



Walter Terence Stace



David Hume

# Soft Determinism

# Soft determinism

- Soft determinism combines two claims:
  - i. Causal determinism is true
  - ii. Humans have free will
- N.B. Soft determinists **are** determinists! *Every single event*, including every human thought and action, is determined by prior causes. Down to the tiniest details!
  - Soft determinists are also *compatibilists*. (Free will is compatible with determinism.)

**2. Compatibilism:** Accept the left horn, that free actions have (or might have) deterministic causes, and claim that this is just fine. Determinism is *compatible* with free will.  
(e.g. David Hume, W. T. Stace, Daniel Dennett, Steven Pinker)



# Compatibilism and soft determinism

- These days, now that our fundamental physical theory (quantum mechanics) is indeterministic, there are not so many soft determinists as such.
- But the really important part of soft determinism is compatibilism.
  - E.g. Stace thinks that if determinism is true, then *so much the better* for free will.
  - Stace says that Free will is not only *compatible* with determinism, but actually *requires* it.

- Stace claims that hard determinists, like d'Holbach, generally *act* as if they and others are free.

“For when it comes to doing anything practical, even of the most trivial kind, they invariably behave as if they and others were free. They inquire from you at dinner whether you will choose this dish or that dish... All of which is inconsistent with a disbelief in free will.” (p. 408-9)

Is this a fair criticism of d'Holbach?

# A merely verbal dispute?

- Stace claims that the dispute between soft determinists (like himself) and hard determinists (e.g. d'Holbach) is *merely verbal*.
- A merely verbal dispute is a disagreement about the meanings of words, or how to use language, rather than about the world itself.

# E.g. Can Little Bear Fly?



He began to climb down,  
and saw four little birds.  
“Look at us,” they said,  
“we can fly.”



“I can, too,” said Little Bear,  
“but I always fly down.  
I can’t fly up  
or sideways.”

# E.g. Can Little Bear Fly?

If you disagree with Little Bear, and say he cannot fly at all, then you have a *verbal disagreement* with him, over the meaning of 'fly'.





- Stace says that hard determinists are using an incorrect definition of ‘free action’, one which has the consequence that:

“they are actions not wholly determined by causes or predictable beforehand.” (p. 409)

- N.B. Stace thinks that free actions *are* determined by prior causes.
- **He agrees with d’Holbach’s model of how we make choices**, but describes the resulting actions as ‘free’.

# The “correct” definition of free will

- The correct definition of a term is determined by *common usage*, says Stace. If everyone uses ‘egg’ to refer to eggs, then that’s what it means.
- So Stace looks at examples where we apply, and don’t apply, the term ‘free will’.

*Jones:* I once went without food for a week.

*Smith:* Did you do that of your own free will?

*Jones:* No. I did it because I was lost in a desert and could find no food.

*Gandhi:* I once fasted for a week.

*Smith:* Did you do that of your own free will?

*Gandhi:* Yes. I did it because I wanted to compel the British Government to give India its independence.

# Free will = choice

“We have now collected a number of cases of actions which, in the ordinary usage of the English language, would be called cases in which people have acted of their own free will. We should also say in all these cases that *they chose to act as they did*. We should also say that they could have acted otherwise, if they had chosen.” (p. 410)

[Recall that, *for d’Holbach*, free will ≠ choice.]

# Definition of free will

“We may therefore frame the following rough definitions.

- *Acts freely done are those whose immediate causes are psychological states in the agent*
- *Acts not freely done are those whose immediate causes are states of affairs external to the agent.”*  
(p. 411)
- (He probably means *conscious* psychological states here.)

**“It is plain that if we define free will in this way, then free will certainly exists, and the philosopher’s [i.e. hard determinist’s] denial of its existence is seen to be what it is—nonsense. For it is obvious that all those actions of men which we should ordinarily attribute to the exercise of their free will, or of which we should say that they freely chose to do them, are in fact actions which have been caused by their own desires, wishes, thoughts, emotions, impulses, or other psychological states.” (p. 411)**

# Objections?

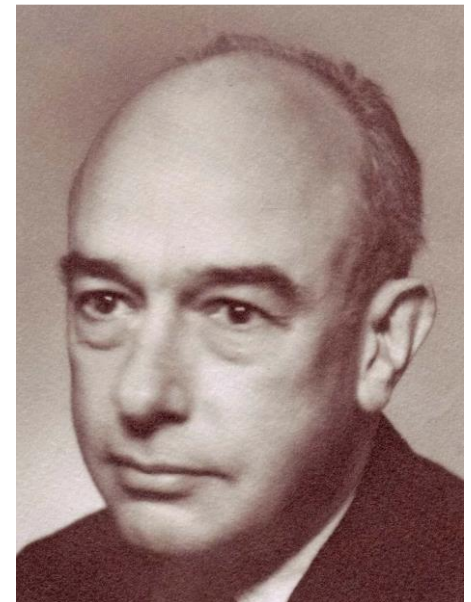
- *DO* we use terms like “free will” this way?
- Yes, we do.
- But maybe only because, when a person chooses something, we *assume* that it wasn't determined by prior causes, that they could have done otherwise, etc.?

## C.f. *behaviourism* about mental states

- We *say* that someone is in pain when they exhibit certain behaviour, like wincing, groaning, etc.
- But does the term ‘being in pain’ *mean* displaying that behaviour?
- No. ‘pain’ refers to a conscious sensation, not any behaviour. We *assume* that someone who displays pain behaviour *also* feels the sensation.



- That's why it's tricky to discover the meaning of a word by examining usage patterns.
- Imagine you visit a tribe where they say "Gavagai" whenever rabbits are present.
- What does 'Gavagai' mean, do you think?
  - 'Gavagai' might mean *rabbit*.
  - Or 'Gavagai' might refer to the *invisible happy spirits* who are thought to always accompany rabbits!
- (This example is based on Quine, *Word and Object*, 1960.)



- Anyhow, here we find the core disagreement between Stace and d'Holbach.
- For Stace, it's enough that the direct causes of our actions are our own choices.
  - (For d'Holbach this is irrelevant, since **those choices are not themselves under our control**. They are caused by beliefs, desires, etc., which we have no control over.)

“It has been believed that man was a free agent because he had a will with the power of choosing; but attention has not been paid to the fact that even his will is moved by causes independent of himself”

# Richard Taylor's control box #2

- Richard Taylor (a libertarian) agrees with d'Holbach on this one.
- He imagines (p. 402 in our book) an “ingenious physiologist” who “can induce in me any volition [i.e. choice] he pleases, simply by pushing various buttons on an instrument...”
- Note that pushing the button causes the *choice* to act, which in turn causes the act.
- So this scenario seems to fit Stace's definition of free will.

# Richard Taylor's control box #2



Strong desire to do A



Decision to do A



Do A

He did A of his own free will!

# A real control box case

“Suppose that a thug threatens to shoot you unless you give him your wallet, and suppose that you do so: Do you, in giving him your wallet, do so of your own free will or not?”

“If we apply our definition, we find that you acted freely, since the immediate cause of the action was not an actual outside force but the fear of death, which is a psychological cause. Most people, however, would say that you did not act of your own free will but under compulsion.”

# How do we understand “could have done otherwise”?

What is a compatibilist to make of the claim:

“If I did X freely, then I could have done otherwise” ?

One option, which Stace takes, is to interpret it *conditionally*.

“According to our view an action may be free though it could have been predicted beforehand with certainty. But suppose you told a lie, and it was certain beforehand that you would tell it. How could one then say, “You could have told the truth”?...

The answer is that it is perfectly true that you could have told the truth *if* you had wanted to. In fact you would have done so, for in that case **the causes producing your action, namely your desires, would have been different**, and would therefore have produced different effects.” (p. 412)

- In other words, “you could have done otherwise” means “you *would* have done otherwise, *if* you had chosen to”
- What would d’Holbach say to this?



Stace: The train reached some points, and went left. But it could have gone right.

D'Holbach: How could it have gone right, if the points were set left?

Stace: Well, I mean that it *would* have gone right, *if* the points had been set right.

# Part 2

Criticisms of traditional compatibilism, and  
Dennett's alternative version

# Is compatibilism *verbal trickery*?

“This is a wretched subterfuge with which some persons still let themselves be put off, and so think they have solved, with a petty word-jugglery, that difficult problem, at the solution of which centuries have laboured in vain, and which can therefore scarcely be found so completely on the surface.”

Kant, talking about compatibilism, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 1788.

# William James on compatibilism:

compatibilism is a “quagmire of evasion”,

a “mere word-grabbing game played by the soft determinists.”

“... they make a pretense of restoring the caged bird to liberty with one hand, while with the other we anxiously tie a string to its leg to make sure it does not get beyond our sight.”

- William James, “The Dilemma of Determinism”, 1884

# Counter-example? (SEP)

“Despite the classical compatibilists’ ingenuity, their analysis of *could have done otherwise* failed decisively. ...

Suppose that Danielle is psychologically incapable of wanting to touch a blond haired dog. Imagine that, on her sixteenth birthday, unaware of her condition, her father brings her two puppies to choose between, one being a blond haired Lab, the other a black haired Lab. He tells Danielle just to pick up whichever of the two she pleases and that he will return the other puppy to the pet store. Danielle happily, and unencumbered, does what she wants and picks up the black Lab.”

*Could Danielle have done otherwise here?*

# Dennett and Predictability

Stace: “It is a delusion that predictability and free will are incompatible. This agrees with common sense. For if, **knowing your character**, I predict that you will act honorably, no one would say when you do act honorably, that this shows you did not do so of your own free will.”

- Dennett similarly claims that, if someone were to offer him \$1000 to torture an innocent child, he would *certainly* refuse. This is 100% predictable. Yet is this not a free action?

# Dennett on Martin Luther

- When speaking to the Diet of Worms of 1521, a key event in the Protestant Reformation, Martin Luther is supposed to have said,

“Here I stand; *I can do no other*”

Dennett concludes that freedom does not require the power to have done otherwise.

- (This is a second possible compatibilist response to the issue of “could have done otherwise”.)

# Compatibilists on “could have done otherwise”

1. (Stace) Free will *does* require that one could have done otherwise. This means that one *would* have done otherwise, *had* one chosen to.
2. (Dennett) Free will *does not* require that one could have done otherwise.

(Which is more plausible?)



# Daniel Dennett: “bizarre metaphysical conceits”



# Is Libertarian free will *worth wanting*?

(Or is it *pointless, bizarre, conceited*, etc.?)

*Girl*: I want a pony!

*Dennett*: I guess you want to  
get around more easily.  
Here's a scooter.

*Girl*: That's nothing like a pony!

*Dennett*: Ok. How about this?  
It's what you really want.



# Part 3

Determinism and punishment, blame, etc.

# Compatibilism and Punishment

- The *apparent* problem:

“But it is not just to punish a man for what he cannot help doing ...”

“...[so] it may seem unjust to punish a man for an action which it could have been predicted with certainty beforehand that he would do.”

(Stace, p. 412)

“But that determinism is incompatible with moral responsibility is as much a delusion as that it is incompatible with, free will. You do not excuse a man for doing a wrong act because, knowing his character, you felt certain beforehand that he would do it. Nor do you deprive a man of a reward or prize because, knowing his goodness or his capabilities, you felt certain beforehand that he would win it.”

- Stace takes the view that punishment is not “giving a person what they deserve” (the retributivist view), but rather a matter of behaviour modification (the utilitarian or consequentialist view)
- The purpose of punishment is to *reform* the criminal/child, and *deter* others from similar action.

“The punishment for the man, the fertilizer for the plant, and the oil for the car, are all justified by the same principle and in the same way. The only difference is that different kinds of things require different kinds of causes to make them do what they should. Pain may be the appropriate remedy to apply, in certain cases, to human beings, and oil to the machine. It is, of course, of no use to inject motor oil into the boy or to beat the machine.”

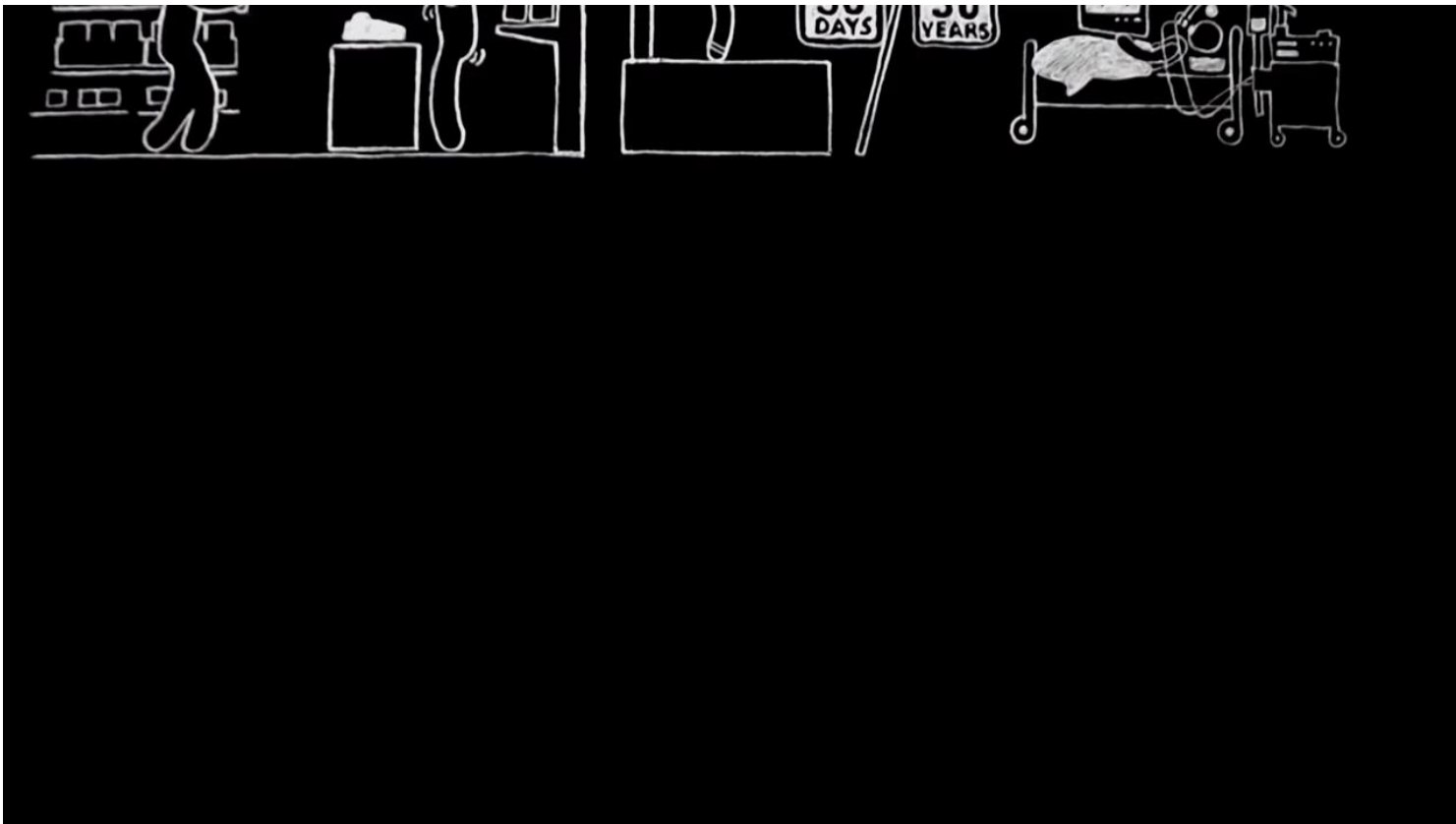
- With this theory of punishment, the more deterministic people are the better!

“If pain could not be a cause of truth-telling there would be no justification at all for punishing lies. If human actions and volitions were uncaused, it would be useless either to punish or reward, or indeed to do anything else to correct people’s bad behavior. For nothing that you could do would in any way influence them” (p. 413)



- Could d'Holbach punish people on this basis as well?
- Yes, of course.

- Is the consequentialist theory of punishment destructive of human dignity?
  - C. S. Lewis makes a case for this:
  - See the first 4 minutes of <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vJYU0RPVbVc>



# Strawson on compatibilism's 'lacuna'

- Peter Strawson is a compatibilist who recognizes that traditional compatibilism is missing something important.
- Strawson notes that we *emotionally* respond to competent humans who do wrong very differently from how we react to a lawnmower that won't start.
  - We *blame* people, feel resentment, outrage, etc.
  - We take an *objective* attitude toward lawnmowers, figure out what's wrong, try to fix them, etc.

# Strawson on compatibilism

- Traditional compatibilism seems wrong because it suggests we take such an objective ‘fix and treat’ attitude toward humans who deserve blame and punishment.
  - Similar to C. S. Lewis’s point.

Peter Strawson, “Freedom and Resentment”

[http://iweb.langara.bc.ca/rjohns/files/2016/10/strawson\\_edited.pdf](http://iweb.langara.bc.ca/rjohns/files/2016/10/strawson_edited.pdf)

Strawson's solution to this is to say that we are **hard-wired** to react to people with moral gratitude and resentment, and this won't be affected by belief in determinism.

“The question we have to ask is: What effect would, or should, the acceptance of the truth of a general thesis of determinism have upon these reactive attitudes? More specifically, would, or should, the acceptance of the truth of the thesis lead to the decay or the repudiation of all such attitudes? Would, or should, it mean the end of gratitude, resentment, and forgiveness; of all reciprocated adult loves; of all the essentially personal antagonisms?”

Peter Strawson, “Freedom and Resentment”

“The human commitment to participation in ordinary inter-personal relationships is, I think, too thoroughgoing and deeply rooted for us to take seriously the thought that a general theoretical conviction might so change our world ...”

(Peter Strawson, “Freedom and Resentment”)

Thus the incompatibilist, who thinks that accepting determinism will mean the demise of moral responsibility, is worried about nothing.

- N.B. Strawson sidesteps the question of whether 'reactive attitudes' of praise and blame *make sense*, or are *rational*, if we believe in determinism.