

**ORIGINAL ARTICLE**

# Dennett's prime-mammal objection to the consequence argument

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Email: [johan.eric.gustafsson@gmail.com](mailto:johan.eric.gustafsson@gmail.com)**Abstract**

The Consequence Argument is the classic argument for the incompatibility of determinism and our ability to do otherwise. Daniel C. Dennett objects that the Consequence Argument suffers from the same error as a clearly unconvincing argument that there are no mammals. In this paper, I argue that these arguments do not suffer from the same error. The argument that there are no mammals is unconvincing as it takes the form of a sorites, whereas the Consequence Argument does not. Accordingly, Dennett's objection misses its mark.

**KEYWORDS**

Daniel C. Dennett, determinism, free will, the Basic Argument, the Consequence Argument, sorites paradox

The Consequence Argument is the classic argument for the incompatibility of determinism and our ability to do otherwise. Dennett (2003, p. 134) states it as follows:<sup>1</sup>

*The Consequence Argument*

- (1) If determinism is true, whether I Go or Stay is completely fixed by the laws of nature and events in the distant past.
- (2) It is not up to me what the laws of nature are, or what happened in the distant past.
- (3) Therefore, whether I Go or Stay is completely fixed by circumstances that are not up to me.
- (4) If an action of mine is not up to me, it is not free (in the morally important sense).
- (5) Therefore, my action of Going or Staying is not free.

Dennett likens this incompatibilist argument to the Prime-Mammal Argument—that is, the following (patently unconvincing) argument that there are no mammals:<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>See also van Inwagen 1974, p. 19; 1975, pp. 190–4; 1983, pp. 93–5.

<sup>2</sup>Dennett 2003, p. 126, adapted with changes from Sanford 1975, pp. 521–2. See also Dennett 2013, pp. 395–6.

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### *The Prime-Mammal Argument*

- (1) Every mammal has a mammal for a mother.
- (2) If there have been any mammals at all, there have been only a finite number of mammals.
- (3) But if there has been even one mammal, then by (1), there have been an infinity of mammals, which contradicts (2), so there can't have been any mammals. It's a contradiction in terms.

Dennett then argues that the Consequence Argument commits the same error as the Prime-Mammal Argument.<sup>3</sup> He (2003, pp. 135–6) writes

How then should we respond to the incompatibilist argument? Where is the misstep that excuses us from accepting the conclusion? We can now recognize that it commits the same error as the fallacious argument about the impossibility of mammals. Events in the *distant* past were indeed not “up to me,” but my choice now to Go or Stay is up to me because its “parents”—some events in the *recent* past, such as the choices I have recently made—were up to me (because *their* “parents” were up to me), and so on, not to infinity, but far enough back to give my *self* enough spread in space and time so that there is a *me* for my decisions to be up to! The reality of a moral me is no more put in doubt by the incompatibilist argument than is the reality of mammals.

Against Dennett, I will argue that the Consequence Argument does not commit the same error as the Prime-Mammal Argument—and, therefore, that his objection misses its mark.

The Prime-Mammal Argument takes the form of an infinite-regress version of the sorites paradox.<sup>4</sup> It has a base step (there has been one mammal) and an inductive step (for each mammal there exists an earlier mammal), which takes us from the base step to a counter-intuitive conclusion (there have been infinitely many mammals) through a large number of intermediate steps.

Because the Prime-Mammal Argument takes the form of a sorites paradox, it seems that whatever response is adequate to dissolve such paradoxes in general should also apply to the Prime-Mammal Argument.<sup>5</sup> So, if the Consequence Argument commits the same error as the Prime-Mammal Argument, it could be dismissed in the same manner. So far, so good.

The Consequence Argument, however, does not take the form of a sorites (nor an infinite regress). Crucially, it doesn't move from a base step to its conclusion through a large number of intermediate steps. From the state of the world at some distant time and the laws of nature, the state of the world at any other time follows logically (given determinism) without any need for intermediate steps. So the Consequence Argument does not share the problematic form of the Prime-Mammal Argument. Accordingly, Dennett's objection to the former misses its mark.

So what may Dennett have been thinking? One possibility is that he mixed up the Consequence Argument with Strawson's (1994, pp. 5–7) Basic Argument.<sup>6</sup> Strawson's argument is a

<sup>3</sup>Note that this is a separate objection from the one proposed in Taylor and Dennett 2002, pp. 273–4, which has been covered in Gustafsson 2020. See note 8.

<sup>4</sup>Diogenes Laertius (2.108, 7.82; 2018, pp. 133, 343) attributes the sorites paradox to Eubulides of Miletus.

<sup>5</sup>Typically, the resolutions rely on some view about the vagueness of a key term (in this instance, ‘mammal’) that lets us reject the inductive step—that is, premise (1). (See Sorensen 1988, pp. 230–46.) Aristotle (*Ph.* 3.6, 206<sup>a</sup>25–<sup>b</sup>3; 1983, p. 14), however, simply rejects premise (2).

<sup>6</sup>The mix-up may have been due to Dennett's (2003, pp. 134–5) digression on Kane's (1996, pp. 69–78) libertarian response to the Consequence Argument, as Kane's response also covers the Basic Argument. This interpretation fits with the similar use of the Prime-Mammal Argument in Dennett 1984, pp. 83–5, where the target is Edwards's (1958, p. 121) version of the Basic Argument, and Dennett 2013, pp. 393–6, where the primary target is Strawson's version (see, similarly, Dennett and Caruso 2021, pp. 72–5). Nevertheless, Dennett (2013, p. 396) still maintains that his objection works against incompatibilist arguments in general.

more suitable target for Dennett's objection. Roughly, the Basic Argument is the following argument: To be responsible for a choice (or other event)  $c_1$ , one must be responsible for the events,  $c_2$ , that cause  $c_1$  to occur. But to be responsible for the causes of one's choice,  $c_2$ , one must in turn be responsible for their causes,  $c_3$ . And so on, creating an infinite regress similar to the one in the Prime-Mammal Argument.

Even though Strawson's Basic Argument resembles the Consequence Argument in some respects, the two arguments do not share the same structure. Notably, rather than an infinite regress, the Consequence Argument relies on *the Fixity of the Past*—that is, the claim that events in the distant past are not up to us. (And, as seen from the above quote, Dennett accepts the Fixity of the Past.<sup>7</sup>) So, even though Dennett's argument may arguably apply to Strawson's Basic Argument, it doesn't apply to the Consequence Argument. Yet it's the latter that Dennett claims to rebut.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>This admission, however, conflicts with his later rejection of the Fixity of the Past. See note 8.

<sup>8</sup>As mentioned in note 3, Dennett raised another objection to the Consequence Argument (together with Taylor) in Taylor and Dennett (2002, pp. 273–4; 2011, pp. 236–7). In Gustafsson (2020), I showed that their objection misses its mark. This compelled Taylor and Dennett (2021) to write a reply, posted on Dennett's home page. Much of their reply, however, is devoted to the complaint that I didn't include material from my correspondence with Taylor. There were several reasons for not including this material: (i) It was a defence of backtracking compatibilism—that is, the rejection of the Consequence Arguments's Fixity-of-the-Past *premise*—whereas my paper concerns their objection to the argument's *validity*. (ii) Taylor wrote that he planned to publish his side of the correspondence himself, and there was no need to scoop him. (iii) Their defence of backtracking compatibilism was neither new nor particularly compelling. Like Lewis (1981, pp. 116–17), they argue fairly convincingly that, if one were to act otherwise, the past would have been different (at least, shortly before the act). But it doesn't follow that one is *able* to act so that the past would have been different. I addressed this move in Gustafsson (2017, p. 711n13). (Better defences of backtracking compatibilism can be found in Forrest 1985 and Aaronson 2016, which still uphold that all known facts about the past are fixed.)

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