

Some Free Thinking about ‘Thinking about Free Will’

According to Peter van Inwagen, free will “is a mystery because [...] there are good arguments for the incompatibility of free will and determinism and good arguments for [the] incompatibility of free will and indeterminism, and [...] no one has ever identified a very plausible candidate for the flaw in any of the arguments in either class.” The aim of my paper is to identify what might be a flaw in van Inwagen’s arguments for the incompatibility of free will and determinism. According to van Inwagen’s arguments for the incompatibility of free will and determinism, nobody is able to do anything about the truth of a complete description of a past state of the world. In my view, *this* is the assumption that might well be a flaw in van Inwagen’s argument. However, I do not argue directly against this assumption. Instead, I develop three arguments to the conclusion that van Inwagen’s attempt to justify this assumption fails. I argue that van Inwagen’s attempt to justify this assumption is, first, incompatible with a theory of propositions according to which necessarily equivalent propositions are identical, second, incompatible with a description theory of proper names according to which proper names are merely abbreviations for definite descriptions and, third, incompatible with a metaphysical theory according to which there is no such thing as the past. At the end of my paper, I sketch an independent argument to the conclusion that van Inwagen’s attempt to justify his crucial assumption fails. I conclude that van Inwagen has given us no reason to believe that nobody is able to do anything about the truth of a complete description of a past state of the world. Further, I show that the argument of my paper not only applies to van Inwagen’s argument for the incompatibility of free will and determinism, but also to a famous argument for the incompatibility of free will and divine foreknowledge.