

Baron d'Holbach



Hard Determinism

You are at the mercy of physical laws

Baron d'Holbach

- D'Holbach is a *hard determinist*.
(Determinism is true, and so free will is an illusion.)
- “Thus man is a being purely physical ... he is connected to universal nature, and submitted to the necessary and immutable laws that she imposes on all the beings she contains ...”

- N.B. d'Holbach doesn't argue for determinism itself, but just takes it for granted, as something that science is telling us.
- Science isn't nearly as deterministic today as it was in d'Holbach's time (1770).

Contrast with Libertarianism

“human vanity accommodated itself to a hypothesis which, unquestionably, appears to distinguish man from all other physical beings, by assigning to him the special privilege of a **total independence of all other causes ...**”

N.B. “The agent must be not merely a cause but the *sole* cause of that for which he is deemed morally responsible. If entities other than the self have also a causal influence upon an act, then that act is not one for which we can say without qualification that the *self* is morally responsible.”

(Libertarian C. A. Campbell)

“Man’s life is a line that nature commands him to describe upon the surface of the earth, without his ever being able to swerve from it, even from an instant ...”

(p. 397)

Similar to the rail yard metaphor, *not at all* like the garden of forking paths.

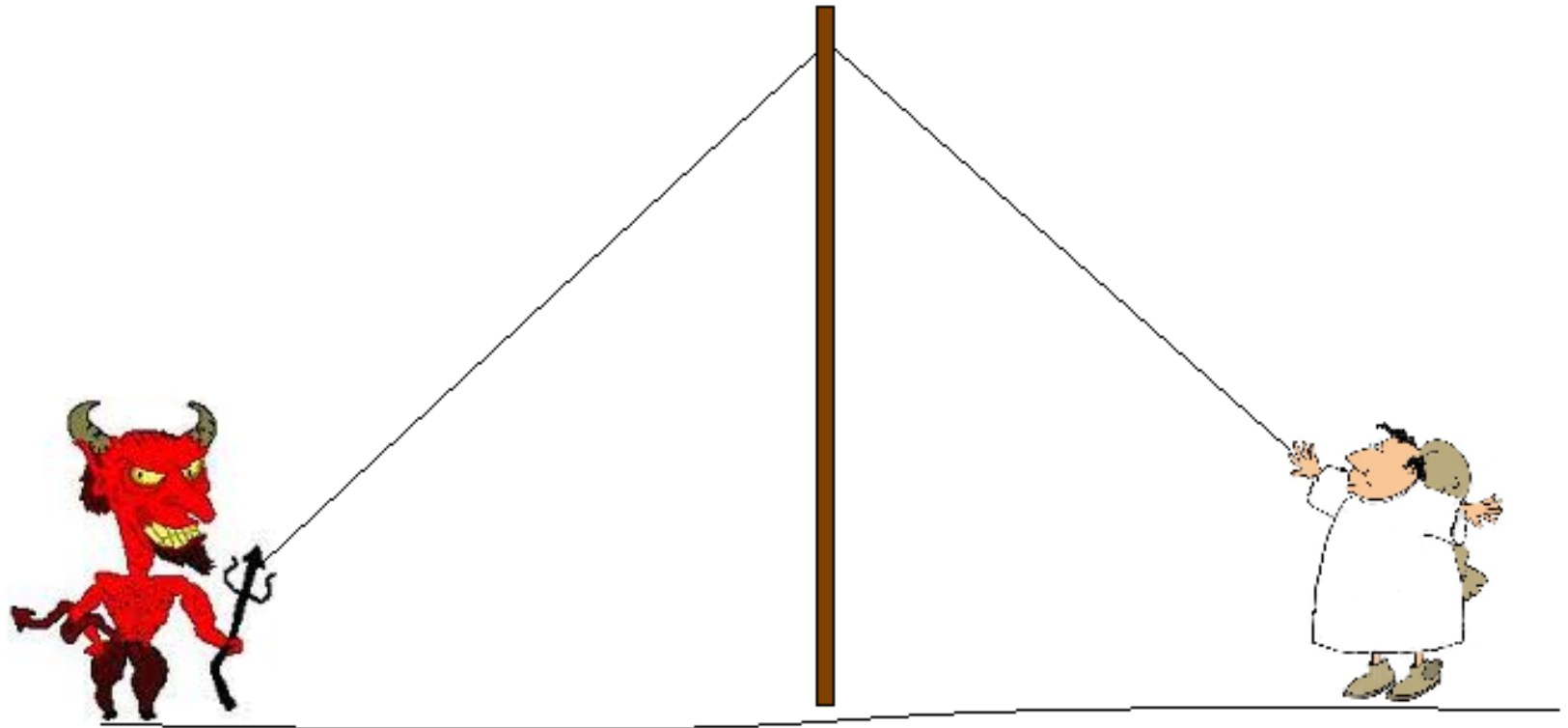
Have a seat Kermit. What I'm about to tell you might come as big shock...



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Theory of the Will

- The will (the part of us that makes choices, decisions) is a physical system.
- Acts of will are caused and determined by the “forces” that act upon it, i.e. desires, impulses, to do different things.
- The rough idea seems to be that the will is like a vertical pole, being pulled in different directions by ropes attached to the top.
- The pole ends up falling toward the direction of the greatest pull. (Falling = deciding)



Keep things simple!

Tell the truth!

- Suppose, for example, you are trying to decide whether to tell the truth, or tell a convenient lie. You want to tell the truth, for its own sake, but also you want to avoid the messy consequences of this.
- These are two competing desires, pulling in opposite directions.
- The strongest desire, according to this model, will determine your will. (So you have no control over the outcome.)

- Imagine a person “tormented with violent thirst”, who “perceives a fountain, whose limpid streams might cool his feverish want”.
- The man will, of necessity, drink from the stream. He has no power to do otherwise.
- “What if,” someone might object, “he’s told that the water is poisoned? Then he will abstain, showing that he is yet a free agent.”

- Not so, says d’Holbach. For in that case, the desire to live is simply stronger than the desire to drink, and overpowers it.
- “the second motive becomes stronger than the preceding, that is, the fear of death, or the desire of preserving himself, necessarily prevails over the painful sensation caused by his eagerness to drink ...”
(p. 397)

- But people can be *persuaded* to change their conduct! That shows they're free agents.
- No. This only shows that a person's will is susceptible to *pressure*, even just verbal pressure, or the pressure of social expectations.
- In every case, we see that a person is at the mercy of external forces.

The phenomenology of deliberation (i.e. “what it feels like”)

- Why is decision making often difficult, i.e. “a struggle”?
- Why does it sometimes take *hours*, not just seconds?
- Why is it sometimes “agonizing”?

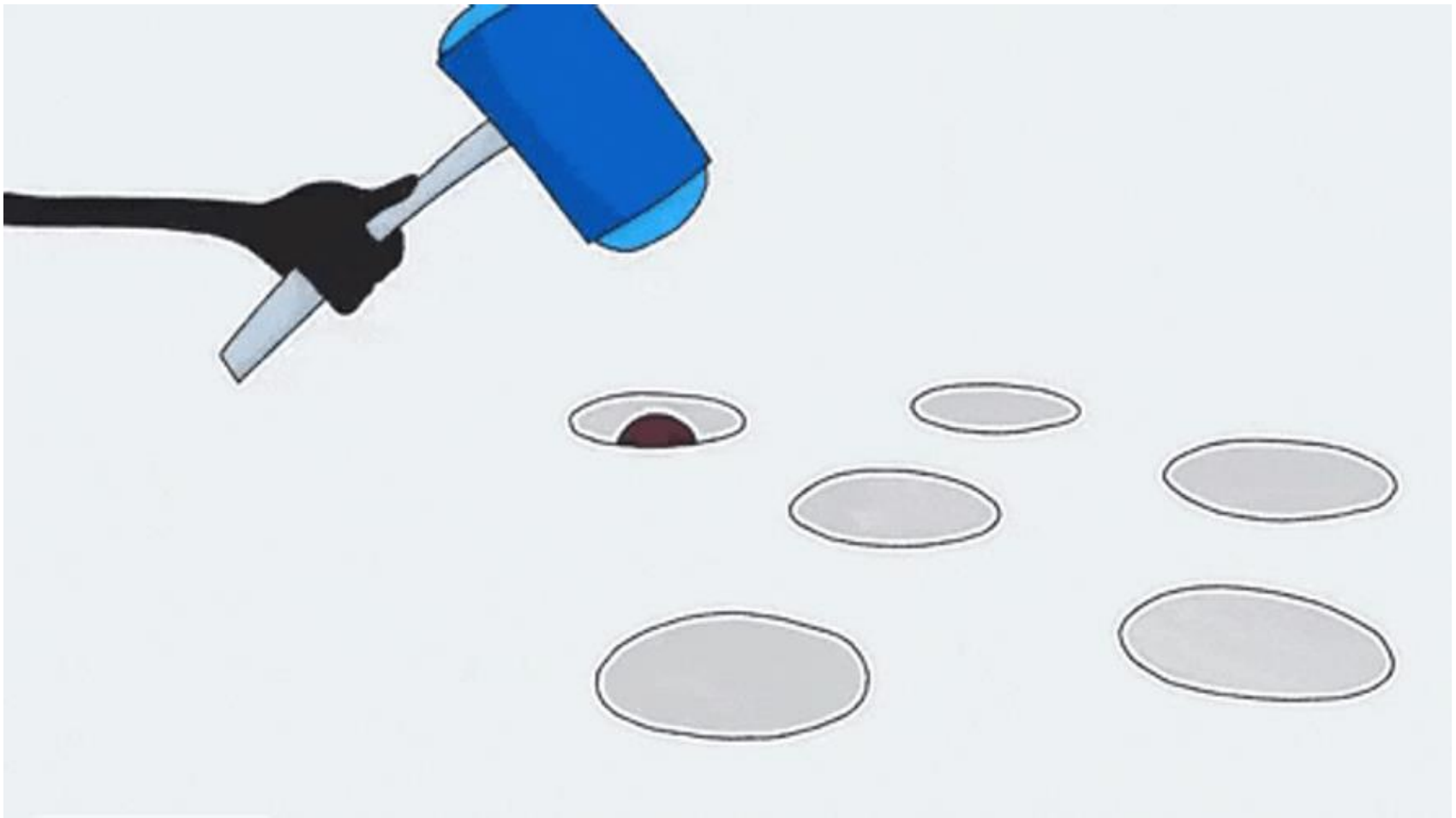
The phenomenology of deliberation

- D'Holbach replies:
 - The struggle of the will between opposing desires may take some time to resolve, as the forces may initially be well balanced.
 - The strength of each force may vary with time.
- “This mechanism ... suffices to demonstrate why uncertainty is painful, and why suspense is a violent state for man” (p. 398) The brain gets fatigued. It “suffers a kind of compression”.

Effort of will?

- Does this really explain the apparent *effort* of will, that exists in some cases?
- For example, it often feels like / am suppressing an inner impulse to do something that I understand would be a bad move.
 - It doesn't feel like I am passive, while being squeezed or stretched by opposing external forces.
 - I don't choose to have a certain impulse. It arises within me from unseen causes. But I can consciously decide to suppress it, and that takes effort.

“Whack-a-mole” model of free will



The powerful intuition of free will

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.

- van Inwagen, *Metaphysics*, p. 283.

- van Inwagen compares the claim that *we don't have free will* to claims like:
 - Consciousness doesn't exist
 - The physical world is an illusion
 - Self-contradictory statements can be true

d'Holbach replies:

- “It is, then, ... from not being competent to decompose the complicated motion of his machine, that man believes himself a free agent: it is only upon his own ignorance that he founds the profound yet deceitful notion he has of his free agency;”
- Summary: FW is an illusion, that arises from the fact that we are too complex to understand ourselves.

D'Holbach on libertarianism

- We humans have an illusion of free will, d'Holbach thinks, because we are *unaware* of the causes which move us. We are very *complicated*, with countless simultaneous causes working together. Many of these are unconscious.

A typical human imagines that “he moves himself by himself; that he determines himself without a cause”



Burden of proof?

- D'Holbach is probably right that there isn't any situation, or experiment, that proves we have free will.
- But is there any good evidence for determinism? Is it supported by empirical evidence?

Brain scan experiments



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)

Free will and psychological health



