

The Road with no Branches argument

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Whenever we make a choice we are doing (or think we are doing) something like what a traveler does when faced with a choice between different roads. The only roads the traveler is able to choose are roads which are a continuation of the road he is already on. By analogy, the only choices we are able to make are choices which are a continuation of the actual past and consistent with the laws of nature. If determinism is false, then making choices really is like this: one “road” (the past) behind us, two or more different “roads” (future actions consistent with the laws) in front of us. But if determinism is true, then our journey through life is like traveling (in one direction only) on a road which has no branches. There are other roads, leading to other destinations; if we could get to one of these other roads, we could reach a different destination. But we can't get to any of these other roads from the road we are actually on. So if determinism is true, our actual future is our only possible future; we can never choose or do anything other than what we actually do.

This is a powerful intuition pump, since it's natural to think of our future as being “open” in the branching way suggested by the road analogy and to associate this kind of branching structure with freedom of choice. But several crucial assumptions have been smuggled into this picture: assumptions about time and causation and assumptions about possibility. The assumptions about time and causation needed to make the analogy work seem to include the following: that we “move” through time in something like the way that we move down a road, that our “movement” is necessarily in one direction only, from past to future, that the past is necessarily “fixed” or beyond our control in some way that the future is not. These assumptions are all controversial; on some theories of time and causation (the 4D theory of time, a theory of causation that permits time travel and backwards causation), they are all false (Lewis 1976, Horwich 1987, Sider 2001).

The assumption about possibility is that possible worlds are concrete spatiotemporal things (in the way that roads are) and that worlds can overlap (literally share a common part) in the way that roads can overlap. But most possible worlds theorists reject both assumptions and nearly everyone rejects the second assumption (Adams 1974, Lewis 1986).

Determinism (without these additional assumptions) does not imply that our “journey” through life is like moving down a road; the contrast between determinism and non-determinism is not the contrast between traveling on a

sci.logic: The Road with no Branches argument

branching road and traveling on a road with no branches.

If this intuition pump nevertheless continues to engage us, it is because we think that our range of possible choices is constrained by two factors: the laws and the past. We can't change or break the laws; we cannot causally affect the past. (Even if backwards causation is logically possible, it is not within our power.) These two premises are the basis of the best known contemporary argument for incompatibilism: the Consequence argument. More of this later.

<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/incompatibilism-arguments/>

http://www.campusprogram.com/reference/en/wikipedia/e/el/elbow_room.html

<http://actiontheory.free.fr/Actionpuzzles.htm>