



# Libertarianism

Is it crazy?



Robert Kane



Richard Taylor



Roderick Chisholm



Laura Waddell Ekstrom



Robert Nozick



Peter van Inwagen

Do they look crazy to you? ... a little?

# A war on two fronts

- Libertarians have to fight off two enemies, both the soft and hard determinists. I.e.
  1. Libertarians need to show that the compatibilist's definition of free will is wrong (insufficient).
  2. Then they need to show that there is some viable libertarian notion of free will.

# 1. Attacking compatibilism

- Attacking compatibilism is the easier part. For example:
  - Richard Taylor’s control box argument, where a person’s desires are under the control of an “ingenious physiologist”.
  - Peter van Inwagen’s consequence argument
- The basic point is that (if determinism is true) we can be controlled through forces acting on our own desires and choices just as effectively as through direct external forces.

## 2. Show that libertarianism is viable

- It needs to be shown that there is some coherent notion of freedom that involves:
  - **Self-selection.** (My action isn't determined by external causes, but selected only by *me*, the self, at the moment of decision.)
  - **Authorship.** We select our actions on the basis of “intentionality” (rational understanding), personal goals, and so on. Not “randomly”, “haphazardly”, “by chance”, etc.

# N.B.

- This ‘self-selection’ idea is usually called **self-determination**. (Determination by the self, rather than by past events.)
- However, determination is logical consequence, given the laws of physics.
  - And the self doesn’t seem to enter into logical consequence relations!
  - ‘Self-selection’ means that it is the self, and nothing prior, that eliminates all but one possible action at this moment.

# What are free acts?

- Libertarians have pursued two approaches to free will.
  - **Agent causation libertarians (ACL)** have said that the *person* (i.e. agent) is the *only* cause of their free actions. Free acts are *self-caused*.
  - **Event causation libertarians (ECL)** deny that causes always determine their effects. Thus free actions have prior external causes, but are *self-selected*.

# Can free choices have external causes?

- A key feature of ACL is that one has to deny that free actions have any causes at all, outside of the agent making them.
  - **Even the agent's own (prior) beliefs and desires cannot be causes of their actions!**
  - ACL is forced to say this, by their belief that causation is always deterministic.
- ECL on the other hand allows that our free choices have prior causes, just as long as those causes don't also *determine* our choices.



# E.g. Richard Taylor is ACL

“In the case of an action that is both free and rational, it must be that the agent who performed it did so for some reason, but this reason cannot have been the cause of it.” (p. 406)

- N.B. Richard Taylor, like all ACLs, thinks that any prior *cause* of a choice will also *determine* the choice, so that we have no ability to have done otherwise.

# E.g. C. A. Campbell is an ACL

“The first condition [of a morally responsible act] is the universally recognised one that the act must be *self*-caused, *self*-determined. But it is important to accept this condition in its full rigour. 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.”

“In Defence of Free Will”, Inaugural Address, Glasgow University, 1938.

# E.g. Roderick Chisholm is ACL

- 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.

‘... each of us, when we act, is a prime mover unmoved’

- N.B. At one point Chisholm says that our desires seem to “incline” us to actions without necessitating them.
  - (This sounds like ECL.)
- But then he continues: ‘There is a temptation, certainly, to say that ‘to incline’ means to cause and that **‘not to necessitate’ means not to cause**, but obviously we cannot have it both ways.’
  - Again we see the assumption that *causes determine their effects* in operation.

(Roderick M Chisholm, “Human Freedom and the Self”, 1964.)

Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886):

“[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* [cause of oneself] and, with more than Baron Munchhausen’s audacity, to pull oneself up into existence by the hair, out of the swamps of nothingness. . . .”

# Taylor's confession

“One can hardly affirm such a theory of agency with complete comfort, however, and wholly without embarrassment, for the conception of men and their powers which is involved in it is strange indeed, if not positively mysterious. In fact, one can hardly be blamed here for simply denying our data outright ...”  
(p. 407)

# Part 2

Nozick, Kane and Ekstrom: less crazy?

# A less crazy libertarian?

- Robert Kane (“Free Will: New Directions for an Ancient Problem”)

“Defenders of an incompatibilist or libertarian free will have a dismal record of answering these familiar charges [that undetermined actions would be random, erratic, etc.]. Realizing that free will cannot merely be indeterminism or chance, they have appealed to various obscure or mysterious forms of agency or causation to make up the difference.”



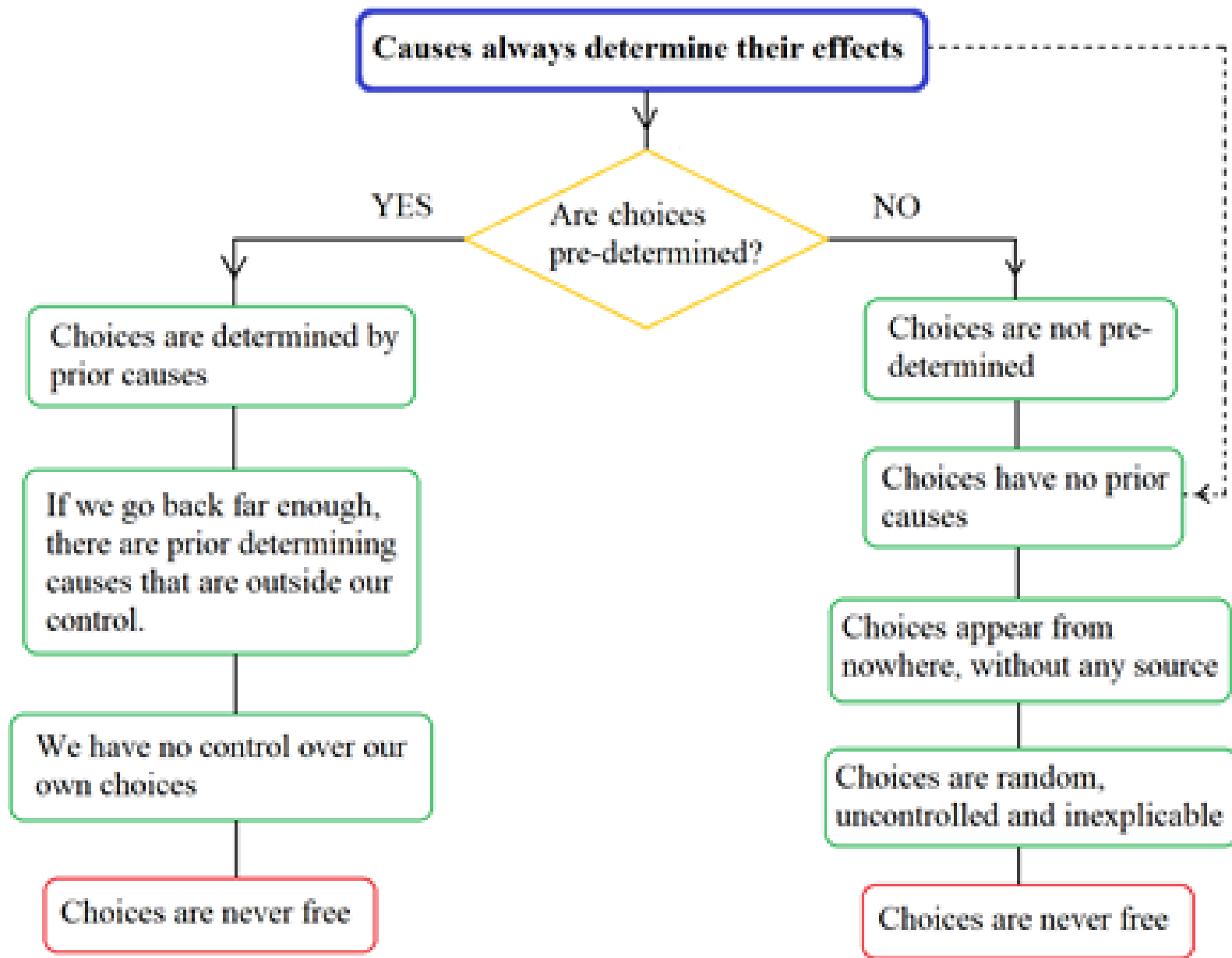
- Kane proposes to do without such mysterious “extra factors”. His more modest view is called *event-causation libertarianism*. (ECL)
- It relies on the claim that causes need not determine their effects, so that free actions are caused, but not determined by those causes.
- Free actions are undetermined until some point in the process of deliberation that leads to them.
- Laura Ekstrom and Robert Nozick have (slightly different) views along the same lines.

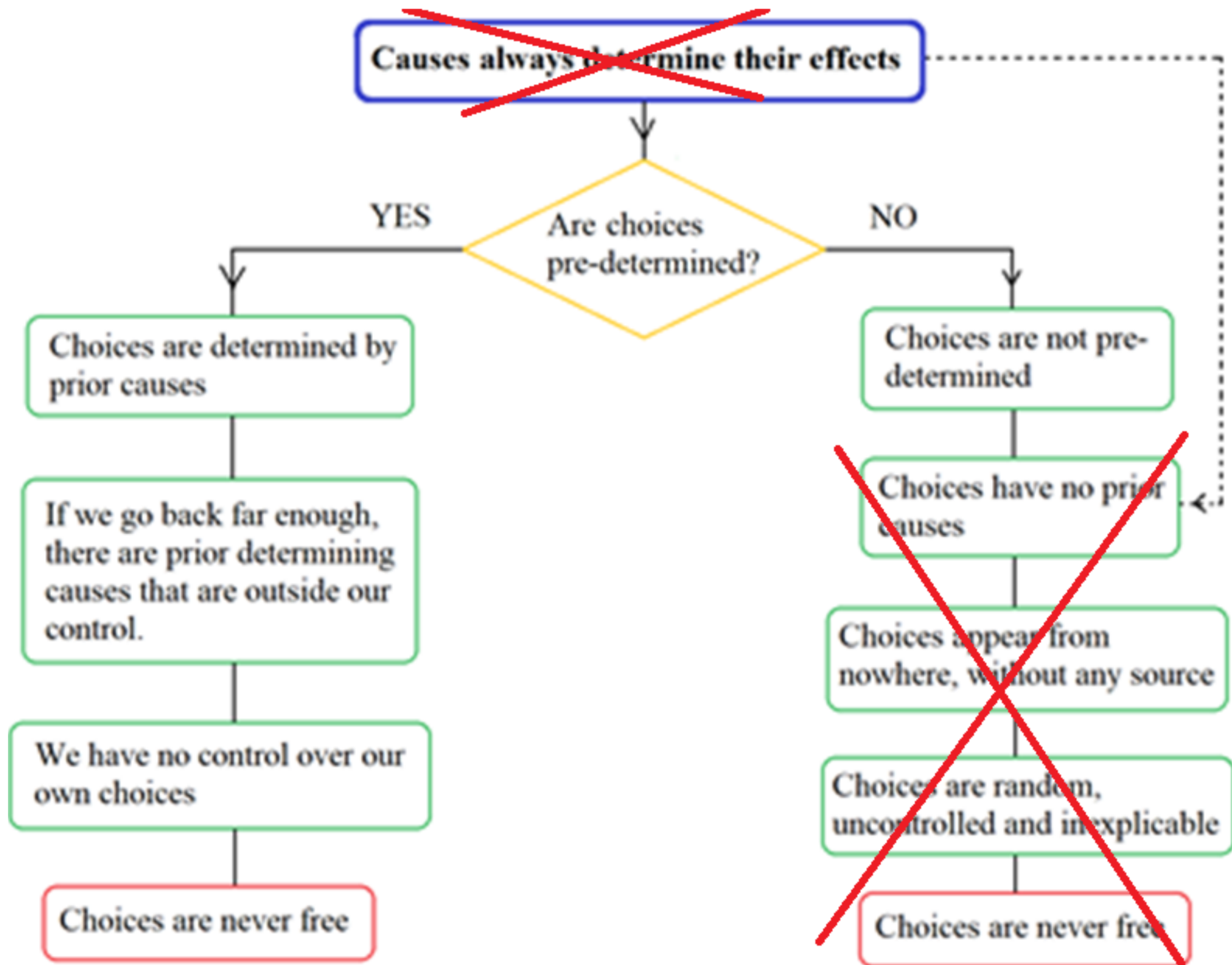
Ekstrom: *Free Will: A Philosophical Study*, 2000.

Nozick: *Philosophical Explanations*, 1981.

# Kane on causation and determination

If we are ever going to understand free will, I think we will have to ... question the intuitive connection in most people's minds between "indeterminism's being involved in something" and "its happening merely as a matter of chance or luck". "Chance" and "luck" are terms of ordinary language that carry the connotation of "its being out of my control." So using them already begs certain questions, whereas "indeterminism" is a technical term that merely precludes *deterministic* causation, though not causation altogether. ... **It is therefore a mistake (alas, one of the most common in debates about free will) to assume that "undetermined" means "uncaused".**





# What does 'random' mean?

1. If my choices are not pre-determined, then they are **random**.
2. If my actions are **random**, then I have no control over them

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∴ If my choices are not pre-determined, then I have no control over them.

- What does 'random' mean here?
- Do the two uses have the same meaning?

# 'random' means 'not pre-determined'?

1. If my choices are not pre-determined, then they are **random** (not pre-determined).
2. If my actions are **random** (not pre-determined), then I have no control over them

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- ∴ If my choices are not pre-determined, then I have no control over them.
- The argument is circular, and so useless.

# 'random' means *uncaused*?

1. If my choices are not pre-determined, then they are **random** (**uncaused**).
2. If my actions are **random** (**uncaused**), then I have no control over them

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- ∴ If my choices are not pre-determined, then I have no control over them.
- But then premise 1 is false, according to Anscombe, Kane, Ekstrom, etc.

# Flying and 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.





# Part 3

Kane's response to Dennett

# Objection: Free acts *can* be pre-determined

- Recall that both Stace and Dennett argued that, in many cases of free choice, someone who knew the agent well could predict their choice in advance, with 100% certainty.
- According to libertarians such a choice couldn't be free, it seems, which sounds odd.

# Self-Forming Actions (SFAs)

- Kane (a libertarian) suggests a solution to this.
- Following Aristotle, Kane stresses the feedback between actions and character. By making free choices, we *form ourselves*. These actions are called “self-forming actions”, or “self-forming choices”.
- The person is not *just* a product of nature and nurture, but also their own free choices.



men become builders by building and lyreplayers by playing the lyre; so too we become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts.

*Aristotle*

# Nature vs. Nurture?

- This point should be stressed. We often hear about the debate of “nature vs. nurture”, in (e.g.) discussions of why people become criminals.
- From Kane’s perspective, **a person’s nature and nurture are both outside their control**. So if (e.g.) criminality is caused by those factors alone, then a person has no control over whether he becomes a criminal, and so he cannot be blamed for it.

# Determined by one's character?

- In the cases raised by Stace and Dennett, where a person's choice is determined by their character, Kane says that **their character is the result of previous indeterministic choices they made.**
- Kane says that the person helped to form their own character, and so is **ultimately responsible** for the (deterministic) choices made later in life.
- Is this a reasonable response to the problem?

# Part 4

Physicalism and indeterministic causation

# Thomas Nagel

*The View from Nowhere*, 1986

“I change my mind about the problem of free will every time I think about it, and therefore cannot offer any view with even moderate confidence; but my present opinion is that **nothing that might be a solution has yet been described.**” (p. 112)

“Compatibilist accounts of freedom tend to be even less plausible than libertarian ones. Nor is it possible simply to dissolve our unanalyzed sense of autonomy and responsibility. It is something we can't get rid of ... We are apparently condemned to want something impossible.” (p. 113)

(Van Inwagen's view is similar to Nagel's.)

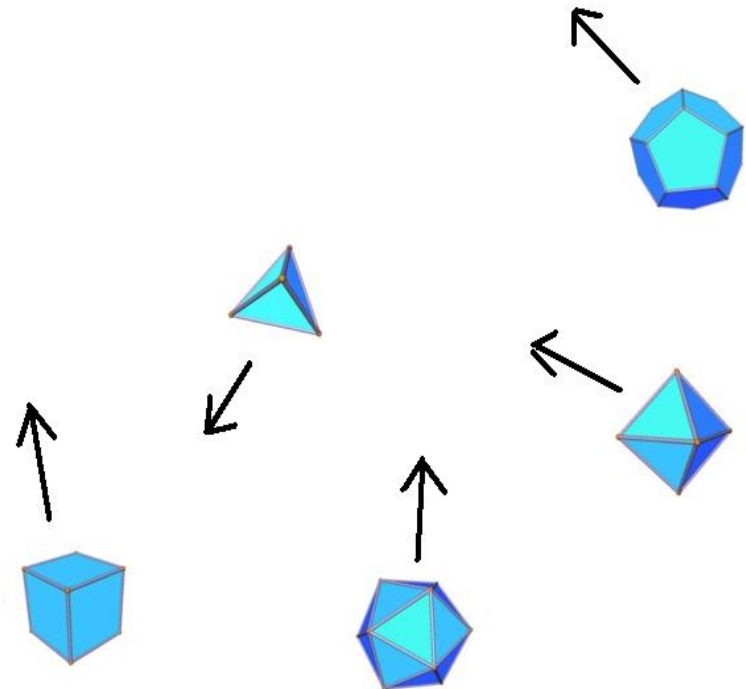


# Indeterminism and physicalism

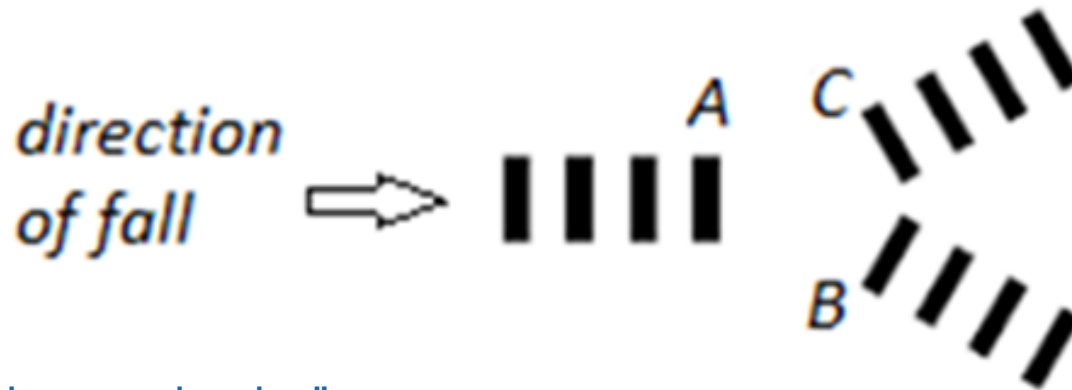
- A key feature of physicalism is its claim that **the world is conceptually clear**, or “transparent” to the mind, in the way that (for example) geometrical figures are fully intelligible.

Jackson’s definition of physicalism: “*All information is physical information*”

What atoms look like, according to Plato



# Indeterminism and physicalism



“domino mechanics”  
(An analogy for quantum mechanics.)

- When A falls, it doesn't hit either B or C.
- One of B and C always falls just after A falls.
- No domino ever falls unless it is either hit by a falling domino, or is close to a falling domino.
- Also, suppose B falls 63% of the time in this experiment.

# Indeterminism and physicalism

- To understand this experiment, we are forced to conclude that A's fall **causes** B (or C) to fall.
  - But we have no conceptual understanding of this indeterministic causal connection.
  - (And we *cannot* have such an understanding!) It is necessarily absent from the (abstract mathematical) description provided by physics.
  - So, indeterminism is incompatible with conceptual transparency (physicalism).

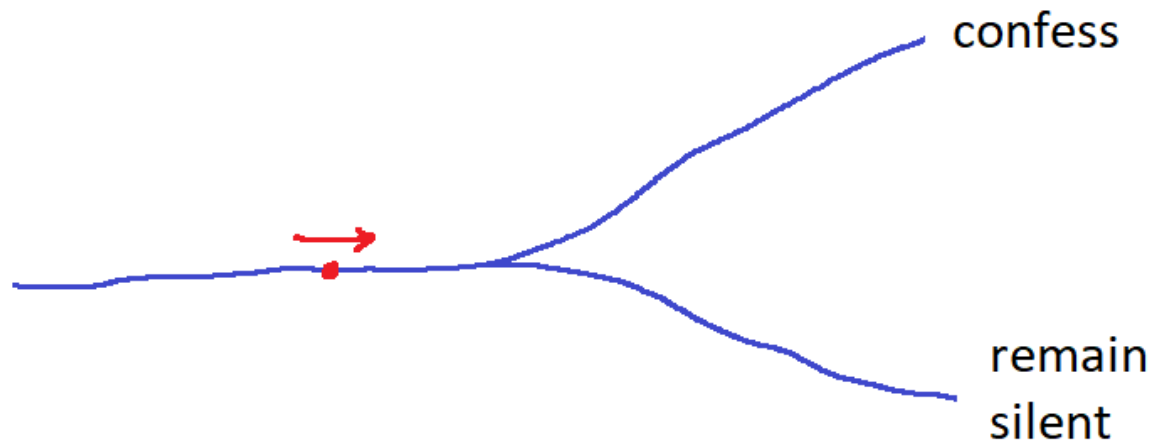
# Inscrutable causal processes

- Suppose that the indeterminism in quantum physics is due to some causal processes being inscrutable, or 'opaque' to the mind.
- A philosopher who believes the world is perfectly transparent will be forced to say that such *quantum events are uncaused*.
- Remember the cartographer who thinks that the earth must be flat, since maps are flat? From his perspective, the train below must *jump* discontinuously from Helsinki to Tallinn.



## Van Inwagen (*Metaphysics*, p. 278)

“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.”



(This is  
Laplace, not  
his demon)



“And let us suppose that it is undetermined which way the pulse will go when it comes to the fork: [even Laplace’s demon would not know].”

“Now let us ask: Is it *up to Jane* whether the pulse goes to the left or to the right? If we think about this question for a moment, we shall see that **it is very hard to see how this could be up to her.**”

- N.B. Beware of what looks like a kind of “knowledge argument here”

**We cannot see** how this outcome was up to Jane

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∴ The outcome was not up to Jane

# Causation $\Rightarrow$ determination?

“Nothing in the way things are at the instant before the pulse makes its “decision” to go one way or the other **makes it happen** [i.e. causes] that the pulse goes one way or goes the other. If it goes to the left, *that just happens* [without a cause]. If it goes to the right, *that just happens*. There is no way for Jane to *influence* the pulse. There is no way for her to **make it go** one way rather than the other.”

- Notice how, in this argument, van Inwagen denies that Jane could be *causing* the pulse to go one way or the other. But why?

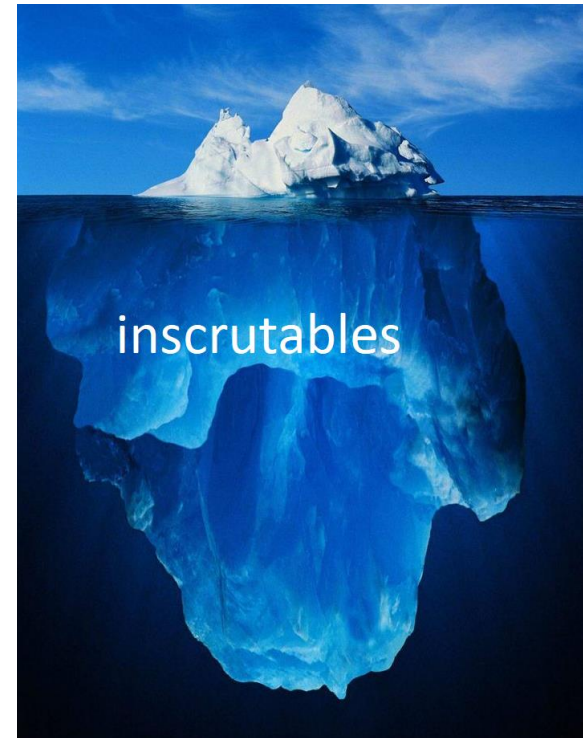


# Determinism and conceptual transparency

- **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.
  - For suppose that *most* of the world is fully comprehensible, but there are some inscrutable properties that cannot be understood at all.
  - If the inscrutables can affect the rest of reality, then **the future is inherently unpredictable**.

# e.g. 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*.
  - The inscrutables are not describable using mathematics



# Is determinism compatible with *intentionality*?

- Determinists (hard and soft) say that a deterministic system can “obviously” make choices, yet we now see that **determinism requires conceptual transparency**.
- Many philosophers argue that physicalism is incompatible with consciousness and intentionality – and those arguments are based on the conceptual transparency of physical states.
- Consciousness and intentionality are of course requirements for making rational choices, so **it’s at least unclear whether it’s possible for a deterministic system to make rational choices**.

# Are deterministic choices possible?

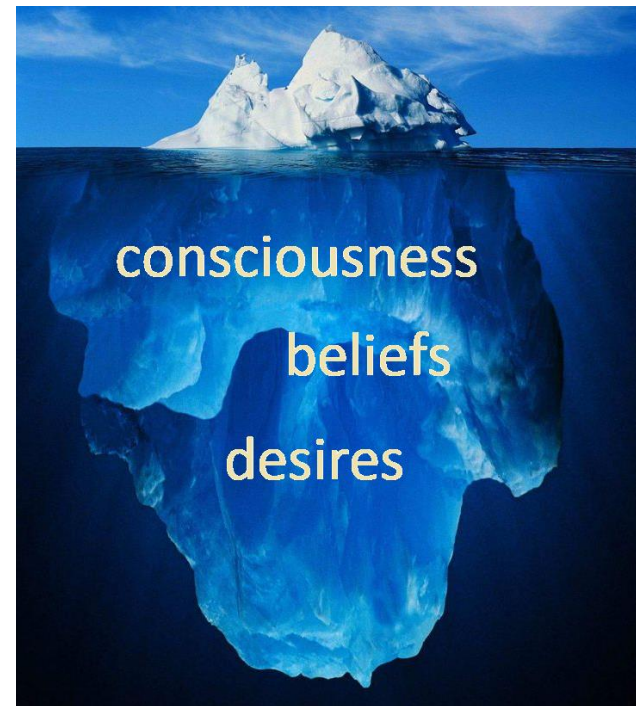
- N.B. determinists like Stace, Dennett, d'Holbach and Pinker all simply *assume* that making choices is compatible with determinism.
  - They see **no need** to argue that making choices is compatible with determinism. It's taken for granted.
- But an argument is definitely needed here.
- If determinism requires conceptual transparency, and transparency is incompatible with intentionality, then **a deterministic rational choice is impossible.**

# Free choices are *random*, then?

- If conscious processes are not deterministic, then according to many philosophers they must be random (i.e. a matter of pure chance, or sheer luck).
- E.g. Jack Smart said:
- “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.”

- N.B. This example of eating a slug seems to **assume** that the “quantum mechanical trigger in my brain” is an event I have no control over, *and is quite separate from any conscious, rational choice I make.*

- But that’s not what the ECL libertarian is talking about. They’re saying that **ordinary voluntary acts are indeterministic by their very nature.**



# Robert Nozick: FW is unintelligible

“... 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. ...**

