Free Will: New Directions for an Ancient Problem

Robert Kane

Editor's Introduction

Robert Kane is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Texas at Austin. In the reading that follows he also attempts to give an intelligible account of libertarian free will, but in a way that differs from both traditional agent-causal theories, like those of Chisholm and O'Connor, and from simple indeterminist theories, like Ginet's, both of which he thinks fall short. The third libertarian option defended in this selection is often called causal indeterminism. Kane acknowledges that most libertarian views of the past have been agent-causal theories of one sort or another. But he agrees with Ginet in thinking that agent-causal theories fail to explain, essentially, needs explaining about indeterminist free will, and hence they leave 'the mystery of metaphysical freedom' still a mystery. But Kane also argues that we do not have to deny (as Ginet's simple indeterminism does) that explanations of action in terms of reasons or motives are species of causal explanation in order to make sense of incompatibilist free will. We can allow that reasons or motives cause actions as long as the relevant causal relations are not always deterministic (they may sometimes be non-deterministic or probabilistic). In short, 'undetermined' need not always mean 'uncaused' and reasons, like other kinds of causes, may influence without necessitating. Kane argues that a coherent view of libertarian free will can be developed along these lines, one that does a better job of reconciling free will with modern views of human beings in the natural and social sciences than alternative theories do. Kane also argues for a different approach to the compatibility question as well as to the intelligibility question. He thinks that

The Compatibility Question: AP and UR

In a number of writings over the past two decades, I have sought to answer four questions about free will: (1) Is it compatible (or incompatible) with determinism? (2) Why do we want it? (3) Can we make sense of a free will that is incompatible with determinism? (4) Can such a free will be reconciled with modern images of human beings in the natural and social sciences? On all four questions, I have tried to point current debates about free will in new directions. In this essay, I discuss some of these new directions.

Consider question (1) – the so-called compatibility question – which has received most of the recent attention in free will debates. The first thing we learn from these debates is that if we formulate the compatibility question as in most textbook discussions of free will – “Is freedom compatible with determinism?” – the question is too simple and ill-formed. The reason is that there are many meanings of “freedom” and many of them are compatible with determinism. Even in a determined world, we would want to distinguish persons who are free from such things as physical restraint, addiction or neurosis, coercion, compulsion, covert control or political oppression from persons who are not free from these things; and we could allow that these freedoms would be preferable to their opposites even in a determined world.

I think those of us who believe that free will is incompatible with determinism – we incompatibilists and libertarians so-called – should simply concede this point to our compatibilist opponents. Many kinds of freedom worth wanting are indeed compatible with determinism. What we incompatibilists should be insisting upon instead is that there is at least one kind of freedom worth wanting that is incompatible with determinism. This significant further freedom, as I see it, is “free will,” which I define as “the power to be the ultimate creator and sustainer of one’s own ends or purposes.” To say this further freedom is important is not to deny the importance of everyday compatibilist freedoms from coercion,
compulsion, political oppression, and the like; it is only to say that human longings transcend them.

This is one shift in direction for the compatibility question that I insist upon. But there is another of more importance. Most recent and past philosophical debate about the incompatibility of free will and determinism has focused on the question of whether determinism is compatible with "the condition of alternative possibilities" (which I shall call AP) – the requirement that the free agent "could have done otherwise." Most arguments for incompatibilism, such as the "consequence argument" of van Inwagen and others, appeal to AP. Critics of such arguments either deny that AP conflicts with determinism or deny that alternative possibilities are required for moral responsibility or free will in the first place. As I view these contentious debates about AP and incompatibilism, they inevitably tend to stalemate over differing interpretations of "can," "power," "ability," and "could have done otherwise." And I think there are good reasons for these stalemates having to do with the different meanings of freedom just mentioned. In response, I argue that we need to look in new directions. AP alone provides too thin a basis on which to rest the case for incompatibilism: the compatibility question cannot be resolved by focusing on alternative possibilities alone.

Fortunately, there is another place to look. In the long history of free will debate one can find another criterion fueling incompatibilist intuitions that is even more important than AP, though comparatively neglected. I call it the condition of ultimate responsibility or UR. The basic idea is this: to be ultimately responsible for an action, an agent must be responsible for anything that is a sufficient reason (condition, cause or motive) for the action’s occurring. If, for example, a choice issues from, and can be sufficiently explained by, an agent’s character and motives (together with background conditions), then to be ultimately responsible for the choice, the agent must be at least in part responsible by virtue of choices or actions voluntarily performed in the past for having the character and motives he or she now has. Compare Aristotle’s claim that if a man is responsible for wicked acts that flow from his character, he must at some time in the past have been responsible for forming the wicked character from which these acts flow.

This UR condition accounts for the "ultimate" in the original definition of free will: "the power of agents to be the ultimate creators and sustainers of their own ends or purposes." Now UR does not require that we could have done otherwise (AP) for every act done of our own free wills – thus vindicating philosophers such as Frankfurt, Fischer, and Dennett, who insist that we can be held morally responsible for many acts even when we could not have done otherwise. But the vindication is only partial. For UR does require that we could have done otherwise with respect to some acts in our past life histories by which we formed our present characters. I call these "self-forming actions," or SFAs. Consider Dennett’s example of Martin Luther. When Luther finally broke with the Church at Rome, he said "Here I stand, I can do no other." Suppose, says Dennett, at that moment Luther was literally right. Given his character and motives, he could not then and there have done otherwise. Does this mean he was not morally responsible, not subject to praise or blame, for his act, or that he was not acting of his own free will? Dennett says "not at all." In saying "I can do no other," Luther was not disowning responsibility for his act, but taking full responsibility for acting of his own free will. So "could have done otherwise," or AP, says Dennett, is not required for moral responsibility or free will.

My response to Dennett is to grant that Luther could have been responsible for this act, even ultimately responsible in the sense of UR, though he could not have done otherwise then and there and even if his act was determined. But this would be so to the extent that he was responsible for his present motives and character by virtue of many earlier struggles and self-forming choices (SFAs) that brought him to this point where he could do no other. Those who know Luther’s biography know the inner struggles and turmoil he endured getting to that point. Often we act from a will already formed, but it is "our own free will" by virtue of the fact that we formed it by other choices or actions in the past (SFAs) for which we could have done otherwise. If this were not so, there is nothing we could have ever done to make ourselves different than we are – a consequence, I believe, that is incompatible with our being (at least to some degree) ultimately responsible for what we are. So SFAs are only a subset of those acts in life for which we are ultimately responsible and which are done "of our own free will." But if none of our acts were self-forming in this way, we would not be ultimately responsible for anything we did.

If the case for incompatibility cannot be made on AP alone, it can be made if UR is added; and thus, I suggest, the too-often neglected UR should be moved to center stage in free will debates. If agents must be responsible to some degree for anything that is a sufficient cause or motive for their actions, an impossible infinite regress of past actions would be required unless some actions in the agent’s life history (SFAs) did not have either sufficient causes or motives (and hence were undetermined). But this new route to incompatibility raises a host of further questions, including how actions lacking both sufficient causes and motives could themselves be free and responsible actions, and how, if at all,
such actions could exist in the natural order where we humans live and have our being. These are versions of questions (3) and (4) listed above, which I call the intelligibility and existence questions for free will, to which I now turn.

The Intelligibility Question

The problem of intelligibility is an ancient one: if free will is not compatible with determinism, it does not seem to be compatible with indeterminism either. The arguments here are familiar and have been made since ancient times. An undetermined or chance event, it is said, occurs spontaneously and is not controlled by anything, hence not controlled by the agent. If, for example, a choice occurred by virtue of a quantum jump or other undetermined event in one’s brain it would seem a fluke or accident rather than a responsible choice. Or look at the problem in another way that goes a little deeper. If my choice is really undetermined, that means I could have made a different choice given exactly the same past right up to the moment when I did choose. That is what indeterminism and probability mean: exactly the same past, different possible outcomes. Imagine, for example, that I had been deliberating about where to spend my vacation, in Hawaii or Colorado, and after much thought and deliberation had decided I preferred Hawaii and chose it. If the choice was undetermined, then exactly the same deliberation, the same thought processes, the same beliefs, desires, and other motives — not a sliver of difference — that led up to my favoring and choosing Hawaii over Colorado, might by chance have issued in my choosing Colorado instead. That is very strange. If such a thing happened it would seem a fluke or accident, like that quantum jump in the brain just mentioned, not a rational choice. Since I had come to favor Hawaii and was about to choose it, when by chance I chose Colorado, I would wonder what went wrong and perhaps consult a neurologist. 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.

Defenders of an incompatibilist or libertarian free will have a dismal record of answering these familiar charges. 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. Immanuel Kant said we can’t explain free will in scientific and psychological terms, even though we require it for belief in morality. To account for it we have to appeal to the agency of what he called a “noumenal self” outside space and time that could not be studied in scientific terms. Many other respectable philosophers continue to believe that only some sort of appeal to mind/body dualism can make sense of free will. Science might tell us there was indeterminacy or a place for causal gaps in the brain, but a nonmaterial self, or what Nobel physiologist John Eccles calls a “transempirical power center,” would have to fill the causal gaps left by physical causes by intervening in the natural order. The most popular appeal among philosophers today is to a special kind of agent- or immanent causation that cannot be explained in terms of the ordinary modes of causation in terms of events familiar to the sciences. Free and responsible actions are not determined by prior events, but neither do they occur merely by chance. They are caused by agents in a way that transcends and cannot be explained in terms of ordinary modes of causation by events involving the agents.

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. 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. If we are going to make progress on the intelligibility and existence questions about incompatibilist free will, I think we have to strike out in new directions, avoiding appeals to extra factor strategies altogether, including special forms of agent- causation. To do this means rethinking issues about indeterminism and responsibility from the ground up, a task to which I now turn.

Indeterminism and Responsibility

The first step is to note that indeterminism does not have to be involved in all acts done “of our own free will” for which we are ultimately responsible, as argued earlier. Not all such acts have to be undetermined, but only those by which we made ourselves into the kinds of persons we are, namely “self-forming actions” or SFA’s. Now I believe these
undetermined self-forming actions or SFAs occur at those difficult times of life when we are torn between competing visions of what we should do or become. Perhaps we are torn between doing the moral thing or acting from ambition, or between powerful present desires and long-term goals, or we are faced with difficult tasks for which we have aversions. In all such cases, we are faced with competing motivations and have to make an effort to overcome temptation to do something else we also strongly want. There is tension and uncertainty in our minds about what to do at such times, I suggest, that is reflected in appropriate regions of our brains by movement away from thermodynamic equilibrium—in short, a kind of “stirring up of chaos” in the brain that makes it sensitive to microindeterminacies at the neuronal level. The uncertainty and inner tension we feel at such soul-searching moments of self-formation is thus reflected in the indeterminacy of our neural processes themselves. What is experienced internally as uncertainty then corresponds physically to the opening of a window of opportunity that temporarily screens off complete determination by influences of the past. (By contrast, when we act from predominant motives or settled dispositions, the uncertainty or indeterminacy is muted. If it did play a role in such cases, it would be a mere nuisance or fluke, as critics of indeterminism contend.)

When we do decide under such conditions of uncertainty, the outcome is not determined because of the preceding indeterminacy—and yet it can be willed (and hence rational and voluntary) either way owing to the fact that in such self-formation, the agents’ prior wills are divided by conflicting motives. Consider a businesswoman who faces such a conflict. She is on her way to an important meeting when she observes an assault taking place in an alley. An inner struggle ensues between her conscience, to stop and call for help, and her career ambitions which tell her she cannot miss this meeting. She has to make an effort of will to overcome the temptation to go on. If she overcomes this temptation, it will be the result of her effort, but if she fails, it will be because she did not allow her effort to succeed. And this is due to the fact that, while she willed to overcome temptation, she also willed to fail, for quite different and incommensurable reasons. When we, like the woman, decide in such circumstances, and the indeterminate efforts we are making become determinate choices, we make one set of competing reasons or motives prevail over the others then and there by deciding.

Now let us add a further piece to the puzzle. Just as indeterminism need not undermine rationality and voluntariness, so indeterminism in and of itself need not undermine control and responsibility. Suppose you are trying to think through a difficult problem, say a mathematical problem, and there is some indeterminacy in your neural processes complicating the task—a kind of chaotic background. It would be like trying to concentrate and solve a problem, say a mathematical problem, with background noise or distraction. Whether you are going to succeed in solving the problem is uncertain and undetermined because of the distracting neural noise. Yet, if you concentrate and solve the problem none the less, we have reason to say you did it and are responsible for it even though it was undetermined whether you would succeed. The indeterministic noise would have been an obstacle that you overcame by your effort.

There are numerous examples supporting this point, where indeterminism functions as an obstacle to success without precluding responsibility. Consider an assassin who is trying to shoot the prime minister, but might miss because of some undetermined events in his nervous system that may lead to a jerking or wavering of his arm. If the assassin does succeed in hitting his target, despite the indeterminism, can he be held responsible? The answer is clearly yes because he intentionally and voluntarily succeeded in doing what he was trying to do—kill the prime minister. Yet his action, killing the prime minister, was undetermined. Or, here is another example: a husband, while arguing with his wife, in a fit of rage swings his arm down on her favorite glass-top table intending to break it. Again, we suppose that some indeterminism in his outgoing neural pathways makes the momentum of his arm indeterminate so that it is undetermined whether the table will break right up to the moment when it is struck. Whether the husband breaks the table or not is undetermined and yet he is clearly responsible if he does break it. (It would be a poor excuse for him to say to his wife: “chance did it, not me.” Even though indeterminism was involved, chance didn’t do it, he did.)

Now these examples—of the mathematical problem, the assassin, and the husband—are not all we want since they do not amount to genuine exercises of (self-forming) free will in SFAs, like the businesswoman’s, where the will is divided between conflicting motives. The woman wants to help the victim, but she also wants to go on to her meeting. By contrast, the assassin’s will is not equally divided. He wants to kill the prime minister, but does not also want to fail. (If he fails therefore, it will be merely by chance.) Yet these examples of the assassin, the husband, and the like, do provide some clues. To go further, we have to add some new twists.

Imagine in cases of inner conflict characteristic of SFAs, like the businesswoman’s, that the indeterministic noise which is providing an
obstacle to her overcoming temptation is not coming from an external source, but is coming from her own will, since she also deeply desires to do the opposite. Imagine that two crossing (recurrent) neural networks are involved, each influencing the other, and representing her conflicting motivations. (These are complex networks of interconnected neurons in the brain circulating impulses in feedback loops that are generally involved in higher-level cognitive processing.) The input of one of these neural networks consists in the woman's reasons for acting morally and stopping to help the victim; the input of the other, her ambitious motives for going on to her meeting. The two networks are connected so that the indeterministic noise which is an obstacle to her making one of the choices is coming from her desire to make the other, and vice versa—the indeterminism thus arising from a tension-creating conflict in the will, as we said. In these circumstances, when either of the pathways "wins" (i.e., reaches an activation threshold, which amounts to choice), it will be like your solving the mathematical problem by overcoming the background noise produced by the other. And just as when you solved the mathematical problem by overcoming the distracting noise, one can say you did it and are responsible for it, so one can say this as well, I argue, in the present case, whichever one is chosen. The pathway through which the woman succeeds in reaching a choice threshold will have overcome the obstacle in the form of indeterministic noise generated by the other.

Note that, under such conditions, the choices either way will not be "inadvertent," "accidental," "capricious," or "merely random" (as critics of indeterminism say), because they will be willed by the agents either way when they are made, and done for reasons either way—reasons that the agents then and there endorse. But these are the conditions usually required to say something is done "on purpose," rather than accidentally, capriciously or merely by chance. Moreover, these conditions taken together, I argue, rule out each of the reasons we have for saying that agents act, but do not have control over their actions (compulsion, coercion, constraint, inadvertence, accident, control by others, etc.). Of course, for undetermined SFAs, agents do not control or determine which choice outcome will occur before it occurs; but it does not follow, because one does control or determine which of a set of outcomes is going to occur before it occurs, that one does not control or determine which of them occurs, when it occurs. When the above conditions for SFAs are satisfied, agents exercise control over their future lives then and there by deciding. Indeed, they have what I call "plural voluntary control" over the options in the following sense: they are able to bring about whichever of the options they will, when they will to do so, for the reasons they will to do so, on purpose rather than accidentally or by mistake, without being coerced or compelled in doing so or willing to do so, or otherwise controlled in doing or willing to do so by any other agents or mechanisms. Each of these conditions can be satisfied for SFAs as conceived above. The conditions can be summed up by saying, as we sometimes do, that the agents can choose either way, at will.

Note also that this account of self-forming choices amounts to a kind of "doubling" of the mathematical problem. It is as if an agent faced with such a choice is trying or making an effort to solve two cognitive problems at once, or to complete two competing (deliberative) tasks at once—in our example, to make a moral choice and to make a conflicting self-interested choice (corresponding to the two competing neural networks involved). Each task is being thwarted by the indeterminism coming from the other, so it might fail. But if it succeeds, then the agents can be held responsible because, as in the case of solving the mathematical problem, they will have succeeded in doing what they were knowingly and willingly trying to do. Recall the assassin and the husband. Owing to indeterminacies in their neural pathways, the assassin might miss his target or the husband fail to break the table. But if they succeed, despite the probability of failure, they are responsible, because they will have succeeded in doing what they were trying to do.

And so it is, I suggest, with self-forming choices, except that in the case of self-forming choices, whichever way the agents choose they will have succeeded in doing what they were trying to do because they were simultaneously trying to make both choices, and one is going to succeed. Their failure to do one thing is not a mere failure, but a voluntary succeeding in doing the other. Does it make sense to talk about the agent's trying to do two competing things at once in this way, or to solve two cognitive problems at once? Well, we now know that the brain is a parallel processor; it can simultaneously process different kinds of information relevant to tasks such as perception or recognition through different neural pathways. Such a capacity, I believe, is essential to the exercise of free will. In cases of self-formation (SFAs), agents are simultaneously trying to resolve plural and competing cognitive tasks. They are, as we say, of two minds. Yet they are not two separate persons. They are not dissociated from either task. The business woman who wants to go back to help the victim is the same ambitious woman who wants to go to her meeting and make a sale. She is torn inside by different visions of who she is and what she wants to be, as we all are from time to time. But this is the kind of complexity needed for genuine self-formation...
Responsibility, Luck and Chance

You may find all this interesting and yet still find it hard to shake the intuition that if choices are undetermined, they must happen merely by chance – and so must be "random," "capricious," "uncontrolled," "irrational," and all the other things usually charged. Such intuitions are deeply ingrained. But if we are ever going to understand free will, I think we will have to break old habits of thought that support such intuitions and learn to think in new ways. The first step in doing this is 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. Indeterminism is consistent with nondeterministic or probabilistic causation, where the outcome is not inevitable. It is therefore a mistake (alas, one of the most common in debates about free will) to assume that "undetermined" means "uncaused."

Here is another source of misunderstanding. Since the outcome of the businesswoman's effort (the choice) is undetermined up to the last minute, we may have the image of her first making an effort to overcome the temptation to go on to her meeting and then at the last instant "chance takes over" and decides the issue for her. But this is misleading. 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). 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. Similarly, the husband breaks the table as a result of his effort, even though he might have failed because of the indeterminacy. (That is why his excuse, "chance broke the table, not me," is so lame.)

Just as expressions like "she chose by chance" can mislead us in such contexts, so can expressions like "she got lucky." Recall that, with the assassin and husband, one might say "they got lucky" in killing the prime minister and breaking the table because their actions were undetermined. Yet they were responsible. So ask yourself this question: why does the inference "he got lucky, so he was not responsible?" fail in the cases of the husband and the assassin? The first part of an answer has to do with the point made earlier that "luck" like "chance," has question-begging implications in ordinary language that are not necessarily implications of "indeterminism" (which implies only the absence of deterministic causation). The core meaning of "he got lucky" in the assassin and husband cases, which is implied by indeterminism, I suggest, is that "he succeeded despite the probability or chance of failure"; and this core meaning does not imply lack of responsibility, if he succeeds.

If "he got lucky" had other meanings in these cases that are often associated with "luck" and "chance" in ordinary usage (for example, the outcome was not his doing, or occurred by mere chance, or he was not responsible for it), the inference would not fail for the husband and assassin, as it clearly does. But the point is that these further meanings of "luck" and "chance" do not follow from the mere presence of indeterminism. The second reason why the inference "he got lucky, so he was not responsible" fails for the assassin and the husband is that what they succeeded in doing was what they were trying and wanting to do all along (kill the minister and break the table respectively). The third reason is that when they succeeded, their reaction was not "oh dear, that was a mistake, an accident – something that happened to me, not something I did." Rather they endorsed the outcomes as something they were trying and wanting to do all along, that is to say, knowingly and purposefully, not by mistake or accident.

But these conditions are satisfied in the businesswoman's case as well, either way she chooses. If she succeeds in choosing to return to help the victim (or in choosing to go on to her meeting) (1) she will have "succeeded despite the probability or chance of failure," (2) she will have succeeded in doing what she was trying and wanting to do all along (she wanted both outcomes very much, but for different reasons, and was trying to make those reasons prevail in both cases), and (3) when
she succeeded (in choosing to return to help) her reaction was not "oh
dear, that was a mistake, an accident – something that happened to me,
not something I did." Rather she endorsed the outcome as something she
was trying and wanting to do all along; she recognized it as her reso-
lution of the conflict in her will. And if she had chosen to go on to her
meeting she would have endorsed that outcome, recognizing it as her reso-
lution of the conflict in her will.

Perhaps the problem is that we are begging the question by assum-
ing the outcomes of the woman’s efforts are choices to begin with, if they are
undetermined. One might argue this on the grounds that “if an event is
undetermined, it must be something that merely happens and cannot be
somebody’s choice or action.” But to see how question-begging such a
claim would be, one has only to note what it implies: if something is a
choice or action, it must be determined – that is, “all choices and actions
are determined.” Is this supposed to be true of necessity or by definition?
If so, the free will issue would be solved by fiat. But beyond that, there is
no reason to assume such a claim is true at all. Was the husband’s
breaking the table not something he did simply because the outcome
was not determined? Recall that “undetermined” does not mean “un-
caused.” The breaking of the table was caused by the swing of his arm
and, though the outcome was not inevitable, that was good enough for
saying he did it and was responsible. Turning to choices, a choice is the
formation of an intention or purpose to do something. It resolves uncer-
tainty and indecision in the mind about what to do. Nothing in such a
description implies that there could not be some indeterminism in the
deliberation and neural processes of an agent preceding choice corres-
dponding to the agent’s prior uncertainty about what to do. Recall from
preceding arguments that the presence of indeterminism does not mean
the outcome happened merely by chance and not by the agent’s effort.
Self-forming choices are undetermined, but not uncaused. They are
caused by the agent’s efforts.

Well, perhaps indeterminism does not undermine the idea that some-
thing is a choice simply, but rather that it is the agent’s choice. But again,
why must it do that? What makes the woman’s choice her own on the
above account is that it results from her efforts and deliberation which in
turn are causally influenced by her reasons and her intentions (for
example, her intention to resolve indecision in one way or another).
And what makes these efforts, deliberation, reasons, and intentions hers
is that they are embedded in a larger motivational system realized in
her brain in terms of which she defines herself as a practical reasoner
and actor. A choice is the agent’s when it is produced intentionally by
efforts, deliberation, and reasons that are part of this self-defining moti-
ational system and when, in addition, the agent endorses the new intention
or purpose created by the choice into that motivational system as a
further purpose to guide future practical reasoning and action.

Well, then, perhaps the issue is not whether the undetermined SPA is a
choice, or even whether it is the agent’s choice, but rather how much con-
trol she had over it. It may be true, as I argued earlier (in the discus-
sion of plural voluntary control), that the presence of indeterminism need
not eliminate control altogether. But would not the presence of indeter-
minism at least diminish the control persons have over their choices and
other actions? Is it not the case that the assassin’s control over whether
the prime minister is killed (his ability to realize his purposes or what he
is trying to do) is lessened by the undetermined impulses in his arm – and
so also for the husband and his breaking the table? And this limitation
seems to be connected with another problem often noted by critics of
libertarian freedom – the problem that indeterminism, wherever it
occurs, seems to be a hindrance or obstacle to our realizing our pur-
poses and hence an obstacle to (rather than an enhancement of) our
freedom.

There is something to these claims, but I think what is true in them
reveals something important about free will. We should concede that
indeterminism, wherever it occurs, does diminish control over what we
are trying to do and is a hindrance or obstacle to the realization of our
purposes. But recall that in the case of the businesswoman (and SPA gen-
generally), the indeterminism that is admittedly diminishing her control
over one thing she is trying to do (the moral act of helping the victim) is
coming from her own will – from her desire and effort to do the opposite (go
to her business meeting). And the indeterminism that is diminishing her
control over the other thing she is trying to do (act selfishly and go to her
meeting) is coming from her desire and effort to do the opposite (to be a
moral person and act on moral reasons). So, in each case, the indeter-
minism is functioning as a hindrance or obstacle to her realizing one of her
purposes – a hindrance or obstacle in the form of resistance within her
will which has to be overcome by effort.

If there were no such hindrance – if there were no resistance in her will
– she would indeed in a sense have “complete control” over one of her
options. There would no competing motives that would stand in the way
of her choosing it. But then also she would not be free to rationally and
voluntarily choose the other purpose because she would have no good
competing reasons to do so. Thus, by being a hindrance to the realization
of some of our purposes, indeterminism paradoxically opens up the
genuine possibility of pursuing other purposes — of choosing or doing otherwise in accordance with, rather than against, our wills (voluntarily) and reasons (rationally). To be genuinely self-forming agents (creators of ourselves) — to have free will — there must at times in life be obstacles and hindrances in our wills of this sort that we must overcome.

Let me conclude with one final objection that is perhaps the most telling and has not yet been discussed. Even if one granted that persons, such as the businesswoman, could make genuine self-forming choices that were undetermined, isn’t there something to the charge that such choices would be arbitrary? A residual arbitrariness seems to remain in all self-forming choices since the agents cannot in principle have sufficient or overriding prior reasons for making one option and one set of reasons prevail over the other. There is some truth to this charge as well, but again I think it is a truth that tells us something important about free will. It tells us that every undetermined self-forming free choice is the initiation of what I have elsewhere called a “value experiment” whose justification lies in the future and is not fully explained by past reasons. In making such a choice we say, in effect, “Let’s try this. It is not required by my past, but it is consistent with my past and is one branching pathway my life can now meaningfully take. Whether it is the right choice, only time will tell. Meanwhile, I am willing to take responsibility for it one way or the other.”

It is worth noting that the term “arbitrary” comes from the Latin arbitrarium, which means “judgment” — as in liberum arbitrarium voluntatis, “free judgment of the will” (the medieval philosophers’ designation for free will). Imagine a writer in the middle of a novel. The novel’s heroine faces a crisis and the writer has not yet developed her character in sufficient detail to say exactly how she will act. The author makes a “judgment” about this that is not determined by the heroine’s already formed past which does not give unique direction. In this sense, the judgment (arbitrium) of how she will act is “arbitrary,” but not entirely so. It had input from the heroine’s fictional past and in turn gave input to her projected future. In a similar way, agents who exercise free will are both authors of and characters in their own stories all at once. By virtue of “self-forming” judgments of the will (arbitria voluntatis) (SFAs), they are “arbiters” of their own lives, “making themselves” out of a past that, if they are truly free, does not limit their future pathways to one. Suppose we were to say to such actors, “But look, you didn’t have sufficient or conclusive prior reasons for choosing as you did since you also had viable reasons for choosing the other way.” They might reply, “True enough. But I did have good reasons for choosing as I did, which I’m willing to stand by and take responsibility for. If they were not sufficient or conclusive reasons, that’s because, like the heroine of the novel, I was not a fully formed person before I chose (and still am not, for that matter). Like the author of the novel, I am in the process of writing an unfinished story and forming an unfinished character who, in my case, is myself.”

Agent Causation

When I began discussing the intelligibility question several sections ago, I said I would avoid appealing to any “extra factors” to account for libertarian free agency, such as noumenal selves, transempirical power centers, or special forms of agent- or nonevent causation, that libertarians have often appealed to. The preceding account makes no such appeals. It does appeal to the fact that free choices and actions can be caused by efforts, deliberations, beliefs, desires, intentions, and other reasons or motives of agents. But this is causation by events or states of affairs involving agents. It is not the special causation of agent-causal theories that cannot be spelled out in terms of events or states of affairs involving agents, either physical or psychological. Moreover, causation by efforts, beliefs, desires, intentions, and the like is something that even compatibilists appeal to in their accounts of free actions and choices; and it is hard to see how they could give accounts of free agency without doing so. The case is otherwise with such things as noumenal selves, transempirical power centers, or nonevent causation, which are invoked specifically to salvage libertarian intuitions about free will and are not needed by non-libertarians.

This is what I mean by not invoking “extra” factors. My account of free will postulates no additional ontological entities or relations that non-libertarian accounts of free agency do not also need. It does postulate efforts, deliberations, desires, intentions, and the like, and causation of actions by these. But compatibilists must postulate these also if they are going to talk about free agency. The only added assumption I have made to account for libertarian free agency is just what you would expect — that some of the mental events or processes involved must be undetermined, so that the causation by mental events may be nondeterministic or probabilistic as well as deterministic.

Of course, if any such theory is to succeed, there must be some indeterminism in the brain where undetermined efforts and choices occur. But such a requirement holds for any libertarian theory. If free choices are undetermined, as libertarians suppose, there must be some indeterminacy
in the natural world to make room for them; and it is an empirical question whether the indeterminism is there. This is true even if one postulates special kinds of agent-causes or a nonmaterial self to intervene in the brain. The indeterminism must be there to begin with in the brain, if these special forms of agency are to have room to operate. As the ancient Epicurean philosophers said, the atoms must sometimes "swerve" in undetermined ways, if there is to be room in nature for free will.

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. Others have suggested different ways in which indeterminacy might be involved in the brain and free will. But such speculations are not entirely idle either. There is growing evidence that chaos may play a role in human cognitive processing, as it does in many complex physical systems, providing some of the flexibility that the nervous system needs to adapt creatively to an ever-changing environment. Of course, chaotic behavior, though unpredictable, is usually deterministic and does not of itself imply indeterminism. But chaos does involve "sensitivity to initial conditions." Minute differences in the initial conditions of chaotic systems, including living things, may be magnified giving rise to large-scale undetermined effects. If the brain does "make chaos to make sense of the world" (as one recent research paper puts it), its sensitivity to initial conditions may magnify quantum indeterminacies in neural networks whose outputs can depend on minute differences in the timing of firings of individual neurons. The general idea is that some combination of quantum physics and the new sciences of chaos and complexity in self-organizing systems may provide sufficient indeterminacy in nature for free will. But it is only an idea. The question is ultimately an empirical one, to be decided by future research.

What I have tried to do in this paper is answer a different, but equally daunting, question: what could we do with the indeterminism to make sense of free will, supposing it were there in the brain? Wouldn't the indeterminism just amount to chance? How could it amount to free will unless one added some "extra factor" in the form of a special kind of agent-causation or transempirical power center to account for agency? As a final test of the answer given to these questions in this essay, it will be instructive to conclude with the following question: what is missing in the account of free will presented in earlier sections that an extra postulate of a special form of nonevent agent-cause is supposed to provide? We could ask the same question for other extra factor strategies, such as noumenal selves, transempirical power centers, and the like. But most of these have gone out of favor in recent philosophy, while theories of nonevent agent- (or immanent) causation are still the most commonly discussed and defended libertarian theories today. So I will concentrate on contrasting agent-causal theories with the kind of libertarian theory I defend, which is often called causal indeterminism.

Let it be clear first of all that the causal indeterminist theory presented in this essay does postulate agent causation (though not of the nonevent or nonoccurrent kind). Agents cause or bring about their undetermined self-forming choices (SFAs) on this theory by making efforts to do so, voluntarily and intentionally; and agents cause or bring about many other things as well by making efforts to do so, such as deaths of prime ministers, broken tables, messes, accidents, fires, pains, and so on. Whether there is agent causation in general is not the issue here. What is at issue is agent-causation (hyphenated) - a sui generis form of causation postulated by agent-causal theorists that cannot be spelled out in terms of events and states of affairs involving the agents. It is misleading to frame this debate in such a way that libertarians who are agent-cause theorists believe in agent causation, while non-agent-cause libertarians like myself do not - presumably because we only believe in event causation. The fact is that both sides believe in agent causation. The issue is how it is to be spelled out.

And just as agents can be said to cause their self-forming choices (SFAs) and many other things, on the theory I proposed, so it can be said on this theory that agents produce or bring about their self-forming choices by making efforts to do so and produce many other things by their efforts and other actions. The point is worth making because defenders of agent-causation often claim that what causal indeterminist theories like mine lack - and what (nonevent) agent-causation is supposed to provide - is a conception of agents really producing or bringing about their undetermined free choices rather than those choices merely occurring by chance. But, as argued earlier, the mere presence of indeterminism does not imply that SFAs and other actions (such as the assassin's or husband's) occur merely by chance and not as a result of the agent's voluntary and intentional efforts. Of course, the causation or production in the case of SFAs is nondeterministic or probabilistic, since they are undetermined. But so it is also in the cases of the assassin and the husband who breaks his wife's table. And the burden of my argument was that such
nondeterministic causation can support claims that agents really do produce what they cause by their voluntary efforts and can be held responsible for doing so.

So we are still looking for what the postulation of non-event agent-causation is supposed to add to the picture that hasn't been captured. A perceptive recent defender of agent-causation, Timothy O'Connor, provides some further clues about this matter that are worth considering. Speaking to the issue of what causal indeterminist theories like mine lack that nonevent agent-causation is supposed to provide, O'Connor says the following. For causal indeterminist theories, "the agent's internal states [including reasons, motives, etc.] have objective tendencies of some determine measure to cause certain outcomes. While this provides an opening in which the agent might freely select one option from a plurality of real alternatives, it fails to introduce a causal capacity that fills it. And what better here than its being the agent himself that causes the particular action that is to be performed?" The missing element suggested in this quote is the "causal capacity" to "freely select one option from a plurality of real alternatives" that are left open by the (causal) indeterminism of prior events.

Now such a causal capacity is surely important. But why do we have to suppose that agent-causation of a non-event kind is needed to capture it? The fact is that, on the causal indeterminist view presented, the agent does have such a causal capacity. Not only does the businesswoman facing an SFA have a plurality of real alternatives from which to choose, she has the capacity to make either choice by making an effort to do so. The conflicting motives in her will and the consequent divisions within her motivational system make it possible for her to choose either way for reasons, voluntarily and intentionally. And this is clearly a causal capacity since it is the capacity to cause or produce either choice outcome (nondeterministically, of course) as a result of her effort against resistance in her will.

This is a remarkable capacity to be sure; and we may assume that it is possessed only by creatures who attain the status of persons capable of self-reflection and having the requisite conflicts within their wills. So O'Connor's calling it a form of "personal causation" (O'Connor, forthcoming) is altogether apt. But there is no reason to suppose we need to postulate a non-event form of causation to account for it. The capacity itself (prior to its exercise) is a complex dispositional state of the agent; and its exercise is a sequence of events or processes involving efforts leading to choice and formation of intention, which intention then guides subsequent action (of going back to help the victim or going on to a meeting).

This is a capacity of the agent, to be sure, but both the capacity and its exercise are described in terms of properties or states of the agent and in terms of states of affairs, events, and processes involving the agent, as I have done in the preceding paragraph and earlier in the essay.

Is there a residual fear functioning here that the "agent" will somehow disappear from the scene if we describe its capacities and their exercise, including free will, in terms of states and events? Such a fear would be misguided at best. A continuing substance (such as an agent) does not absent the ontological stage because we describe its continuing existence — its life, if it is a living thing — including its capacities and their exercise, in terms of states of affairs, events, and processes involving it. One needs more reason than this to think that there are no continuing things or substances, or no agents, but only events, or to think that agents do not cause things, only events cause things. For my part, I should confess that I am a substance ontologist and indeed something of an Aristotelian when it comes to thinking about the nature of living things and the relation of mind to body. Agents are continuing substances with both mental and physical properties. But there is nothing inconsistent in saying this and being a causal indeterminist about free will who thinks that the lives of agents, their capacities and the exercise of those capacities, including free will, must be spelled out in terms of states, processes, and events involving them.

Similar remarks are in order about O'Connor's (forthcoming) comments about "emergence" or "emergent properties" of agents (such as emergent causal capacities) in connection with free will. Issues about the existence of emergent properties (like issues about continuing substances) must also be distinguished from issues about non-event causation. Indeed, I also believe that emergence of a certain kind (now recognized in self-organizing systems) is necessary for free will, even of the causal indeterminist kind that I defend. Once the brain reaches a certain level of complexity, so that there can be conflicts in the will of the kind required for SFAAs, the larger motivational system of the brain stirs up chaos and indeterminacy in a part of itself which is the realization of a specific deliberation. In other words, the whole motivational system realized as a comprehensive "self-network" in the brain has the capacity to influence specific parts of itself (processes within it) in novel ways once a certain level of complexity of the whole is attained. This is a kind of emergence of new capacities and indeed even a kind of "downwards causation" (novel causal influences of an emergent whole on its parts) such as are now recognized in a number of scientific contexts involving.

But this kind of emergence characteristic of self-organizing systems does not, in and of itself, imply causation of a nonoccurrent or nonevent kind, since the wholes and parts involved are states and processes of the organism of various levels of complexity. Of course, O’Connor would like a stronger form of emergence, which would require nonoccurrent causation. But his argument — that some kind of emergence of capacities for holistic or downwards causation of wholes on parts is required for free will — does not prove the need for a nonevent kind of causation. Such emergence, which I agree is important for free will, can be accommodated within a theory of the kind I have proposed.

O’Connor (forthcoming) offers yet another argument when he says that what nonagent-causal theories lack and what agent-causation supplies is “the agent’s directly controlling the outcome” of an undetermined choice. This is the issue of control about which I have said a great deal earlier in this essay. What is it for an agent to have direct control at a given time over a set of choice options (e.g., to help the assault victim or go on to a meeting)? The answer given earlier is embodied in the idea of plural voluntary control. Stating it more precisely, agents have plural voluntary control over a set of options at a time when they have the (1) ability or capacity to (2) bring about (3) at that time (4) whichever of the options they will or want, (5) for the reasons they will to do so, (6) on purpose or intentionally rather than accidentally, by mistake or merely by chance, hence (7) voluntarily (in accordance with their wills rather than against them), (8) as a result of their efforts, if effort should be required, (9) without being coerced or compelled or (10) otherwise controlled or forced to choose one way or the other by some other agent or mechanism. Agents exercise such control directly when they voluntarily and intentionally produce one of the options (a particular self-forming choice or SFA) then and there (at the time in question) under these conditions. I have argued here and in other writings that these conditions can be satisfied for SFAs without appealing to any kind of nonevent agent-causation.

Moreover, these conditions of plural voluntary control are the kinds we look for when deciding whether persons are or are not responsible for their choices or actions (e.g., when they produce something voluntarily and intentionally as a result of making an effort to do so).

Finally, I want to consider an objection about control made to my theory by another agent-causal theorist, Randolph Clarke. Clarke argues that causal indeterminist theories, like mine, provide “leeway” for choice, but no more control over actions than compatibilists offer: and more control than compatibilists offer is needed to account for the genuine libertarian free will and responsibility. I agree that something more in the way of control than compatibilists offer is needed to account for libertarian free will. But I think the “more” control libertarians need is not more of the same kind of control compatibilists offer, but rather another kind of control altogether. The kind of control that concerns compatibilists is what might be called “anteecedent determining control” — the ability to guarantee or determine beforehand which of a number of options is going to occur. If free choices are undetermined, we cannot have antecedent determining control over them, for exercising such control would mean precluding them — determining beforehand just which choice we are going to make. (Even nonevent agent-causation cannot give us that.) What libertarians must require for undetermined SFAs is I think another kind of control altogether (that compatibilists cannot get) — namely, ultimate control — the originate control exercised by agents when it is “up to them” which of a set of possible choices or actions will now occur, and up to no one and nothing else over which the agents themselves do not also have control. This is the kind of control required by ultimate responsibility or UR and it is not something that can be captured by compatibilists, since it requires indeterminism. But neither does such ultimate control require nonevent causation, as I have been arguing. What it does require is the ability or capacity to cause or produce any one of a set of possible choices or actions each of which is undetermined (hence nondeterministically) and to do so “at will,” that is, rationally (for reasons), voluntarily and intentionally.

Note also that there is a trade-off between this ultimate control and the antecedent determining control that compatibilists want. To have ultimate control over our destinies, we have to give up some antecedent determining control at crucial points in our lives. We have to accept a measure of uncertainty and genuine indeterminacy right up to the moment of decision. Indeterminism does not leave everything unchanged, for it implies “the probability or chance of failure” — though with genuine free will, every failing is also a succeeding, so we are responsible either way. If libertarians were after the same kind of control that compatibilists have to offer — only more of it — then I would agree with Clarke. But I think that what motivates the need for incompatibilism is an interest in a different kind of “control over our lives” altogether — a control which has to do with our being to some degree the ultimate creators or originators of our own purposes or ends and hence ultimate “ arbiters” of our own wills. We can’t have that in a determined world.
Notes

1 See especially The Significance of Free Will (1996), which provides an overview of philosophical debates about all four questions over the past 50 years and further development of many of the ideas of this paper. Also, see an earlier work, Free Will and Values (1985) and the articles cited in the suggested reading after this essay and in the bibliography.

2 For a formal statement and defense of this condition, see The Significance of Free Will, chapter 3.

3 For defenses of this claim by these authors see the readings in this volume by Dennett, Fischer, and Pereboom.

4 Kant, The Critique of Practical Reason (1956), part III.


6 For discussion and defense of this view, see the readings in this volume by Chisholm and O’Connor and the suggested reading at the end of each of them.

7 See the preceding essays in this part by van Inwagen and Gineth.


9 We have to make further assumptions about the case to rule out some of these conditions. For example, we have to assume no one is holding a gun to the woman’s head forcing her to go back, or that she is not paralyzed, etc. But the point is that none of these conditions is inconsistent with the case of the woman as we have imagined it. If these other conditions are satisfied, as they can be, and the businesswoman’s case is otherwise as I have described it, we have an SFA. I offer the complete argument for this in The Significance of Free Will, chapter 8.

10 I show in greater detail that each of these conditions can be satisfied by SFAs in The Significance of Free Will, chapter 8.

11 That some such motivational system is necessary to define personhood and agency has been persuasively argued by Fred Dretske (1988), David Velleman (1992) and Owen Flanagan (1992). In The Significance of Free Will (pp. 137–42), I call the realization of such a system in the brain the “self-network.”

12 The Significance of Free Will, pp. 145–6.

13 Mental causation (or causation by mental states such as beliefs and desires) is itself a matter of controversy among philosophers. But I am making only two simple points about it here. First, since mental causation must be assumed by compatibilist accounts of free agency as well as libertarian accounts like my own, whatever problems attach to the idea are not simply problems for libertarian theories or theories like mine. Second, causation by desires, beliefs, etc., is causation by states or events and does not commit one to non-event agent-causation. I think both points are defensible. Some libertarians, who are simple indeterminists, such as Carl Ginet, would deny the first point (though not the second) since they argue that explanations of actions in terms of beliefs, desires and other mental states are not causal explanations at all. I disagree with this simple indeterminist view, but do not try to argue against it in this essay. See the preceding essay in this volume by Ginet and the suggested reading that follows it.


16 Skarda and Freeman. (See note 15.)

17 O’Connor (forthcoming).

18 See The Significance of Free Will, chapter 8 and “Responsibility, Luck and Chance: Reflections on Free Will and Indeterminism” (1999).

19 Clarke and others have also posed questions about the (dual) “efforts of will” that precede self-forming choices or SFAs on my theory. The SFAs are nondeterministically caused by these preceding efforts, but are the efforts themselves determined by the agent’s prior reasons or motives? My answer is that the efforts agents make in SFA situations are causally influenced by their prior reasons or motives, but they are not strictly speaking determined by those reasons because the efforts themselves are indeterminate, which means there is some indeterminism involved in the complex neural processes realizing them in the brain. Thus, the reasons do not determine that an exact amount of effort will be made. This means that indeterminism enters the picture in two stages, first, with the efforts, then with SFAs. One might say that, with the efforts, one opens a “window” of indeterminacy whose upshot is that the choice outcome (the SFA) will not be determined. But the primary locus of indeterminism is in the moment of choice itself, the SFA. The latter is underdetermined in a way that allows for robust alternative possibilities (making a moral choice or an ambitious choice). To prepare for this, a measure of indeterminacy enters the picture earlier, in the preceding indeterminate efforts. A related question: do the agents cause these efforts? No, not in the way they cause their SFAs, because the efforts are basic actions. Agents make the efforts, they do not cause them by doing something else. And what it means to say they make the efforts was spelled out earlier in the account of what it means to say that the businesswoman’s choice was hers. Finally, are the efforts freely made? I distinguish three senses of freedom, all
of which I think are required for a complete account of free action and free will: (1) not being coerced, compelled, controlled etc., (2) acting “of one’s own free will” in the sense of a will of one’s own making (i.e., satisfying UR) and (3) being an undetermined self-forming action or SFA. Sense (1) is compatibilist (and I think it is necessary for free will, though not sufficient); senses (2) and (3) are incompatibilist. Efforts of will preceding SFAs are free in senses (1) and usually (2) also; SFAs (the full flowering of free will) are true in all three senses.

Comments and Questions on Robert Kane’s “Free Will: New Directions for an Ancient Problem”

1. Kane argues that not all actions done “of our own free wills” have to be undetermined on a libertarian view. Only some crucial actions in our lifetimes which he calls “self-forming actions” (SFAs) have to be undetermined. On what grounds does he argue for these claims? How can one believe that free will is incompatible with determinism and yet allow that something may be done “of our own free will” when it is not undetermined? And what is special about “self-forming actions” (SFAs), as Kane conceives them, that makes them so crucial for free will?

2. It is natural to think that indeterminism or chance would undermine an agent’s control and responsibility for action. It is also natural to think that indeterminism or chance would make actions merely “accidental” or “random,” “capricious” and “irrational.” Kane argues that contrary to what we might suppose, none of these claims are true. How does he go about trying to show this? Do you think he succeeds?

3. A common objection made against all libertarian theories of free will, including the causal indeterminist theory presented in this reading, is called the “luck objection.” The objection has been forcefully stated in different ways by Bruce Waller, Alfred Mele, Galen Strawson, Ishiyaku Haji, Mark Bernstein, Richard Double, Bernard Berolfsky, and Peter van Inwagen, among others. It goes like this: if indeterminism is true of choice, then the agent could have made different choices given exactly the same past. Suppose two persons had exactly the same pasts up to the point where they were faced with a choice between lying or telling the truth. One agent lies and the other tells the truth. As Bruce Waller (1990, p. 151) puts the luck objection: if the pasts of these two agents are really identical up to the moment of choice and the difference in their acts is undetermined, would there be any grounds for distinguishing between them, for saying that one deserves censure for lying and the other praise for telling the truth? Wouldn’t it be a matter of luck that they acted one way or the other? Alfred Mele poses the problem in a striking way in terms of one agent in different possible worlds. Suppose in the actual world John lies. If he could have done otherwise given exactly the same past, then we can imagine that in another possible world, which is exactly the same as the actual world up to the moment of choice, John’s counterpart in this other possible world, call him John*, tells the truth rather than lying. Mele (1998, p. 582) then argues that “if there is nothing about the agents’ powers, capacities, states of mind, moral character and the like that explains this difference in outcome, then the difference is just a matter of luck.” It would seem that John* got lucky in his attempt to overcome temptation and do the right thing while John was unlucky. How if at all do you think Kane might respond to this “luck objection”? Do you think it can be successfully be countered by his view? Do you think the other libertarian theories we have considered, such as the agent- causation view or the simple indeterminist view, are subject to this luck objection also? Or would they escape it?

4. Other causal indeterminist theories of free will differ from Kane’s have been put forward by Alfred Mele, Autonomous Agents: From Control to Autonomy (1995) and Laura Ekstrom, Free Will (2000), among others. They differ from Kane in placing the causal indeterminism earlier in the process of deliberation — in the prior coming to mind of thoughts and other considerations relevant to choice or in the prior formation of preferences — rather than in efforts of will and final choices that conclude deliberation, as does Kane. Mele, for example, thinks the luck objection (discussed in the previous question) makes it difficult to say that choices which conclude deliberations can be controlled by the agent if they are undetermined. But indeterminism, he thinks, could enter earlier in deliberation without undermining control. When, for example, I am deliberating about whether to vacation in one place or another, various images, thoughts, memories, may spring to mind that incline me toward favoring one option over the other. These “comings to mind” of relevant thoughts and considerations may very well be undetermined without undermining my control over the subsequent choice. For, what I proceed to do with these thoughts and considerations to conclude my deliberation after they come to mind need not be undetermined and could be under my control. Assess the pros and cons of this alternative causal indeterminist theory in relation to Kane’s. Which do you think is preferable and why? Mele admits that his kind of causal
indeterminist account of freedom does not provide everything in the way of responsibility for choices and actions that libertarians (such as Kane, van Inwagen, Chisholm, Ginet, and O’Connor) might want. But he also thinks that because of the luck objection libertarians cannot get everything they want. Mele therefore argues that his modest libertarianism is the best that libertarians can do. Do you agree with him? Explain why or why not.

Suggested Reading