

Libertarianism

Chisholm and Kane on free will

‘The intelligibility question’

- The big problem for libertarianism:
- How is free will compatible with *indeterminism*?
 - Isn’t indeterminism the same thing as randomness?
 - If our actions are random, then we don’t control them.
 - Such “actions” are mere fluke accidents.
- “Indeterminism does not confer freedom on us: I would feel that my freedom was impaired if I thought that a quantum mechanical trigger in my brain might cause me to leap into the garden and eat a slug.” (J. J. C. Smart)

Van Inwagen's Jane example

- Suppose Jane is about to make an indeterministic decision between two options (e.g. confess all, or keep silent).

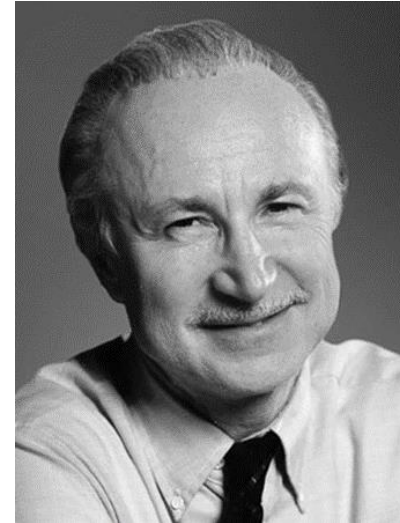
“Each contemplated action will, of course, have antecedents in the motor speech area of Jane’s cerebral cortex. Let us suppose that a certain current-pulse is proceeding along one of the neural pathways in Jane’s brain and that it is about to come to a fork, And let us suppose that if it goes to the left, she will make her confession, and that if it goes to the right, she will remain silent. And let us suppose that it is undetermined which way the pulse will go when it comes to the fork: [even Laplace’s demon couldn’t predict it].”

- Is it *up to Jane* whether the pulse goes to the left or to the right?

Kane's *Hawaii vs. Colorado* example

It's exactly the same as Kane's Hawaii vs Colorado case.

Kane's conclusion:



“For reasons such as these, people have argued through the centuries that undetermined free choices would be “arbitrary,” “capricious,” “random,” “irrational,” “uncontrolled,” and “inexplicable,” not really free and responsible choices at all.” (Kane, p. 5)

“Extra factors” to the rescue?

- “I call these familiar libertarian strategies for making sense of free will “extra factor” strategies. The idea behind them is that, since indeterminism leaves it open which way an agent will choose or act, some “extra” kind of causation or agency must be postulated over and above the natural flow of events to account for the agent’s going one way or another” (Kane, p. 6)
- The agent (Jane) herself, who seems to stand outside the physical chain of causes and effects, *causes* the current-pulse in Jane’s brain to go a particular way.
 - (This ‘agent causation’ doesn’t reduce to the more familiar causation by events.)

Agent-causation

According to this suggestion, it might very well be that an event in Jane's brain—a current-pulse taking the left-hand branch of a neural fork, say—**had Jane as its cause**. And not some event or change involving Jane, not something taking place inside Jane, not something Jane *did* but Jane herself, the person Jane, the agent Jane, the individual thing Jane.

This “type” of causation is usually labeled ‘agent-causation’, and it is contrasted with ‘event-causation’ ...” (van Inwagen)

Kane on agent causation vs. “agent-causation”

“Let it be clear first of all that **the causal indeterminist theory presented in this paper *does* postulate *agent causation*** ... Agents *cause* or bring about their undetermined self-forming choices (SFAs) on this theory by making efforts to do so, voluntarily and intentionally; ... Whether there is agent causation *in general* is not the issue here.

What is at issue is agent-causation (hyphenated) – a *sui generis* form of causation postulated by agent-causal theorists that cannot be spelled out in terms of events and states of affairs involving the agents.”

Objection to agent-causation

“But what about the event *Jane’s becoming the agent-cause of her decision to speak*? According to your position, this event occurred, and it was undetermined—for if it were determined by some earlier state of things and the laws of nature, then her decision to speak would have been determined by these same factors. Even if there is such a thing as agent-causation, and this event occurred, how could it have been up to Jane whether it occurred?” (van Inwagen, p. 18)

van Inwagen's verdict on agent causation

“I have no clear sense of what is going on in this debate because I do not understand agent-causation. At least I don't think I understand it. To me, the suggestion that an individual thing, as opposed to a change in an individual thing, could be the cause of a change is a mystery.”

A 'disquieting possibility'

“Perhaps the explanation of the fact that both compatibilism and incompatibilism seem to lead to mysteries is simply that the concept of free will is self-contradictory. Perhaps free will is, as the incompatibilists say, incompatible with determinism. But perhaps it is also incompatible with indeterminism, owing to the impossibility of its being up to an agent what the outcome of an indeterministic process will be. If free will is incompatible with both determinism and indeterminism, then since either determinism or indeterminism has to be true, free will is impossible.”

And yet ...

- When I myself look at contemplated future courses of action in the way I have described above, I discover an irresistible tendency to believe that each of them is “open” to me. This tendency may be a vehicle of illusion. It may be that free will belongs to appearance, not to reality. If the concept of free choice were self-contradictory, a belief in this self-contradictory thing might nevertheless be indispensable to human action. ...

Belief in FW is part of psychological health

“This thought-experiment [where the door might be locked] convinces me that I cannot try to decide whether to do A or B unless I believe that doing A and doing B are both possible for me. And therefore I am convinced that I could not try to decide what to do unless I believed that more than one course of action was sometimes open to me. And if I never tried to decide what to do, if I never deliberated, I should not be a very effective human being. ...”

Van Inwagen's final word

“Nevertheless, when all is said and done, I find myself with the belief that sometimes more than one course of action is open to me, and I cannot give it up. (Dr. Johnson has said, “Sir, we know our will is free, and there’s an end on’t.” I would say, “We are unalterably convinced that our will is free, and there’s an end on’t.”) And I don’t find the least plausibility in the hypothesis that this belief is illusory.”

Part 2

Chisholm's agent-causation

Chisholm's (A-C) libertarianism

“Let us consider some deed, or misdeed, that may be attributed to a responsible agent: one man, say, shot another. If the man *was* responsible for what he did, then, I would urge, what was to happen at the time of the shooting was something that was entirely up to the man himself. ...

And if this is so, then, even though he did fire it, he could have done something else instead ... the act was something that was in his power either to perform or not to perform.”



Chisholm's libertarianism

“But now if the act which he *did* perform was an act that was also in his power *not* to perform, then it could not have been **caused or determined** by any event that was not itself within his power either to bring about or not to bring about.” [E.g. it was not caused by his genes, upbringing, etc.]

- N.B: ‘caused or determined’. Apparently Chisholm is treating these as the same thing.

- Speaking of a person's actions being caused by their prior beliefs and desires, Chisholm says:

“... if these beliefs and desires in the particular situation in which he happened to have found himself **caused** him to do just what it was that we say he did do, then, since *they* caused it, *he* was **unable to do anything other** than just what it was that he did do.”

(Again, Chisholm thinks that if an event is caused, then it is also necessary given that cause.)

Flying vs. gliding

- Agent-causation libertarians see free will as something like *flying*, where your on-board engine provides all your power needs, and can overcome any external air currents.
- Event-causation libertarians see free will as more like *gliding*. Your motion is *powered* almost entirely by external forces like air currents (and the initial boost), but you still have flaps and rudder that provide (some) control over your own path. You could have gone elsewhere.



Theological consequences

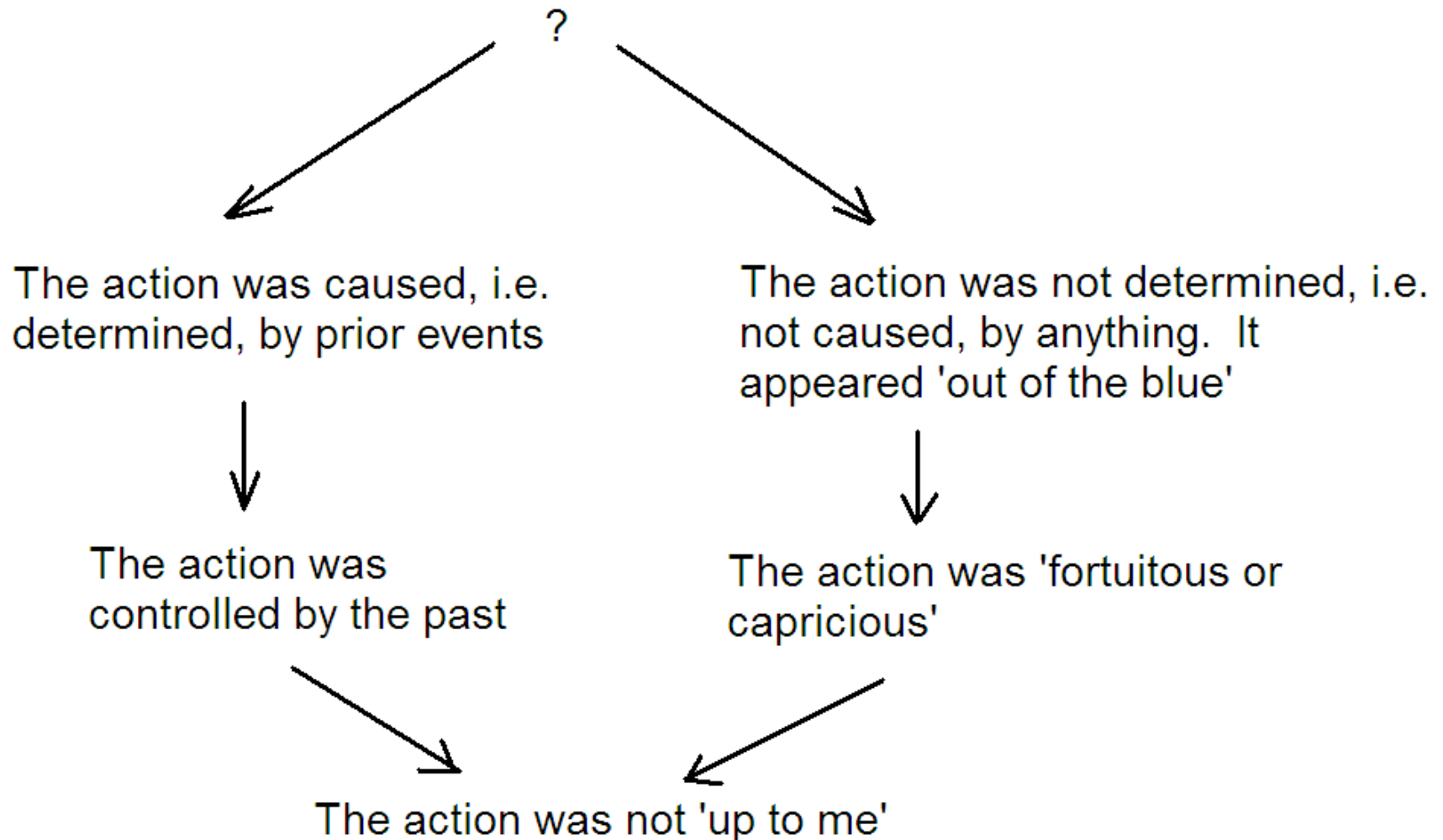
- The identification of causation with determination has an extreme consequence for theologians. Since God is the *cause* of everything, it follows that God also *determines* everything, and hence is absolutely in control of all human actions.

Chisholm: “This may be a bold assertion, in view of the history of western theology, but I must say that I have never encountered a single good reason for denying it.”

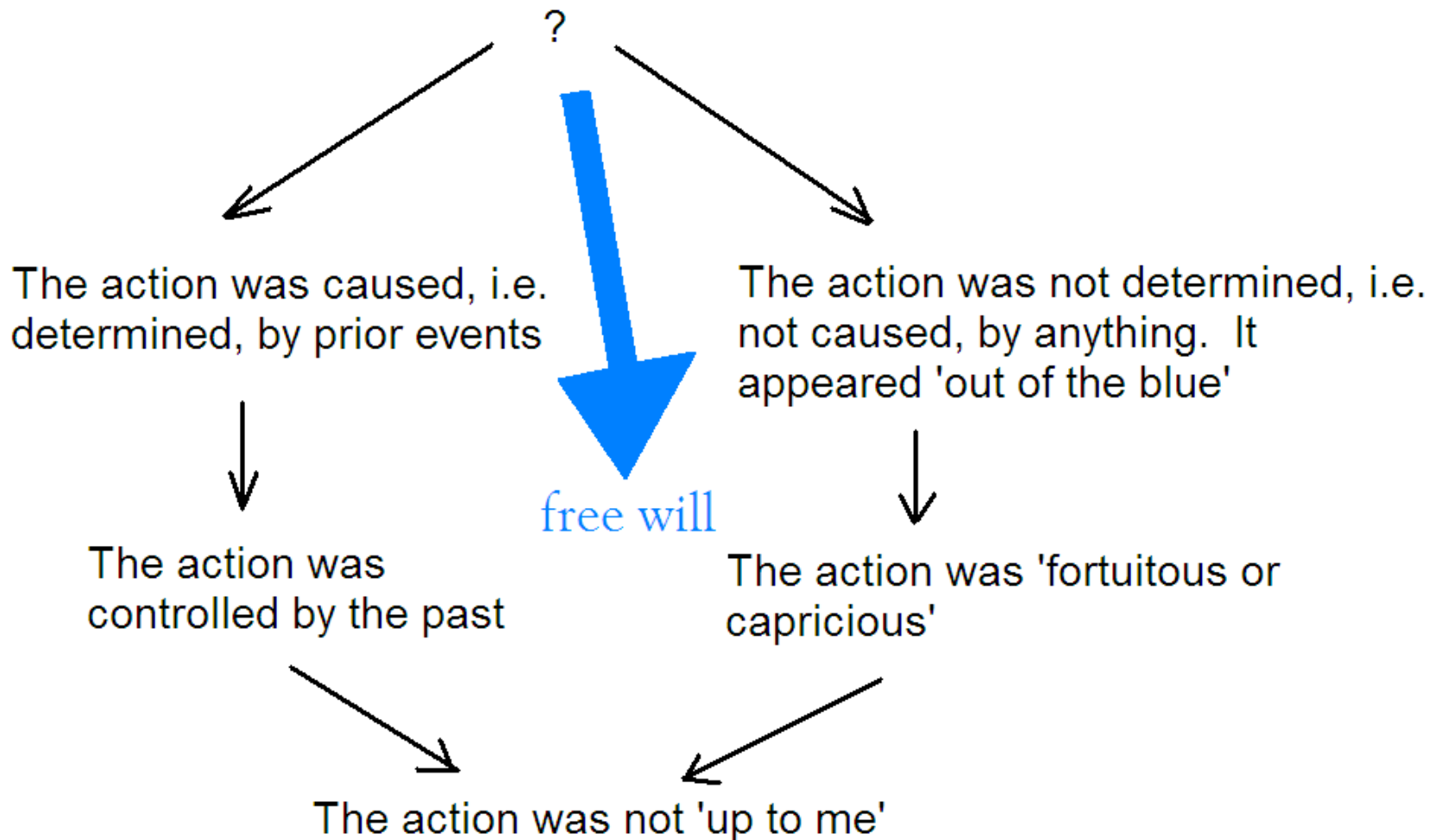
Section 4.

“Perhaps there is less need to argue that the ascription of responsibility also conflicts with an **indeterministic** view of action—with the view that the act, or some event that is essential to the act, is **not caused at all**. If the act—the firing of the shot—was not caused at all, if it was fortuitous or capricious, happening so to speak out of the blue, then, presumably, no one—and nothing—was responsible for the act. Our conception of action, therefore, should be neither deterministic nor indeterministic. Is there any other possibility?”

The dilemma of free will



Libertarian response: a third option



- All libertarians are looking for a third option, to avoid the dilemma.
- ‘Agent-causation’ libertarians (e.g. Chisholm) say that free actions are caused by *people*, not *events*.
- ‘Indeterministic causation’ libertarians distinguish between causing and determining. Free actions are caused, but not determined, by our beliefs and desires.

Medieval terminology

- *Transeunt causation*: Causation by events or states of affairs
- *Immanent causation*: Causation by agents (persons)
- N.B. Chisholm assumes that immanent causation is *incompatible* with transeunt causation, in the sense that if an agent caused something, then no prior event caused it.
 - ‘... there must be some event A, presumably some cerebral event, which is caused not by any other event, but by the agent.’

- From the point of view that causation is the transmission of concreteness (substance, or existence) from cause to effect, this seems to entail that *an agent isn't a causal process*, but a kind of static source of existence.
- Very odd!
- ‘... each of us, when we act, is a prime mover unmoved’

What is the relation between our desires and actions?

Hobbes: Our actions can be logically inferred from our desires.

Kant: Our desires might make an action probable, but they don't make it logically certain.

(No doubt *sometimes* our desires determine our action. But at other times, they 'incline without necessitating', Chisholm says.)

- Here Chisholm seems to be moving very close to the event-causation view, that our desires cause, but do not determine, our actions.
- What else could ‘incline without necessitating’ mean?

‘There is a temptation, certainly, to say that ‘to incline’ means to cause [Yes, roughly] and that ‘not to necessitate’ means not to cause, [D’oh!] but obviously we cannot have it both ways.’



Overall criticism of Chisholm

- He seems to create a lot of unnecessary difficulty, by identifying causation with determination.
- Is there an *argument* for this identification? No. Rather, a failure to make the conceptual distinction.

Part 3

Kane's indeterministic causation

Libertarians have a bad reputation

“[libertarianism] is a sort of rape and **perversion of logic**. But the extravagant pride of man has managed to entangle itself profoundly and frightfully with just this **nonsense**. The desire for “freedom of the will” in the superlative metaphysical sense, which still holds sway, unfortunately, in **the minds of the half-educated**; the desire to bear the entire and ultimate responsibility for one’s actions oneself, and to absolve God, the world, ancestors, chance, and society involves nothing less than to be precisely this *causa sui* and, with more than Baron Munchhausen’s audacity, to pull oneself up into existence by the hair, out of the swamps of nothingness. . . .” Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886)

Enter Kane

“Early in my encounters with free will debates, I became disenchanted with all such extra factor strategies. I agree with other libertarian critics, such as Peter van Inwagen and Carl Ginet, that extra factor strategies – including agent-causal theories – do not solve the problems about indeterminism they are supposed to solve and they create further mysteries of their own.”

Kane endorses ‘event causation’ libertarianism, although here he calls it ‘indeterministic causation’.

How can we find another approach?

- First, we have to break old habits of thought. We must realise that (contrary to old thinking):
 - Determination isn't the same as causation.
 - So, lack of a determining cause doesn't imply *uncaused*.
 - One's own prior desires can *help* to cause our actions without completely controlling our actions.
 - The term "it occurred by chance" isn't a synonym for mere indeterminism. It smuggles in assumptions about it being out of anyone's control.
 - Indeterminism doesn't mean that "chance takes over" at a certain point.

An “inner struggle”

“Consider a businesswoman who faces such a conflict. She is on her way to an important meeting when she observes an assault taking place in an alley. An inner struggle ensues between her conscience, to stop and call for help, and her career ambitions which tell her she cannot miss this meeting. She has to make an effort of will to overcome the temptation to go on. ...



... If she overcomes this temptation, it will be the result of her effort, but if she fails, it will be because she did not *allow* her effort to succeed. And this is due to the fact that, while she willed to overcome temptation, she also willed to fail, for quite different and incommensurable reasons. When we, like the woman, decide in such circumstances, and the indeterminate efforts we are making become determinate choices, we *make* one set of competing reasons or motives prevail over the others then and there *by deciding*. ...

The deliberation *is* indeterministic

“On the view I proposed, one cannot separate the indeterminism and the effort of will, so that *first* the effort occurs *followed* by chance or luck (or vice versa). [Instead,] **One must think of the effort and the indeterminism as fused**; the effort *is* indeterminate and the indeterminism is a property of the effort, not something separate that occurs after or before the effort. The fact that the effort has this property of being indeterminate does not make it any less the woman’s *effort*. ...

... The complex recurrent neural network that realizes the effort in the brain is circulating impulses in feedback loops and there is some indeterminacy in these circulating impulses. But **the whole process is her effort of will** and it persists right up to the moment when the choice is made. **There is no point at which the effort stops and chance “takes over.”** She chooses as a result of the effort, even though she might have failed. ... ”

“My suggestion about how indeterminism might enter the picture, if it were available in the physical world, was that conflicts in the wills of agents associated with self-forming choices would “stir up chaos” in the brain sensitizing it to quantum indeterminacies at the neuronal level, which would then be magnified to effect neural networks as a whole. The brain would thus be stirred up by such conflict for the task of creative problem solving. This is speculative to be sure. ...”

- What do you think?

N.B. Kane on indeterministic causation

“Indeterminism is consistent with nondeterministic **or probabilistic** causation, where the outcome is not inevitable.”

“...so that the causation by mental events may be nondeterministic **or probabilistic** as well as deterministic.”

“Of course, the causation or production in the case of SFAs is nondeterministic **or probabilistic**, since they are undetermined.”

Indeterministic cause \neq probabilistic cause

- I'd say that 'probabilistic causation' isn't *anything like* the kind of causation that Kane needs here. Instead, he wants a primitive notion of causation like Anscombe's (or mine), i.e. the transmission of real existence.
- I.e. causation cannot be analysed in terms of other things that are more basic. All we can do is describe some general features (such as the fact that only *actual* events can be causes and effects, that causes are *prior* to effects, etc.)

Why not probabilistic causation?

“One must think of the effort and the indeterminism as fused; the effort *is* indeterminate and the indeterminism is a property of the effort, not something separate that occurs after or before the effort. ... There is no point at which the effort stops and chance “takes over.” ”

- With probabilistic causation, earlier events merely alter the chance that the agent will do something. But there is no actual *production* involved. It looks as if chance *does* take over.

Part 4

“Opaque thought” libertarianism

Nozick on the intelligibility of FW

“... we want to know how [free will] works.

According to the view currently fashionable, we adequately understand a psychological process only if we can simulate that process on a digital computer. ...

Any process of choosing an action that could be understood in this sense would appear not to be a process of free choice. ...

- Is this true? If so, then what's the reason?

Nozick on the intelligibility of FW

- ... Suppose that this is so. Does the fact that we cannot, in this sense, understand what a free choice is, indicate some defect in the notion of a free choice or rather is the defect in the view that this mode of understanding is the sole mode? Is the result, that we cannot understand what a free choice is, an *artifact* of this method of understanding?” (pp. 302-303)

Is free will *unintelligible*?

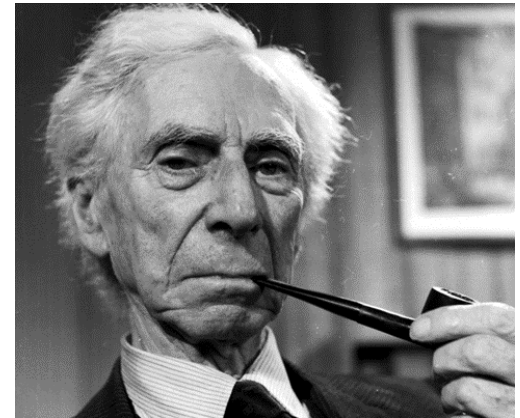
- I want to suggest this as an option for libertarians.
- Is this a silly option? Isn't saying that free will is unintelligible as good as admitting that free will doesn't exist? ("the last refuge of a scoundrel")
- I would say *not*. I believe that the world contains all kinds of unintelligible things: causation, substance (or real existence, concreteness) consciousness, intentionality, free will, ...
 - In any case, why should the *human mind* be the measure of all things?

Sam Harris on free will being a mystery

- Harris had a conversation with a rabbi about free will. When pressed for details on how free will works, the rabbi relied that the workings of the human soul are “a mystery”.
- Harris reports being “furious” at this “ugly tangle of ignorance and superstition”
 - “A claim this empty, expressed with such evident self-satisfaction, causes some small part of me ... to hope that a distant asteroid will just be nudged out of its orbit and set on a collision course with earth.”

Russellian monism says the world is partly unintelligible

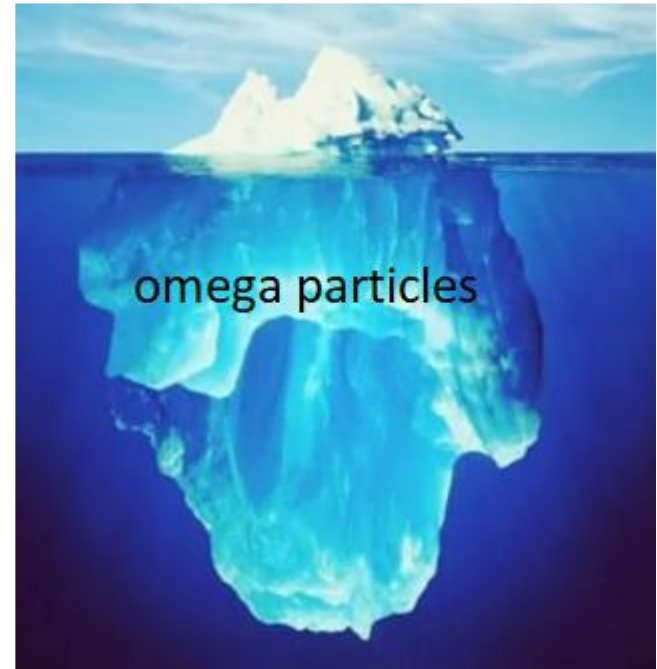
“Physics is mathematical, not because we know so much about the ‘physical world’ but because we know so little: it is only its mathematical properties that we can discover. For the rest, our knowledge is negative ... The physical world is only known as regards certain abstract features of its space-time structure ...”



Bertrand Russell, *An Outline of Philosophy*, (1927) 125-6.

Russellian monism

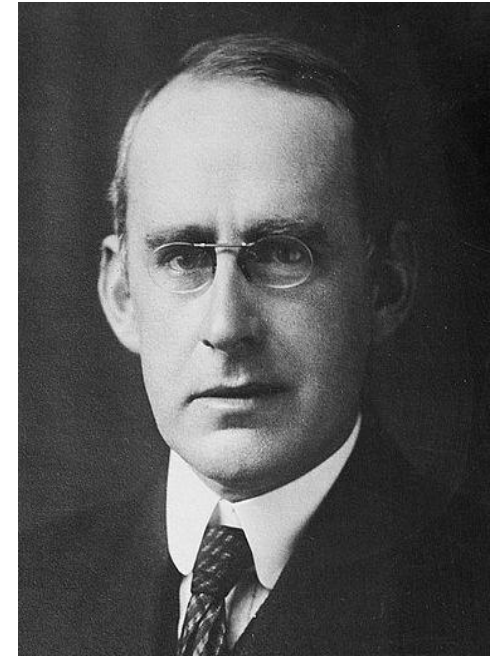
- Russellian monism says that the maximal physical description of a system is like the tip of an iceberg: it doesn't describe the whole system, but *just the part that we can describe abstractly*.
 - E.g. “Omega particles” might not be describable using mathematics



Eddington Agrees

“Let us suppose that an ichthyologist is exploring the life of the ocean. He casts a net into the water and brings up a fishy assortment. ... He arrives at two generalisations: (1) No sea-creature is less than two inches long. (2) All sea-creatures have gills. ... In applying this analogy, the catch stands for the body of knowledge which constitutes physical science, and the net for the sensory *and intellectual* equipment which we use in obtaining it.”

Arthur Eddington, *The Philosophy of Physical Science* (1939)



“Not only is the universe stranger than we imagine, it is stranger than we can imagine.”

(And Daniel Stoljar)

“Imagine a mosaic constituted by two basic shapes, triangles and pieces of pie, as well as a large number of shapes obtained by a transparent combination of these: squares, half-moons, circles, rhombuses etc. Imagine also that our access to the mosaic is limited to two shape-detecting systems: the first scans the mosaic and detects triangles; the second scans it and detects circles. For one reason or another we spontaneously assume that the triangle-detector tells us everything about the nature of the mosaic – we become trianglists, i.e., those who believe that triangles are the fundamental shape and that all other shapes supervene. The problem of the circle then stares us in the face: the circle-detector tells us the mosaic contains circles, but there is apparently no place for circles in a mosaic totally constituted by triangles.”

Daniel Stoljar (2001) “Two Conceptions of the Physical”, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 62, No. 2, pp. 253-281

What we *can* say about libertarian FW

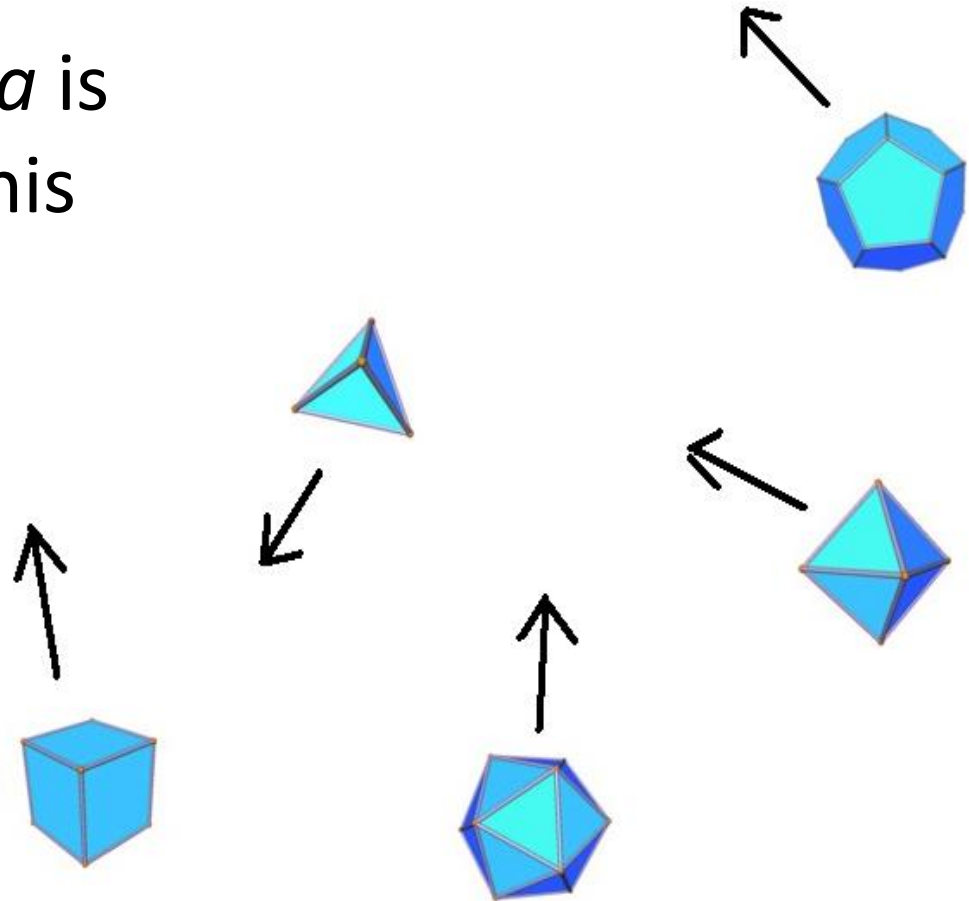
- “S performs A freely” implies:
 - i. **Authorship.** S is a conscious, rational being, who performed A for reasons of her own, based on understanding his situation, etc.
 - ii. **Self-selected.** The action was self-selected, in the sense that no prior events outside S determined that S would do A. The action became determined only at the conclusion of the process of deliberation.

Why should nature be intelligible anyway?

- As far as I know, the view that the world is fully intelligible arose from the *mechanical philosophy*, developed in the 17th century by Descartes, Boyle and others.

The mechanical philosophy

The *res extensa* is basically like this



Mechanical systems are ‘transparent’

- ‘transparent’ = completely intelligible, or “clear”, i.e. transparent to the intellect.
- Robert Boyle (1674), talking about the mechanical philosophy:

“And the first thing that recommends it is the clearness and intelligibleness of its principles and explanations”

Physicalism

- Physicalism is simply an updated version of the mechanical philosophy, that takes account of advances in physics since Descartes:
 - Non-Euclidean geometry and kinematics (SR and GR)
 - Fields rather than (in addition to?) particles
 - Fundamental probabilities in QM

Physical descriptions still have to be mathematical, or ‘transparent’. There can be no occult qualities, nothing fundamentally inscrutable.

Problems for physicalism

- Physicalism is popular today, but criticisms of it are very persistent. (See later readings.)
- E.g. concerning qualia, intentionality, etc.
- What is it about *physicalism* in particular that attracts criticisms of this sort?
 - I believe it is the requirement of ‘transparency’, or intelligibility.

E.g. Leibniz's Mill

- One is obliged to admit that perception and what depends upon it is **inexplicable on mechanical principles**, that is, by figures and motions. In imagining that there is a machine whose construction would enable it to think, to sense, and to have perception, one could conceive it enlarged while retaining the same proportions, so that one could enter into it, just like into a windmill. Supposing this, one should, when visiting within it, find only parts pushing one another, and never anything by which to explain a perception.

Nagel/Jackson “Mary argument”



Mary's black-and-white neuroscience lab
(Nagel 1974, Jackson 1982)

E.g. the Mary argument

1. Mary is a neuroscientist who knows all the physical facts about the physiology of human colour vision.
 2. Mary has never had a colour experience, since she has only ever lived in a black-and-white environment.
 3. According to physicalism, all facts are physical facts, expressible in the language of physics.
 4. There is a real fact concerning *what it is like* to have each type of colour experience (e.g. red).
 5. Mary doesn't know what it is like to have colour experiences.
 - 6. Assume** that physicalism is true.
-
7. The fact of what it is like to have a red colour experience is a physical fact (from 3, 4, 5)
 8. Mary knows what it is like to have a red colour experience. (from 1, 5)
 - 9. Contradiction** (6, 8).
 10. Physicalism is false. (5, 9)

The assumption of transparency

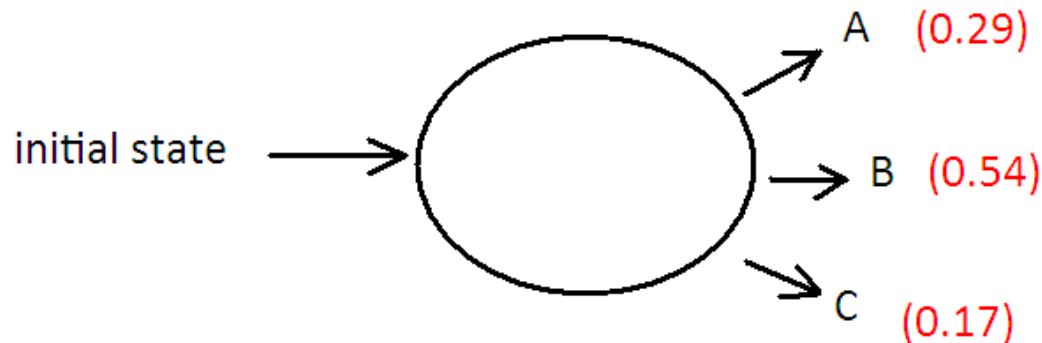
1. The intelligible properties of physical systems are logically independent of mental properties like colour experiences.
2. Physical systems are transparent, so that all their properties are intelligible.

∴ Physical systems do not have mental properties

Chancy causation is unintelligible as well?

- A genuinely chancy system would be one that is unpredictable for Laplace's demon, even using maximal information about the initial state.
- Laplace's demon would just have an epistemic probabilities $P(A)$, $P(B)$, etc. for each possible outcome A , B , etc.
 - [Note: $P(A)$ = the physical chance of A .]
- Can Laplace's demon understand why A actually occurred, rather than something else?

- No, Laplace's demon won't be able to explain why. **If there were a clear mechanical model of the chancy process, then it would be deterministic.**
- If you assume that Laplace's demon has complete information, then chancy events must be conceived of as ***hollow***. They have no content, beyond the chance that is attached. They are inexplicable jumps, with nothing going on between the start of the process and its outcome.
- But chancy processes could be **unintelligible** (opaque) instead.



Transparency and determinism

- What is the relation between a process being *transparent* (completely intelligible) and being *deterministic*?
- A transparent process must be deterministic. (I think)
- Must a deterministic process be transparent?
 - Not necessarily. A deterministic process might have opaque aspects as long as they are *epiphenomena*, i.e. causally inert.
 - However, if the opaque aspects (“omega particles”) are causally involved then the process cannot be deterministic. (I think)

Transparency and determinism

- Determinism requires conceptual transparency, since it claims that the future is a *logical consequence* of past causes.
- Laplace's demon needs a complete conceptual understanding of the past, in order to infer the future.
 - E.g. suppose that *most* of the world is fully comprehensible, but there are some particles (omega particles, say) that cannot be understood at all.
 - If omega particles can affect the rest of reality, then the future is inherently unpredictable.

Is thought transparent?

- Suppose that Mary studies me as a subject and comes to have a complete knowledge of my physical and neurophysiological makeup as I am thinking these various thoughts. Can she determine on that basis what I am consciously thinking about at a particular moment? One thing that seems utterly clear is that she could not do this merely on the basis of knowing my *internal* physical characteristics ...
- (Laurence Bonjour, “Against Materialism”, 2010.)
- Bonjour takes this to be ‘utterly clear’, but I think it’s also provable.
 - See “Why physicalism seems to be (and is) incompatible with intentionality”, on my research page.

Or is thought opaque?

- If thought is opaque, as Bonjour and I suggest, then this would really change the landscape of the libertarian vs. compatibilist debate.
- Recall that both compatibilists and libertarians think that “authorship” is essential to free will.
- Compatibilists stop there, simply asserting that authorship is (i) sufficient for free will, and (ii) compatible with causal determinism.
- **But note that authorship requires intentionality, which (if both opaque and causally involved) would be incompatible with determinism.**

“Opaque thought” libertarianism?

- This looks really promising for libertarianism, I think:
 1. We know that we have authorship concerning some actions, by introspection.
 2. If the above arguments are correct, then such authorship *entails* indeterminism.
 3. Compatibilism (which combines authorship with pre-determination) turns out to contradict itself.
 4. Hard determinism has to assert that intentionality is epiphenomenal.

Sam Harris's arguments

1. The dilemma of free will. Therefore, “there’s no way to describe the universe so as to make sense of free will”
2. The Libet (and similar) experiments show that consciousness is not in the “driver’s seat” of our decision making.
3. Free will doesn’t even correspond to our subjective experience. If you pay close attention, you see that thoughts simply appear in consciousness, so that we have no control over what we think about.

1. The dilemma of free will

- We've discussed this already. The main response of Kane (and me) is that non-determined does not entail uncaused, so that non-determined events are not uncontrolled, random, haphazard, etc.
- Kane also says that identifying indeterministic with "chance" is just a verbal trick. An indeterministic system can still have authorship.
- I go a little further and say that authorship *entails* indeterminism.

2. The Libet (and similar) experiments



Responses

- The ‘prediction’ of which button will be pushed is only correct 60% of the time, so these experiments don’t give much evidence of determinism.
- Libet himself saw the readiness potential not as a finished decision but the unconscious beginning of an urge to make a certain decision. The urge, when it rises into consciousness, can still be vetoed by the conscious self. (He called this “free won’t”.)

Alfred Mele on Libet



3. Do we *experience* free will?



3. Do we *experience* free will?

1. Thoughts just come into our minds, seemingly from nowhere, without us choosing them to do so.
2. “If you can’t control your next thought, and you don’t know what it’s going to be until it arises, where’s your freedom of will?”
3. “We can’t choose what we choose in life. And when it seems that we choose what we choose (perhaps when going back and forth between two options) we don’t choose to choose what we choose. There is a regress here that ends in darkness.”