

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 van Inwagen's Jane case. The 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.

Selection from Chisholm

- 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.
- 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.)

Theological consequences

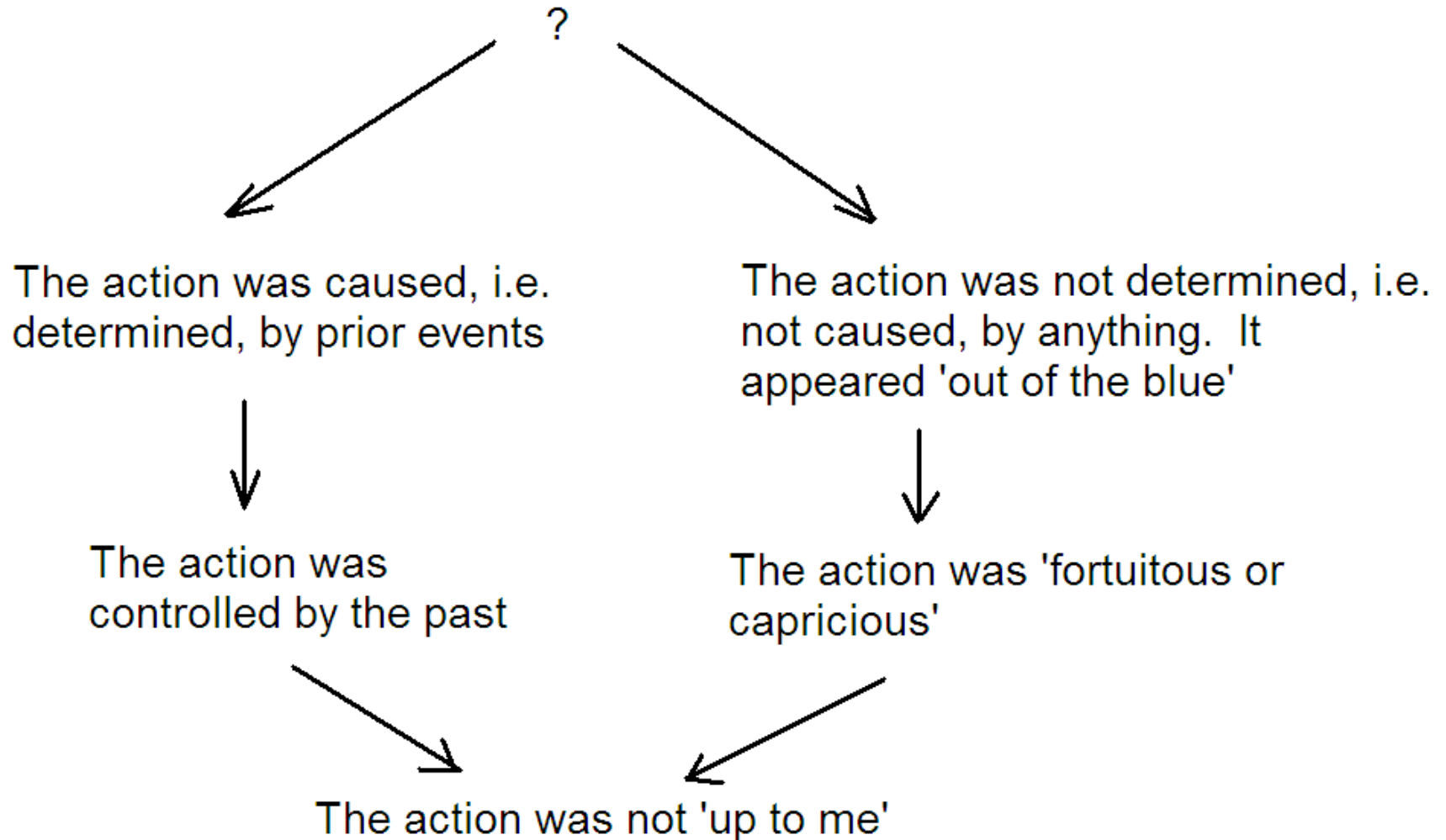
- The identification of causation with determination has an extreme consequence for theologians. Since God is the cause of everything, it follows that God also determines everything, and hence is absolutely in control of all human actions.

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.”

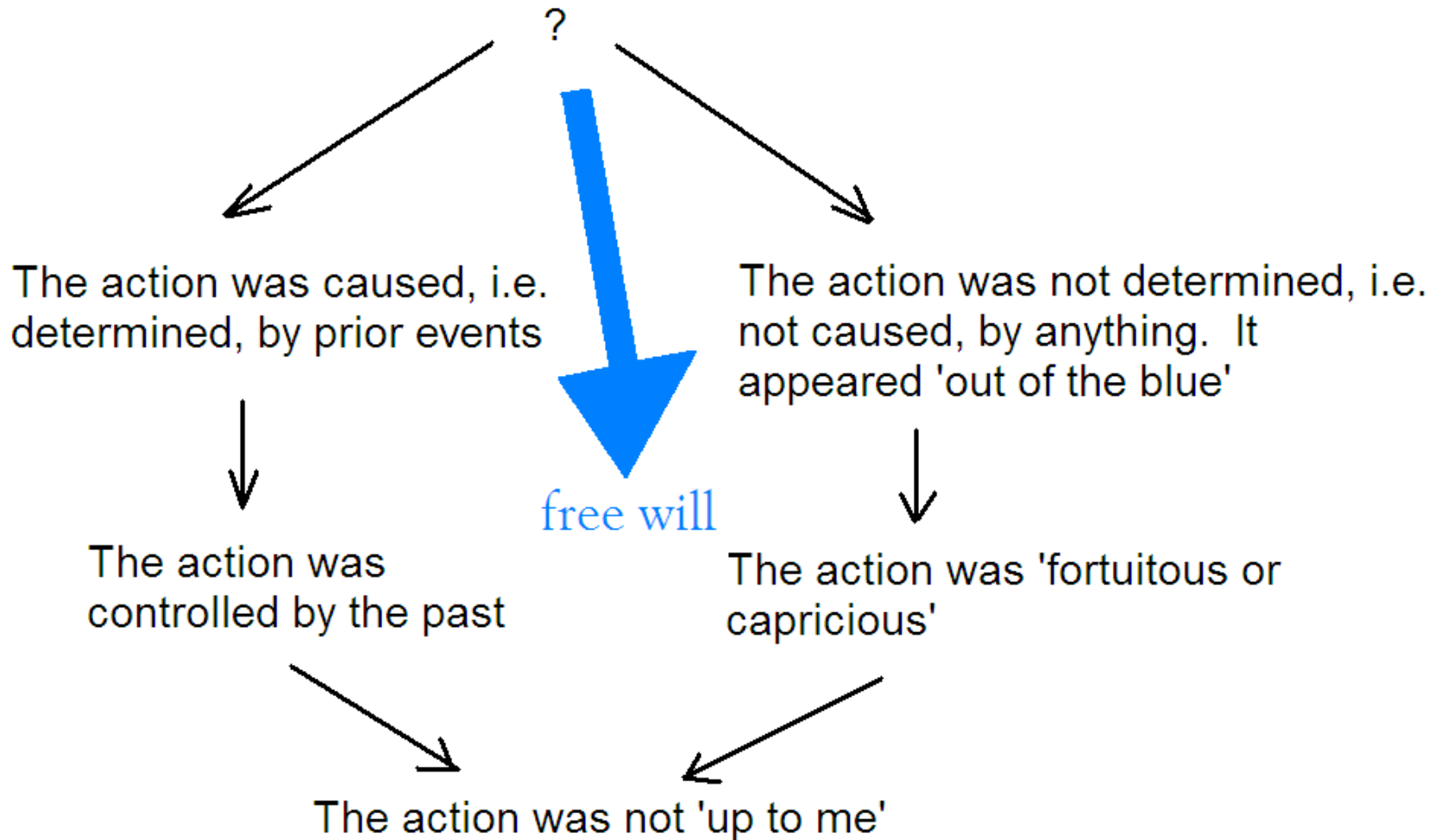
Section 4.

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*.
- ‘Event-causation’ libertarians distinguish between causing and determining. Free actions are caused, but not determined, by our beliefs and desires. (I would like to call this ‘agent-determination’ libertarianism.)

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.

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

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 rendering us powerless.
 - 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.

Kane tries to understand how FW works

- 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. ...
- **FAIL!!**

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.”

- 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.)

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. 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?
- 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?

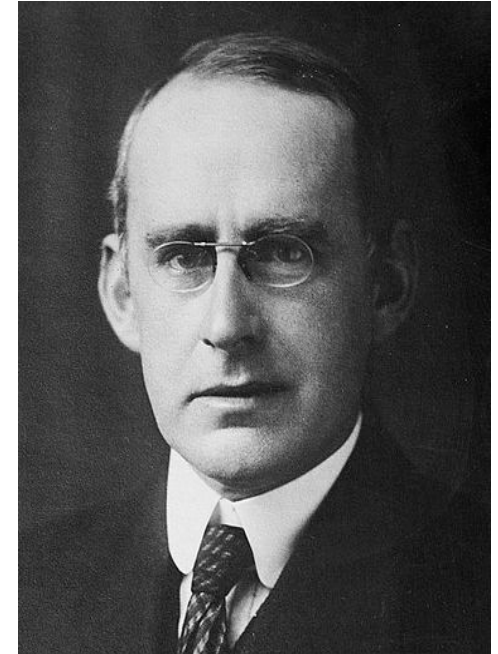
Neutral monism says the world is largely unintelligible

“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.

“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.”

- 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

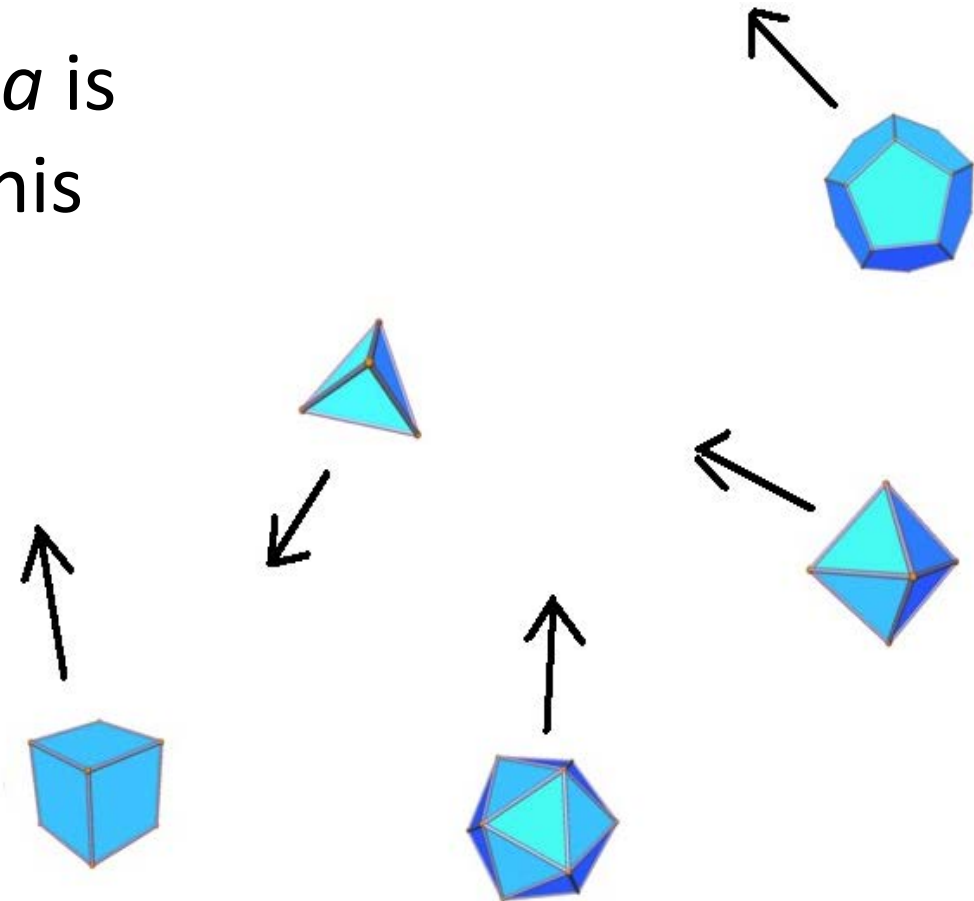
- “S performs A freely” implies:
 - i. **Authorship.** S is a conscious, rational being, who performed A for reasons of her own, based on understanding his situation, etc.
 - ii. **Self-determination.** The action was self-determined, in the sense that no prior events outside S determined that S would 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 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.
- 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 the mechanical philosophy, updated to take account of advances in physics since Descartes:
 - Non-Euclidean geometry (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.
- 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 rational 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.

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. Assume** that physicalism is true.
 6. Mary doesn't know what it is like to have colour experiences.
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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

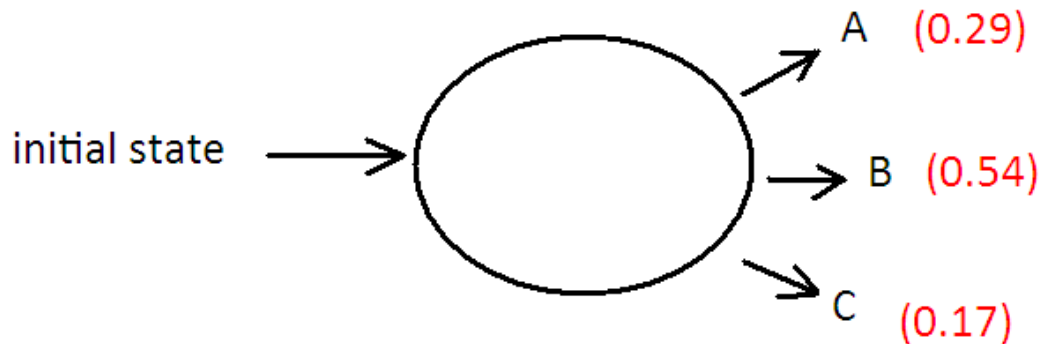
1. The intelligible properties of physical systems are logically independent of mental properties like colour experiences.
2. Physical systems are transparent, so that all their properties are intelligible.

∴ Physical systems do not have mental properties

Chancy causation is unintelligible?

- 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 chance of A , etc.]
- 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 are causally involved then the process cannot be deterministic. (I think)

Is thought transparent?

- The issue I want to raise here is whether a materialist view can account for the sort of conscious intentional content just characterized. Can it account for conscious thoughts being about various things in a way that can be grasped or understood by the person in question? ... 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.

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, understanding etc., which (if both opaque and causally involved) would be incompatible with determinism.

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-determination.** The action was self-determined, 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.

- This looks really promising for libertarianism, I think:
 1. We know that we have authorship over some actions, by introspection.
 2. If the above arguments are correct, then such authorship *entails* self-determination.
 3. Compatibilism turns out to be contradict itself.