses the state of the world at $T$ " (68). You can think of this as an enormous sentence that describes everything about the universe at time $T$ in perfect detail. For example: <i>J is in the courtroom and J is not raising his hand and the criminal is in the courtroom and it is 54° F in Portland and Drew Carey is eating a sandwich in Cleveland and the moon is at apogee and...</i> The sentence would include a detailed account of the state of every subatomic particle or other physical entity that exists in the universe at that time.
$L$	The laws of physics. Again, think of this as an enormous sentence that expresses all physical laws, for example: <i>Nothing can move faster than light and energy cannot be created or destroyed and...</i>
$T_0$	Any point in time before $J$ was born
$P_0$	"the proposition that expresses the state of the world at $T_0$ " (68)

## Argument

Quoted from pages 68-69; footnotes omitted

*If determinism is true, the laws of physics and the earlier state of the world determine the later state of the world.*

→ (1) If determinism is true, then the conjunction of  $P_0$  and  $L$  entails  $P$ .

(2) If  $J$  had raised his hand at  $T$ , then  $P$  would be false.

← *If someone had acted differently, the state of the world would have been different.*

*Which means if someone "could have" acted differently, they "could have" made the state of the world different.*

→ (3) If (2) is true, then if  $J$  could have raised his hand at  $T$ ,  $J$  could have rendered  $P$  false.

(4) If  $J$  could have rendered  $P$  false, and if the conjunction of  $P_0$  and  $L$  entails  $P$ , then  $J$  could have rendered the conjunction of  $P_0$  and  $L$  false.

← *Which means, if determinism is true, they could have either changed things that happened before their birth, or changed the laws of physics.*

*They can't change things that happened before their birth, so the only possibility is that they could have changed the laws of physics.*

→ (5) If  $J$  could have rendered the conjunction of  $P_0$  and  $L$  false, then  $J$  could have rendered  $L$  false.

(6)  $J$  could not have rendered  $L$  false.

← *But that's not a real possibility either - surely nobody ever could have changed the laws of physics!*

*So there's no way, if determinism is true, that someone could have acted differently than they actually did.*

→ (7) If determinism is true,  $J$  could not have raised his hand at  $T$ .