

# FREEDOM AND DETERMINISM: A CONTEMPORARY DISCUSSION

by *Louis P. Pojman*

*Abstract.* The problem of freedom of the will and determinism is one of the most intriguing and difficult in the whole area of philosophy. It constitutes a paradox. If we look at ourselves, at our ability to deliberate and make moral choices, it seems obvious that we are free. On the other hand, if we look at what we believe about causality (i.e., that every event and thing must have a cause), then it appears that we do not have free wills but are determined. Thus we seem to have inconsistent beliefs. In this paper I set forth and analyze the major contemporary arguments for free will and determinism as well as for compatibilism, the position that tries to combine insights from both theories. I end with a brief conclusion regarding my assessment of the status of the arguments.

*Keywords:* compatibilism; determinism; freedom; free will; libertarianism; metaphysics.

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The problem of freedom of the will and determinism is one of the most intriguing and difficult in the whole area of philosophy. It constitutes a paradox. If we look at ourselves and our ability to deliberate and make choices, it seems obvious that we are free. On the other hand, if we look at what we believe about causality, namely, that every event and thing must have a cause, then it appears that we do not have free wills but are determined. Thus we seem to have inconsistent beliefs.

Let us look more closely at the two theses involved in order to see how they work and what support there is for each of them. Determinism is the thesis that everything in the universe (or at least the macroscopic universe) is entirely determined by causal laws, so that whatever happens at any given moment is the effect of some antecedent cause. On the other hand, libertarianism is the position that claims there are some

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actions which are exempt from the causal laws, actions in which the individual is the sole (or decisive) cause of the act; the act originates *ex nihilo*, cut off from all other causes but the self's origination. There is, however, a third position that tries to combine the best of these two positions. Called compatibilism, it says that although everything is determined, we can still act voluntarily.

In this essay I shall examine the issue of freedom of the will and determinism mainly in the light of contemporary philosophical analysis. First, I shall present the classical picture of determinism. After this I shall set forth in a dialectical manner the libertarian and compatibilist arguments, as well as the determinist's responses to these arguments. I will conclude with my own assessment of the status of the debate.

### DETERMINISM

Baron d'Holbach (1723-89) stated the determinist thesis in its classic form when he wrote:

In whatever manner man is considered, he is connected to universal nature, and submitted to the necessary and immutable laws that she imposes on all the beings she contains, according to their peculiar essences or to the respective properties with which, without consulting them, she endows particular species. Man's life is a line that nature commands him to outline upon the surface of the earth, without his ever being able to swerve from it, even for an instant. He is born without his own consent; his organization does in nowise depend upon himself; his ideas come to him involuntarily; his habits are in the power of those who cause him to contract them; he is unceasingly modified by causes, whether visible or concealed, over which he has no control, which necessarily regulate his mode of existence, give the hue to his way of thinking, and determine his manner of acting. He is good or bad, happy or miserable, wise or foolish, reasonable or irrational, without his will counting for anything in these various states . . . (Holbach 1770; cited in Castell & Borchet 1976, 70-71).

H. T. Buckle who published Holbach's work sums up his position in this way: "If I were capable of correct reasoning, and if, at the same time, I had a complete knowledge both of his disposition and of all the events by which he was surrounded, I should be able to foresee the line of conduct which, in consequence of those events, he would adopt" (Buckle 1857; cited in Castell & Borchet 1976, 76-77).

Extending this further, we may say that if we knew all the possible states of matter and motion in the universe, we could know all the events of the universe—past, present, and future. We could postdict every past event and predict every future event.

Determinism is the theory that everything in the universe is governed by causal laws. That is, everything in the universe is entirely determined so that whatever happens at any given moment is the effect of some antecedent cause. If we were omniscient, we could predict

exactly everything that would happen for the rest of this hour, for the rest of our lifetime, and for the rest of time itself, simply because we know how everything up to this time is causally related. This theory which, it is claimed, is the basic presupposition of science holds that there is no such thing as an uncaused event (sometimes this is modified to include only the macrocosmic world, leaving the microcosmic world in doubt). Hence, since all human actions are events, human actions are not undetermined, are not *free* in a radical sense but are also the product of a causal process. Therefore, while we may self-importantly imagine that we are autonomous and possess free will, in reality we are totally conditioned by heredity and environment.

The outline of the argument for determinism goes something like this:

1. Every event (or state of affairs) must have a cause.
2. Human actions (as well as the agent who gives rise to those actions) are events (or state of affairs).
3. Therefore, every human action (including the agent him or herself) is caused.
4. Hence, determinism is true.

While the hypothesis of universal causality cannot be proved, it is something we all assume either because of considerable inductive evidence or as an a priori truth which seems to make sense of the world. We cannot easily imagine an uncaused event taking place in ordinary life. For example, imagine how you would feel if, on visiting your dentist for relief of a toothache, he were to conclude his oral examination with the remark, "I certainly can see that you are in great pain because of your toothache, but I'm afraid that I can't help you, for there is no cause of this toothache." Perhaps, he calls his partner over to confirm his judgment. "Sure enough," she or he says, "this is one of those interesting noncausal cases. 'Sorry, there's nothing we can do for you. Even medicine and pain relievers won't help these noncausal types.'"

Let us take another example. In Melbourne, Australia, weather forecasts for a twenty-four-hour period are exceedingly reliable. The predictions based on the available atmospheric data and the known meteorological laws are almost always correct. However, on Star Island, off the coast of Portsmouth, New Hampshire, the official forecasts for a twenty-four-hour period are more often wrong than right. Suppose someone came along and said, "There is an easy explanation for the success of the Australian forecasts and the lack of success of the Star Island forecasts. In Melbourne the weather is caused by preceding conditions, but on Star Island, more often than not, the weather has no cause. It's cut off from what happened before." Most of us would

explain the failure of the meteorologists differently, believing that the weather on Star Island is just as much the outcome of preceding conditions as the weather in Melbourne. The forecasts are less reliable on Star Island because of the greater complexities of the factors which have to be taken into account and the greater difficulty of observing them, but not because sufficient causal factors do not exist.

It is an interesting question whether the belief in causality is universal in humans or simply a product of experience. When does it arise in children? When our children were about five and seven respectively, I discovered one day a mess made in the pantry. The package of cookies had been opened and the cookies and cookie crumbs were scattered on the floor, some having been eaten. My wife and I asked our children which one of them have pilfered them. They both denied having anything to do with the matter. We pressed them, for there were no other people but ourselves who had access to the cookies. Finally, my exasperated five-year-old son volunteered, "Why does someone have to have done it? Why couldn't it just have happened?" "Impossible," I remonstrated, "Every event must have a sufficient cause!" My son looked at me with bewilderment. Two weeks later I went to the pantry again and saw a similar sight. Bags of cookies had been broken into and cookies were scattered all over the floor. In the midst of the cookies was a dead mouse, caught in a mousetrap with a piece of cheese in his mouth but cookie crumbs lining his whiskers. Greed summoned his downfall. Exhilarated by the discovery and confirmation of my theory, I summoned my children to the scene of the crime and triumphantly exclaimed, "Behold, every event must have a cause!" So the not-so-subtle indoctrination commences.

Why do we believe that everything has a cause? Most philosophers have echoed John Stuart Mill's answer that the doctrine of universal causality is a conclusion of inductive reasoning. We have had an enormous range of experience in which we have found causal explanations to individual events, which in turn seem to participate in a further causal chain. The problem with this answer, however, is that we have only experienced a very small part of the universe, not enough of it to warrant the conclusion that every event must have a cause.

It was David Hume (1711-76) who indicated that the idea of causality is not a logical truth (i.e., the idea that all triangles have three sides). The hypothesis that every event has a cause arises from the observation of regular conjunctions. "When many uniform instances appear, and the same object is always followed by the same event; we then begin to entertain the notion of cause and connexion" (Hume 1748, 78). After a number of successful tries at putting water over a fire and seeing it disappear, we conclude that heat (or fire) causes water to disappear (or

vaporize, turn into gas). However, we cannot prove causality. We never see it. All we see are two events in constant spatio-temporal order and infer from this constant conjunction a binding relation between them. For example, we see one billiard ball (*a*) hit another (*b*); we see (*b*) move away from (*a*); and we conclude that (*a*'s) hitting (*b*) at a certain velocity is the cause of (*b*'s) moving away as it did. However, we cannot prove that it is the sufficient cause of the movement.

It was Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) who first suggested that the principle of universal causality is a synthetic a priori, that is, an assumption we cannot prove by experience but simply cannot conceive not to be the case. Our mental construction demands that we read all experience in the light of universal causation. We have no knowledge of what the world is in itself, or whether there really is universal causation, but we cannot understand experience except by means of causal explanation. The necessary idea of causality is part and parcel of the structure of our noetic structure. We are programmed to read our experience in the causal script.

Kant wrote even before Buckle, "The actions of men . . . are determined in conformity with the order of nature, by their empirical character and by the other causes which cooperate with that character; and if we could exhaustively investigate all the appearances of men's wills, there would not be found a single human action which we could predict with certainty" (Kant 1781, 410). Yet, while Kant saw that there was a powerful incentive to believe in determinism, he also thought that the notion of morality provided a powerful incentive to believe in freedom of the will. Hence, Kant's dilemma.

The man who used the idea of determinism more effectively for practical purposes than any one before him was the great American criminal lawyer Clarence Darrow. In the 1920s there was a sensational crime; two teenage geniuses named Leopold and Loeb from the University of Chicago committed what they regarded as the perfect murder. They grotesquely dismembered a child and buried the parts of his body in a prairie. Caught, they faced an outraged public who demanded the death penalty. The defense attorney was Clarence Darrow, champion of lost causes. He conceded that the boys committed the deed but argued that they were, nevertheless, "innocent." His argument was based on the theory of determinism. It is worth reading part of the plea.

We are all helpless. . . . This weary world goes on, begetting, with birth and with living and with death; and all of it is blind from the beginning to the end. I do not know what it was that made these boys do this mad act, but I do know there is a reason for it. I know they did not beget themselves. I know that anyone of an infinite number of causes reaching back to the beginning might be working out

in these boys' minds, whom you are asked to hang in malice and in hatred and injustice. . . .

Nature is strong and she is pitiless. She works in her own mysterious way, and we are her victims. We have not much to do with it ourselves. Nature takes this job in hand, and we play our part. In the words of old Omar Khayam, we are:

But helpless pieces in the game He plays  
Upon the chess board of nights and days;  
Hither and thither moves, and checks and slays,  
And one by one back in the closet lays.

What had this boy to do with it? He was not his own father, he was not his own mother; he was not his own grandparents. All of this was handed to him. He did not surround himself with governesses and wealth. He did not make himself. And yet he is to be compelled to pay (Darrow 1957, 35).

This was sufficient to convince the jury to go against public opinion and recommend a life-sentence in lieu of the death penalty. If Leopold and Loeb were determined by antecedent causes to do the deed they did, we cannot blame them for what they did, any more than we can blame a cow for not being able to fly.

Determinism has received new attention and respect because of modern neurological studies. These suggest the hypothesis that there is a one-to-one correlation between mental states and brain states, so that every conscious action can be traced back to a causally sufficient brain state. In other words, the laws of physics deterministically produce mental states (see MacKay 1967; Honderich 1973).

#### TELEOLOGICAL DETERMINISM

Let me immediately emphasize that determinism need not be crudely mechanistic; it can take into account rational intentions and purposes. While it generally holds true that mental events are dependent on neural events or brain states, sophisticated teleological determinism (as opposed to simple physical determinism) can recognize the conceptual connection between intention and action. That is, in analyzing why you raised your hand, I need to know whether you were intending to wave to a friend, to vote, or to swat a fly. A purely physical description of your bodily motions is quite inadequate as a full account of what you are doing.

However, in spite of what some libertarians have argued, intentions are no great problem for determinism. Guided missiles, thermostats, and chess playing computers are also purposive and self-regulating, having feedback mechanisms which enable them to reach their goals in spite of changing factors in the environment. Chess playing computers, for example, are able to learn, devise new strategies, and decide between alternate moves. Although computers are not conscious, they

have purposes. The determinist notes that the only advantage that human chess players have over the artifact is that humans are conscious while playing chess. Yet the question is, what exactly is so important about consciousness? How does consciousness—mere awareness—add to our ability to act freely? We could well imagine a chess playing computer suddenly conscious of its strategies and moves. Would that awareness by itself make it free?

To summarize: the determinist argues that all human action can be subsumed under scientific causal laws which govern the rest of physical behavior. Since every action is completely caused by heredity and environmental factors, there are no free actions. Since there are no free actions, we are not responsible for any of our actions. Stated schematically, the argument runs as follows:

1. Every event (or state of affairs) must have a cause.
2. Human actions (as well as the agent who gives rise to those actions) are events (or state of affairs).
3. Therefore, every human action (including the agent him or herself) is caused.
4. Hence, determinism is true.
5. If determinism is true, then there are no free actions.
6. Therefore (from 4 & 5), there are no free actions.
7. If there are no free actions, then no one is responsible for his or her actions.
8. Therefore (from 6 & 7), no one is responsible for his or her actions.
9. Hence, since morality entails responsibility, morality is wholly illusory.

#### LIBERTARIANISM

Libertarianism is the theory that states we have free wills. It contends that given the same antecedent conditions at time  $t_1$ , an agent  $S$  could do either act  $A1$  or  $A2$ . That is, it is up to  $S$  what the world will look like after  $t_1$ ;  $S$ 's act is causally underdetermined, the self making the unexplained difference. Libertarians do not contend that all of our actions are free, only some of them. Moreover, libertarians do not offer an explanatory theory of free will. Their arguments are indirect. They offer two main arguments for their position: first, the Argument from Deliberation; second, the Argument from Moral Responsibility.

#### THE ARGUMENT FROM DELIBERATION

This position is nicely summarized in the words of Corliss Lamont: "[There] is the unmistakable intuition of virtually every human being

that he is free to make the choices he does and that the deliberations leading to those choices are also free flowing. The normal man feels too, after he has made a decision, that he could have decided differently. That is why regret or remorse for a past choice can be so disturbing" (Lamont 1967, 3).

As an example, there is a difference between a knee jerk and purposefully kicking a football. In the first case, the behavior is involuntary, a reflex action. In the second case, we deliberate, notice that we have an alternative (namely, not kicking the ball), consciously choose to kick the ball, and, if successful, we find our body moving in the requisite manner so that the ball is kicked.

Deliberation may take a short or long time and be foolish or wise, but the process is a conscious one wherein we believe that we really can do either of the actions (or any of many possible actions). That is, in deliberating we assume that we are free to choose between alternatives and that we are not determined to perform simply one action. Otherwise, why should we deliberate? This should seem obvious to everyone who introspects on what it *is* to deliberate.

Furthermore, there seems to be something psychologically lethal about accepting determinism in human relations; it tends to curtail deliberation and paralyze actions. If people really believe themselves to be totally determined, the tendency is for them to excuse their behavior; human effort seems pointless. As Arthur Eddington stated, "What significance is there to my mental struggle tonight whether I shall or shall not give up smoking, if the laws which govern the matter of the physical universe already preordain for the morrow a configuration of matter consisting of pipe, tobacco, and smoke connected to my lips?" (Eddington 1928).

#### THE DETERMINIST'S OBJECTION TO THE ARGUMENT FROM DELIBERATION

The determinist responds by admitting that we often feel "free," that is, feel that we could do otherwise, but that these feelings are illusory. The determinist may admit that at any given time,  $t_i$ , while deliberating, he or she feels free—at least on one level. Yet on a higher level or after the deliberation process is over, he or she acknowledges that even the deliberation is the product of antecedent causes. Ledger Wood suggests that the libertarian argument from deliberation can be reduced to the formula: "I feel myself free, *therefore*, I am free" (Wood 1941, 389). He analyzes the deliberative decision into three constituents: first, the recognition of two or more incompatible courses of action; second, the weighing of considerations favorable and unfavorable to each of the conflicting possibilities of action, and third, the choice among the



alternative possibilities. "At the moment of making the actual decision, the mind experiences a *feeling* of self-assertion and of independence both external and internal." However, Wood insists that the determinist can give a satisfactory account of this feeling, regarding it as "nothing but a sense of relief following upon earlier tension and indecision. . . . After conflict and uncertainty, the pent-up energies of the mind—or rather of the underlying neural processes—are released and this process is accompanied by an inner sense of power. Thus the feeling of freedom or voluntary control over one's actions is a mere subjective illusion which cannot be considered evidence for psychological indeterminacy" (Wood 1941, 386-89).

Sometimes, the determinist will offer an account of action in terms of action being the result of the strongest motive. Adolf Grunbaum puts it this way: "Let us carefully examine the content of the feeling that on a certain occasion we could have acted other than the way we did in fact act. What do we find? Does the feeling we have inform us that we could have acted otherwise under exactly the same external and internal motivational conditions? No, says the determinist, this feeling simply discloses that we were able to act in accord with our strongest desire at the time, and that we could indeed have acted otherwise if a different motive had prevailed at that time" (Grunbaum 1957, 336).

We could break up the concept of motivation into two parts: belief and desire (or wants); the result is the combination of a desire based on certain beliefs. If Mary strongly desires to fly to New York from Los Angeles at a certain time and believes that taking a certain American Air Lines flight is the best way to accomplish this, she will, all things being equal, take such a flight. There is no mystery about the decision. She may deliberate about whether she really wants to pay fifty dollars more for American than she would have to pay for a later economy flight, but once she realizes that she values getting to New York at a certain time more than saving fifty dollars, she will act accordingly. If Mary is rational, her wants and desires will function in a reliable pattern. Since wants and beliefs are not under our direct control, are not products of free choice, and the act is a product of desires and beliefs, the act is not a product of free choice either. The argument follows this pattern:

1. Actions are the results of (are caused by) beliefs and desires.
  2. We do not choose our beliefs and desires.
  3. Therefore, we do not choose our actions, but our actions are caused by the causal processes which form our beliefs and desires.
- If this is true, it is hard to see where free will enters the picture. The controversial premise is probably number 2, whether we choose our beliefs and desires. The determinist (and probably most epis-

temologists) would maintain that we do not choose our beliefs but that they, as truth-directed, are events in our lives, and represent the way the world forces itself upon us. That is, beliefs function as truth detectors; just as it is not our task to determine what the truth *is*, so it is not our task to form beliefs about the world. You may check this in a small way by asking why it is that you believe the world is spherical and not flat? Do you believe because of evidence or because you choose to believe? If the latter, could you give up the belief by simply deciding to do so?

Neither do we choose our desires; rather, our desires simply formulate choices. We do not choose to be hungry or to love knowledge, although when we find ourselves in conflict between two conflicting desires (e.g., the desire to run to the kitchen and eat and the desire to lose weight), we have to adjudicate the difference. However, this decision is simply a process of allowing the strongest desire (or deepest desire—for a deep dispositional desire could win over a sharply felt occurrent desire) to win. All this can be explained in a purely deterministic way without resorting to a mysterious free act of the will.

#### THE LIBERTARIAN COUNTER-RESPONSE: AGENT CAUSATION

The libertarian objects that this is too simplistic a notion of action. We cannot isolate the desires and beliefs in such a rigid manner. There are intangibles that are at work which may be decisive in bringing all the factors of desire and belief together and formulating the final decision.

Some libertarians respond to this view of motivation by putting forward an alternate picture of causation to account for actions. According to Roderick Chisholm and Richard Taylor, it is sometimes the case that *agents themselves* are the cause of their own acts. That is, agents cause actions without themselves changing in any essential way. No account need be given as to how this is possible.

The only conception of action that accords with our data is one according to which men . . . are sometimes, but of course not always, self-determining beings; that is, beings which are sometimes the causes of their own behavior. In the case of an action that is free, it must be such that it is caused by the agent who performs it, but such that no antecedent conditions were sufficient for his performing just that action. 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 (Taylor 1974, 54).

This notion of the self as agent differs from the Humean notion that the self is simply a bundle of perceptions, insisting instead that it is a substance and self-moving being. Human beings are not simply assemblages of material processes; they are complex wholes with a different metaphysical status than physical objects. Furthermore, this view of the

self sees the self as a substance and not an event. It is a being that initiates action without being caused to act by antecedent causes. If I raise my hand, it is not the events leading up to the raising of my hand that cause this act, but I myself am the cause.

In a sense the self becomes a "god" creating *ex nihilo* in that reasons may influence but do not determine the acts. In the words of Chisholm, "If we are responsible, and if what I have been trying to say [about agent causality] is true, then we have a prerogative which some would attribute only to God: each of us, when we act, is a prime mover unmoved. In doing what we do, we cause certain events to happen and nothing—or no one—causes us to cause those events to happen" (Chisholm 1964, 32). Perhaps the libertarian draws some support for this thesis from Genesis 1:26 where God says, "Let us make man in our image." The image of God may be our ability to make free, causally underdetermined decisions. In a sense every libertarian believes in at least one god and in creative miracles.

This theory, while attractive in that it preserves the notion of free agency, suffers from the fact that it leaves agent causation unexplained. The self is a mystery which is left unsolved; actions are seen as miracles that are unrelated to antecedent causal chains, detached from the laws of nature. Nevertheless, something like the argument from agency seems to be intuitively satisfying upon introspection. We *do* feel that we are free agents.

Along these lines the libertarian dismisses the determinist's hypothesis of a complete causal explanation based on a correlation of brain events with mental events. While memories may be stored in the brain, the self is not. Whether as an emergent property or as a transcendent entity or simply as an unexplained mystery, the self must be regarded as primitive. In a Cartesian manner, it is to be accepted as more certain than anything else and the source of all other certainties.

#### OBJECTION TO ARGUMENTS FROM INTROSPECTION

The problem with the argument from introspection which underlies the agency theory is that our introspections and intuitions about our behavior are often misguided. Freudian psychology and common sense tell us that sometimes when we believe we are acting from one motive, another, hidden, subconscious motive is really at play. Hypnotized people believe they are free when they are uttering a preordained speech while the audience looks on knowingly. Dr. Chris Frederickson, a neurophysiologist at the University of Texas at Dallas, has told of experiments with electrodes which illustrate this point. Patients with electrodes attached to their neocortex are set before a button which sets off a bell. The patients are told that they may press the button

whenever they choose. The patients proceed to press the buttons and ring the bells. They report that they are entirely free in performing these tasks. However, the monitoring of the brain shows that an impulse is started in the cerebral cortex before they become aware of their desire and decision to press the button, and when this impulse reaches a certain level, the patients feel the volition and press the button. Is it fair to assume that all our behavior may follow this model? Do we only become conscious of the workings of our subconscious at discrete moments? Often we seem to have unconsciously formulated our speech before we are conscious of what we are saying. The words flow naturally, as though some inner speech writer were working them out before hand.

It seems, then, that our introspective reports must be regarded as providing very little evidence in favor of free will in the libertarian sense. As Spinoza said, if a stone hurled through the air were to become conscious, it would probably deem itself free.

### THE ARGUMENT FROM QUANTUM PHYSICS

At this point libertarians sometimes refer to an argument from quantum mechanics in order to defend themselves against the insistence of determinists that science is on their side in their espousal of universal causality. The argument from quantum mechanics is negative and indirectly supports the libertarian thesis. According to quantum mechanics as developed by Neils Bohr and Max Borne the behavior of subatomic particles does not follow causal processes but instead yields only statistically predictable behavior. That is, we cannot predict the motions of individual particles, but we can successfully predict the percentage which will act in certain ways. A certain randomness seems to operate on this subatomic level. Hence, there is a case for indeterminacy.

This thesis of quantum mechanics is controversial. Albert Einstein never accepted it: "God doesn't play dice!" he said. Quantum physics may only indicate the fact that we do not know the causes operative at subatomic levels. We are only in the kindergarten of subatomic physics. Thus, the indeterminist may be committing the fallacy of ignorance in reading too much into the inability of quantum physicists to give causal explanations of subatomic behavior.

On the other hand, perhaps quantum physics should make impartial persons reconsider what they mean by *causality*, and whether it could be the case that it is an unclear concept in the first place. The fact that our notion of *causality* is vague and unanalyzed was pointed out long ago by Hume and reiterated in this century by William James, who wrote: "The principle of causality . . .—what is it but a postulate, an

empty name covering simply a demand that the sequence of events shall some day manifest a deeper kind of belonging of one thing with another than the mere arbitrary juxtaposition which now phenomenally appears? It is as much an altar to an unknown god as the one that Saint Paul found at Athens. All our scientific and philosophic ideas are altars to unknown gods" (James 1912, 147). Recent work by philosophers on the subject of causality has not substantially improved this state of affairs. The notion, while enjoying an intuitively privileged position in our noetic structure, is still an enigma (see Mackie 1974; Anscombe 1971; Ehring 1984).

Nevertheless, while the quantum theory and doubts about causality may cause us to loosen our grip on the notion of universal causality, it does not help the libertarians in any positive way; it only shows at best that there is randomness in the world, not that there is purposeful, free agency. Uncaused behavior suggests erratic, impulsive, reflect motion without any rhyme or reason, the behavior of the maniac lacking all predictability and explanation, behavior out of our rational control. However, free action must be under our control if it is to be counted as our behavior. The thesis of libertarianism is that as agents we are underdetermined when we make a purposeful, rational decision. All that quantum mechanics entails is that there are random events in the brain or wherever which yield unpredictable behavior for which we are not responsible.

#### THE ARGUMENT FROM MORAL RESPONSIBILITY

Determinism seems to conflict with the thesis that we have moral responsibilities, for responsibility implies that we could have done otherwise than we did. We do not hold a dog responsible for chewing up our philosophy book, or a one-month-old baby responsible for crying, because they could not help it; but we do hold a twenty-year-old student responsible for cheating because (we believe) he or she could have done otherwise. Blackbacked sea gulls will tear apart a stray baby herring sea gull without the slightest suspicion that their act may be immoral, but if humans lack this sense, we judge them as pathological, as substandard.

Moral responsibility is something that we take very seriously. We believe that we do have duties, oughts, over which we feel rational guilt when we fail to perform them. Yet there can be no such things as duties, oughts, praise, or blame of rational guilt if we are not essentially free. The following is the argument:

1. If determinism is true, and our actions are merely the product of the laws of nature and antecedent states of affairs, then it is not up to us to choose what we do.

2. However, if it is not up to us to choose what we do, we cannot be said to be responsible for what we do.

3. Thus, if determinism is true, we are not responsible for what we do.

4. Yet, our belief in moral responsibility is self-evident, at least as strong as our belief in universal causality.

5. Thus, if we believe that we have moral responsibilities, determinism cannot be accepted.

We must reject the notion of determinism even if we cannot give a full explanatory account of how agents choose.

In response the determinist usually admits that we do not have moral responsibilities and that it is just an illusion that we feel we have them. Yet we are determined to have such an illusion, so there is nothing we can do about it. We cannot consciously live as determinists, but why should we think that we can? We are finite and fallible creatures, driven by causal laws, but with self-consciousness that makes us aware of part (but only a part) of the process that governs our behavior.

#### COMPATIBILISM

There is another response to the problem of free will and determinism, one similar to Kant but perhaps more subtle. It may be called reconciling determinism or soft-determinism or compatibilism. It argues that although we are determined, we still have moral responsibilities, and its argument is based on distinction between *voluntary* and *involuntary* behavior.

The language of freedom and the language of determinism are but two different ways of talking about certain human or rational events, both necessary for humanity (one is necessary for science and the other is necessary for morality and personal relationships). The compatibilist argues that the fact that we are determined does not affect our interpersonal relations. We will still have feelings we must handle, utilizing internalist insights. We will still feel resentment when someone hurts us "on purpose." We will still feel grateful for services rendered and hold people responsible for their actions. The difference is that we will still acknowledge that from the external perspective the determinist's viewpoint is valid.

Walter T. Stace has argued that the problem of freedom and determinism is really only a semantic one, a dispute about the meanings of words. *Freedom* has to do with acts done voluntarily and *determinism* with the causal processes that underlie all behavior and events. These need not be incompatible. Mahatma Gandhi's fasting because he wanted to liberate India was voluntary, whereas a man starving in the desert is not doing so as a free act. A thief purposefully and voluntarily

steals, whereas a kleptomaniac cannot help stealing. In both cases each act or event has causal antecedents, but the former in each set are free whereas the latter are unfree. "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" (Stace 1952, cited in Feinberg 1985, 382).

Sometimes the compatibilist position is stated in terms of reasons for actions. The agent is free just in case he or she acted according to reasons rather than from internal neurotic or external coercive pressure. Yet our reasons are not things we choose; they are wants and beliefs with which we find ourselves. Since free actions are caused by that which is not a free act, we can see that our free actions are in a sense determined.

The argument for compatibilism may be formulated as follows:

1. The reasons *R* that someone *S* has for performing act *A* are not themselves actions.

2. *S* could not help having *R*.

3. Act *A* could nevertheless be free since it was not coerced by external causes.

4. Therefore, an action may result from having a reason which one could not help having, for example, a reason that one was not free not to have, and the action might nevertheless be free.

5. Therefore, we obtain the collapse of the argument for the incompatibility of free action and determinism.

The compatibilist challenges the libertarian to produce an action that does not fit this formula. Take the act of raising my hand at time  $t_i$ . Why do I do it? If it is a rational (i.e., free) act, it is because I have a reason for raising my hand. For example, at  $t_i$  I wish to vote for Joan to be president of our club. I deliberate on whom to vote for (i.e., I allow the options to present themselves before my mind), decide that Joan is the best candidate, and raise my hand in response to that judgment. It is a free act, but all the features can be accommodated within causal explanatory theory. Reasons function as causes here.

What would a free act be that was not determined by reasons? Consider the situation of coming to a fork in the road with no obvious reason to take either one or to go back. If there are no reasons to do one thing more than another, I have no basis for choice. I may still believe that doing something is better than just standing still, so I slip a coin in order to decide. This belief functions as my reason for flipping the coin. Similarly, I may flip a "mental coin," by letting the internal devices of my subconscious make an arbitrary decision. The alternative to these arbitrary "flips of the coin" is to be in the same position as Buridan's ass who starved to death while he was equal distance between two luscious

bails of hay, because there was no more reason to choose one bail over the other. Thus, the objections runs, all rational action is determined by reason, and libertarianism turns out to be incoherent.

The compatibilist joins with the determinist to the extent that he asserts that all actions have a sufficient causal explanation. Free actions are caused by reasons the person has and unfree actions are caused by nonrational coercion. What would it mean to act freely without reasons? What kind of freedom would that be? Would it not turn out to be irrational, hence arbitrary or unconsciously motivated action?

If our free acts are the acts that we do voluntarily because we have reasons for them, we can be held accountable for them. We identify with the springs of that action and so may be said to have produced them in a way that we do not produce involuntary actions. We could have avoided the action, if we had chosen to do so. Hence, we are responsible for it.

One particularly sophisticated version of this position is that of Harry Frankfurt, who in his article "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person" argues that what is important about freedom of the will is not any contra-causal notions but the manner in which the will is structured. What distinguishes *persons* from other conscious beings (which he calls *wantons*) are the second order desires which they have. All conscious beings have first order desires, but persons have attitudes about those first order desires. They either want it to be the case that their first order desires motivate them to action or that they do not motivate them to action. "Someone has a desire of the second order either when he wants simply to have a certain desire or when he wants a certain desire to be his will. In situations of the latter kind, I shall call his second-order desires 'second order volitions'" (Frankfurt 1971, 86). A nicotine addict may very well desire that his first order desire for a cigarette be frustrated or overcome, while a wife unable to feel certain sentiments toward her husband may have a second order desire that she would come to have feelings of affection for her husband.

Nevertheless, we should not confuse free will with free action.

We do not suppose that animals enjoy freedom of the will, although we recognize that an animal may be free to run in whatever direction it wants. Thus, having the freedom to do what one wants to do is not a sufficient condition of having a free will. It is not a necessary condition either. For to deprive someone of his freedom of action is not necessarily to undermine the freedom of his will. When an agent is aware that there are certain things he is not free to do, this doubtless affects his desires and limits the range of choices he can make. But suppose someone, without being aware of it, has in fact lost or been deprived of his freedom of action. Even though he is no longer free to do what he wants to do, his will may remain as free as it was before. Despite the fact that he is not free to translate his desires into actions or to act according to the determinations of his will, he may still form those desires and make those



determinations as freely as if his freedom of action had not been impaired (Frankfurt 1971, 90).

Hence, it makes no sense to define free will as the libertarians do, as those actions which originate in ways underdetermined by antecedent causes. Our wills are free just because we are free to have the will we want, whether or not we are able to act.

#### CRITIQUE OF COMPATIBILISM

The compatibilist may be accused of “wanting his cake and eating it, too.” The libertarian does not meet the compatibilist challenge head on, for he admits that we do not have a straightforward argument for libertarianism. Instead, he shows that compatibilism is simply a wistful sort of determinism. William James labelled it “a quagmire of evasion” (James 1912, 149). In his trenchant attack on compatibilism in his book *An Essay on Free Will* Peter van Inwagen argues that the compatibilist is simply an inconsistent determinist or a determinist who tries to smuggle in moral responsibility by virtue of an irrelevant dichotomy between voluntary and involuntary action.

The libertarian emphasizes that the distinction between voluntary and involuntary actions is beside the point, since we cannot be held accountable for antecedent causes and since all relevant features in any voluntary or involuntary action can be traced to antecedent causes. As van Inwagen states: “If determinism is true, then our acts are the consequences of the laws of nature and events in the remote past. But it is not up to us what went on before we were born, and neither is it up to us what the laws of nature are. Therefore, the consequences of these things (including our present acts) are not up to us” (van Inwagen 1983, 16).

Since according to the determinist (and the compatibilist as a determinist), all our actions are the results of antecedent causes, the notion of free action is simply honorific. It does not establish moral responsibility, so it merely “passes the buck” back to antecedent causes. The distinction between voluntary and involuntary actions is simply the difference between the determinist process that does *not* find assent in the will (which is also determined) and the deterministic process that *does* find assent in the will (which is also determined). How can we be responsible for that which we do not cause? We cannot; hence, we are not responsible for any of our actions since they can all be traced back to prior causes.

This reasoning applies to the compatibilist’s characterization of free action as “*S* could have done otherwise” = “*S* would have done otherwise if *S* had so chosen,” for, in reality, *S* could not have chosen to have

done otherwise in those circumstances. Hence, the conditional is irrelevant and freedom is not established.

#### THE COMPATIBILIST RESPONSE

While the determinist may admit with Darrow that strictly speaking there is no moral responsibility and that all punishment and reward functions as deterrent and incentive, the compatibilist wants to preserve the validity of the notion of accountability within a determinist framework. The compatibilist will still try to work out the distinction between voluntary and involuntary actions, and between rational and coerced behavior. Perhaps he or she will argue that the distinction is useful fiction or simply that we need to adhere to the notion of voluntary action as the basis of moral responsibility. Perhaps he or she should admit the paradoxical nature of the problem, refrain from giving it a solution, and merely state that we see things in these two different ways, from the viewpoint of agency (where responsibility holds) and from the viewpoint of determinism (where universal causality holds). Perhaps he or she needs to question whether we know what universal causality involves. On closer examination it turns out to be a rather fuzzy notion. No one has adequately defined it; it has something to do with necessary condition for another event, but that is not a clear concept, nor is it clear how this applies to individual actions. It may be a metaphor that is inapplicable to action language.

Whatever the answer to these questions, we seem to need the kind of attitude involved in holding a libertarian position. Peter Strawson has pointed out that it is intrinsic to the human condition to experience certain interpersonal, subjective attitudes such as resentment, forgiveness, and gratitude. Strawson calls these the "reactive attitudes."

The central commonplace that I want to insist on is the very great importance that we attach to the attitudes and intentions towards us of other human beings, and the great extent to which our personal feelings and reactions depend upon, or involve, our beliefs about these attitudes and intentions. I can give no simple description of the field of phenomena at the centre of which stands this commonplace truth; for the field is too complex. . . . [W]e may, like La Rochefoucauld, put self-love or self-esteem or vanity at the centre of the picture and point out how it may be caressed by the esteem or wounded by the indifference or contempt of others. We might speak, in another jargon, of the need for love, and the loss of security which results from its withdrawal; or, in another, of human self-respect and its connection with the recognition of the individual's dignity. These simplifications are of use to me only if they help to emphasize how much we actually mind, . . . whether the actions of other people—and particularly of *some* other people—reflect attitudes towards us of goodwill, affection, or esteem on the one hand or contempt, indifference, or malevolence on the other. If someone treads on my hand accidentally, while trying to help me, the pain may be no less acute than if he treads on it in contemptuous

disregard of my existence or with a malevolent wish to injure me. But I shall generally feel in the second case a kind and degree of resentment that I shall not feel in the first. If someone's actions help me to some benefit I desire, then I am benefited in any case; but if he intended them so to benefit me because of his general goodwill towards me, I shall reasonably feel a gratitude which I should not feel at all if the benefit was an accidental consequence, unintended or even regretted by him, of some plan of action with a different aim (Strawson 1963, 63).

We make a difference between cases where the agent is compelled or influenced by unusual stress or "neurotic" causes and "normal" cases where the agent could have performed differently (better or worse). We can take the objective perspective in the first case, excuse the subject, understand the causal mechanisms, and treat the behavior as impersonally derived events.<sup>1</sup> However, we cannot treat normal behavior in this manner without losing something precious, something vital to human interaction. Unless I take your intentions seriously as belonging to you, I lose something that is necessary to a fully human existence. I lose the personal aspect of relationships, for to view others as personal is to take their intentions seriously as demanding the reactive attitudes. Hence, even if determinism cannot be proved to be false, we still will have to take other people's intentions seriously, react to them spontaneously, and hold them accountable. Human existence, in its deepest interpersonal, nonmechanistic sense, cannot go on without the idea of freedom.

Let me conclude this analysis. The notion of the libertarian self which creates new actions which are themselves underdetermined by antecedent causes is an unexplained mystery—a little god standing apart from our normal explanatory schemes.

The theory of evolution tells us that wholly deterministic and physicalistic processes are responsible for whatever we are. But we are self-conscious beings whose inner experiences are not physicalist; they are mental. Hence, the fundamental mystery is how something as physicalistic as evolutionary process could result in something nonphysical—consciousness—from which freedom of the will emerges.

While the determinist cannot explain consciousness or how the physical results in and causes the mental, the libertarian is no further ahead, for no one has successfully explained how the mental can affect the physical. How does the mind make contact with the body in order to move it to action? Where are its points of contact, its hooks which pull on our brains and/or limbs?

In the end, perhaps the best we can do is to be aware of the fascinating mystery of the problem of free will and determinism and admit our ignorance of a solution. If we look at ourselves through the eyes of

science and neurophysiology, we will no doubt regard ourselves as determined. If we look at ourselves from the perspective of morality and subjective deliberators, we must view ourselves as having free will. As philosophers—which we all are, like it or not—we can simply wonder at the dualism that forces us to take both an objective/determinist and a subjective/libertarian perspective of conscious behavior. This dichotomy seems unsatisfactory, incompatible, and yet inescapable.

For myself, I do not know the answer to this enigma, so I do not believe in either the libertarian or the determinist position (and, remember, compatibilism reduces to determinism). Yet, I must live. Because I judge that the view we hold will influence our lives and, as it turns out, free will is the more useful and inspiring position, I choose to live as though we have some free will. I live, not with knowledge or belief that this is true, but in hope of its truth, *as if* it were the case. Free will becomes a living hypothesis which directs my life while my mind continues to be open to the wonder of this paradox which has, since the dawn of reflective thought, perplexed the very best minds.

#### NOTE

1. For a clear discussion of the problem of mechanism and freedom of the will see Malcolm (1968) and Dennett (1973).

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