

Could I have taken the other road?

Libertarianism versus Determinism

Gregory Johnson

Robert Frost's "The Road Not Taken" begins,

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood

After a bit of pondering, the narrator finishes his account this way:

Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

The intervening lines complicate the interpretation of the poem a bit, but we can all relate to the situation described here. Two options—important or not so important—present themselves to us, we deliberate, select one of them, and then act. That we could have chosen the other option seems obvious. But could we really have done so?

The free will debate seeks to answer this question. *Will*, in the sense that it is used here, is the part of us that directs our deliberate actions. And *free* means that, when give two or more options, either one can be selected. (A broader sense of *free*—the one that we use to describe, for example, not being imprisoned or tied to a chair—is not the issue here.) If our actions are not free, then either (1) they are determined by prior events, which means that, in each instance, they could not have been done differently, or (2) they

are random, which means that, although they are not determined, they also aren't guided by our wills. (While we are clarifying terminology, we can also note that, usually—although not always—*an action is caused* and *an action is determined* have the same meaning, and, when they do, they the result is the same: the action could not have been done differently.)

Returning to the question 'Could we really have chosen the other option?', on initial reflection, it surely seems to you that you could have. As we will see, however, matters are not that simple. The response that probably seems unbelievable, that we couldn't have, actually turns out to be the stronger position. Let's see how we get there.

1. Determinism and libertarianism

The two central theories about the will are *determinism* and *libertarianism*. According to determinism, we do not have free wills. The central idea that underwrites this theory is *the principle of universal causality*, which states that every event, including every human action, is caused by an earlier event or events in accordance with the laws of physics. These earlier events can include brain or mental activity, and so the immediate causes of our actions will normally be neurobiological or psychological. But those neurobiological and psychological events will themselves have been caused by the events that surround us as we go through life or, perhaps, by genetic or other biological factors. One way or another, however, these various events determine our actions. As a consequence, if we had a complete knowledge about a person and his or her environment, as well as a complete knowledge of the relevant laws of physics, genetics, biology, neuroscience, and psychology, then, according to determinism, we would know with certainty which actions this person would take. As Henry Thomas Buckle put it in the 19th century,

If, for example, I am intimately acquainted with the character of any person, I can frequently tell how he will act under some given

circumstances. Should I fail in this prediction, I must ascribe my error not to the arbitrary and capricious freedom of his will, nor to any supernatural pre-arrangement, for of neither of these things have we the slightest proof; but I must be content to suppose either that I had been misinformed as to some of the circumstances in which he was placed, or else that I had not sufficiently studied the ordinary operations of his mind. If, however, 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.¹

Of course, we never have this kind of complete knowledge of another person, and we don't have a complete enough understanding of how the human mind works. (Although if you have known someone really well for a long time, you might notice that it is often possible to predict his or her behavior). But not being able to predict another person's behavior perfectly doesn't detract from Buckle's assertion that, in principle, these predictions can be accurately made because every action is caused by a person's "disposition" and the "events by which he was surrounded."

On the other side of the debate, libertarianism is the theory that we do have free will.² This theory maintains that some of the time—although not always—we act freely. It can still be that sometimes, or maybe even often,

¹ Pp. 18 – 19 in Buckle, H. T. (1872). *History of Civilization in England*, vol. 1.

² A possible point of confusion is the name *libertarianism*, which this theory shares with the political movement and party. Both have adopted the name because it is derived from the Latin word for free, but otherwise they have nothing in common and shouldn't be confused or conflated.

our actions are determined by our biology, or our habits, or our environment, but *some of the time* our actions are not determined. In those cases, at a certain moment in time, and with all prior conditions remaining the same, a person can do either action *A* or action *B*.

The narrator in Frost's poem chose one of the two roads. According to determinism, this person, at that moment in time, could not have taken the other road. Some aspect of his mind—an intention, a desire, an urge—caused him to select the road that he did. Hence, given that he had that intention, desire, or urge, and not a different one, his action could not have been different. Of course, if the narrator returns to that fork, he may very well take the other road, but at this later time he will, in a variety of ways, be a different person. In contrast, libertarianism maintains that the narrator could have, at that moment, taken the other road. Hence, although the narrator has certain beliefs, desires, and urges, they don't cause or determine one specific action.

2. The evidence

Obviously, the reason why most people believe that they have a free will is because, often, when we are faced with two or more options, we feel as though we can do either one. We consider, choose, and act, but as we do, it seems to be within our power to have acted differently. This, as compelling as it might seem at first glance, is not a very strong argument for libertarianism. As Ledger Wood explains, it just amounts to this:

P1. I feel myself free.

C. Therefore, I am free.³

But we can feel lots of things that don't mesh with reality. I may feel that I am an NBA-level basketball player, but that feeling, obviously, doesn't

³ P. 388 in Wood, L. (1941). "The Free-Will Controversy." *Philosophy*, 16: 386-397.

make me an NBA-level basketball player. What I need is other, independent evidence to corroborate my feeling.

Looking for evidence to support my feeling, however, quickly takes us to determinism. We can't know for sure if the principle of universal causality holds everywhere in the universe, but all of the evidence that we have points to it being true. Right now, I am seated at a desk in my office. When I look around this room, I am certain that every object was placed—that is, *caused to be*—in its present location. Similarly, when I look out the window, I am confident that every tree, building, car, and so forth got to where it is by way of a causal process, and those causal processes all obeyed the laws of physics. Nothing appeared uncaused, and everything is exactly where it should be according to the laws of physics.

As the philosopher Louis Pojman aptly puts it, “We cannot easily imagine an uncaused event taking place in ordinary life” (p. 399). Consider, for instance, this account of a car accident:

One day you read a news headline about a one car crash that occurred not far from where you live. You read on. The car was totaled, although luckily no one was hurt. In an unusual twist, however, the state and local police report that the crash had no cause. The driver did not do anything to cause it. The car itself didn't malfunction in any way. And it wasn't caused by road conditions, the weather, or any of the other vehicles on the road at the time. It just happened. According to the official police statement, “This is one of those rare cases in which a vehicular accident has no cause. Despite the seriousness of the crash, there was no event preceding the accident that caused it.”

Pause for a moment to consider whether you can imagine a car crash that doesn't have a cause. One that just spontaneous happens.

The story continues.

Despite the conclusion of the state and local police, however, the insurance claims adjuster assigned to the case insists that the investigation isn't over yet. "I am convinced," she says, "that this accident had a cause—the driver made a miscalculation, perhaps, or some part of the vehicle failed at an inopportune moment." And little bit later in the article, she states emphatically, "there isn't going to be an insurance settlement until the cause of the crash is found." That makes sense, you think. The crash must have had a cause. The police just haven't figured out what it is yet.

This story illustrates that we experience and understand the world through the lens of universal causality. And it's not just that some of the time we expect an event to have a causal explanation—for example, when there is a car crash or a new book is sitting on my desk. *All* of the time, we expect events to have causes. While discussing Immanuel Kant's explanation of why we believe the principle of the universal causality, Pojman comments,

Our mental construction demands that we read all experience in the light of universal causation. . . . [W]e cannot understand experience except by means of causal explanation. (p. 401)

This is, perhaps, a more sophisticated point than the libertarian's argument that 'I feel free; therefore, I am free,' but needing the principle of universal causality to understand the world doesn't thereby make the principle true. Moreover, our belief that every event has a cause conflicts with our belief that we have free wills. Both cannot be true, yet almost all of us readily accept both.

Moving beyond this stalemate brings us back to the observation that every event or state of affairs that each of us—scientists and non-scientists alike—has encountered has had a cause. We haven't observed every event in the universe, but collectively, we've observed quite a number of individual events. And every single one, or at least every one reported by a reliable source, has had a cause. Thus, from observing *this event has a cause*,

this event has a cause, this event has a cause, this event has a cause, and so on, trillions and trillions of times, we conclude that therefore, every event has a cause. We cannot be certain that this conclusion is true, but it's as close to certain as can be.

3. Libertarianism and actions

Since it seems to us that we usually do have the ability to choose among multiple options right before we act, we might think that an analysis of how we choose our actions would demonstrate the strengths of the libertarianism position. It is surprisingly difficult, however, to give an account of choosing actions that is consistent with this theory. To begin, let's consider what the libertarian does not want in a description of an allegedly free action. First, the decision to perform the action cannot be determined by prior events, including the agent's other mental states. It has to be possible that the action could have been done differently, and so the selection of the action can't have a cause that determines what it will be. Second, although the action cannot be determined by prior events, it also should not be random or arbitrary. When a person has the option to do action A or action B, whichever one she does can't be decided by a coin flip or some similar random procedure inside her head.

3.1 Uncaused events

So then, how does the libertarian describe the process that produces free actions? One possibility is that the process that produces an action begins with an uncaused event. Let's say that I am considering two options for the Thanksgiving holiday: (1) I can visit my sister in North Carolina and spend Thanksgiving with her family or (2) I can go to London with some friends. And let's also say that, in the end, I visit my sister in North Carolina. This version of libertarianism would maintain that my decision to go to my

sister's home in North Carolina was uncaused. It is what some libertarians call a *basic mental action*.

This explanation satisfies our first criterion: the decision, being uncaused, was not determined by any earlier events. Libertarians don't deny that I have many beliefs about my two options: what the trip will be like if I go to North Carolina and what it will be like if I go to London; how much I want to make each trip; how important travel time and costs are to me; and so forth. According to this account, however, none of these beliefs and other mental states cause—or force or push or tip—my decision. After all, the decision was uncaused.

At the same time, this account fails to satisfy our second criterion. If the decision just happens, if it's spontaneous, then we can't point to any reason why I am going to North Carolina instead of London. Of course, in this case it might seem that, even if I am randomly assigned one of these two options, either one will still appear to make sense. But if the decision really is spontaneous—and unmoored from my beliefs, desires, and other mental states—then, apparently, I could arrive at any decision. According to this account, I could just as well end up deciding to travel to Winnipeg or Santiago. Hence, we have to conclude, that according to this version of libertarianism, my decision would be random.

3.2 Caused by the agent

So far, we have used *caused* and *determined* interchangeably. *Caused* in this sense means *caused while following the laws of physics* (or any other laws of nature that we might want to invoke). If one billiard ball hits another and sends the second one into the corner pocket, it's clear that, given the laws of physics, the second billiard ball's location in the corner pocket was caused and it was determined. In other words, as soon as the pool cue hit the first billiard ball, the final location of the second one was set. The philosopher Roderick Chisholm, however, proposes *non-deterministically*

caused events. If an action is caused, but caused non-deterministically, then (unlike in the billiard ball example) it could have, with the same cause, turned out differently.

Using an example from Aristotle's *Physics* about a man moving a stone with a stick, Chisholm explains,

We may say that the hand was moved by the man, but we may also say that the motion of the hand was caused by the motion of certain muscles; and we may say that the motion of the muscles was caused by certain events that took place within the brain. But some event, and presumably one of those that took place within the brain, was caused by the agent and not by any other events.⁴

The precise event that Chisholm is unsure about, however—the one that was “caused by the agent” somewhere in the brain—is the very one that needs an explanation. Although we don't know everything about how the brain works, we know a lot, and we know that there is no little person in there somewhere pulling levers and turning dials: at one moment, pressing these neurons into service, and at another moment, coaxing other neurons into action. Pondering how we can make sense of an agent—or what we might call *the self*—causing events in the brain can get muddled quickly. Instead, let's turn to our two criteria.

The agent in Chisholm's account causes activity in the brain, but nothing causes the agent to act one way or another. Hence, although the activity in the brain is caused (by the agent), it is not determined. Let's say that it is *brain activity A* that causes the man to move his hand so that stick moves the stone, while *brain activity B* would cause the man to drop the stick and pick up a beer. Since nothing forces the agent to initiate *brain*

⁴ P. 8 in Chisholm, R. (1964). “Human Freedom and the Self.”

activity A instead of *brain activity B*, either one could happen. Hence, the criterion that the action not be determined is satisfied.

At the same time, as you might have foreseen, this account won't be able to satisfy the second criterion: that the action isn't random. Before directly addressing that issue, we might wonder if there is really a difference between this account and the previous one that invoked uncaused basic mental events. Chisholm, anticipating this objection, offers the following explanation—where A refers to the brain activity that causes the hand to move the stick.

The only answer, I think, can be this: that the difference between the man's causing A, on the one hand, and the event A just happening, on the other, lies in the fact that, in the first case but not the second, the event A *was* caused and was caused by the man. There was a brain event A; the agent did, in fact, cause the brain event; but there was nothing that he did to cause it. (1964, p. 10)

Chisholm takes this tactic to preserve the idea that the event has a cause. It is not supposed to be *indeterministic*—that is, “happening so to speak out of the blue” (p. 7).

But whether it's the case that nothing caused the brain activity or it's the case that nothing caused the agent to initiate the brain activity, our concern is why one motion was made with the hand instead of another. And to that end, the same problem that we discussed for uncaused basic mental events applies here as well. If nothing causes the agent to initiate *brain event A* instead of *brain event B* (or, if we want to put it in terms of mental states, if nothing causes the agent to initiate the decision to move the stone with the stick versus the decision to pick up a beer), then the agent does not have any reason for doing one or the other. Putting the same point in a different way, let's assume that there are reasons for doing both actions: moving the stone with the stick and dropping the stick and

picking up a beer. If, however, these reasons have no influence or impact on whichever chain of events the agent sets in motion, then whatever the agent does has to be initiated by a mental flip of a coin.

4. Determinism and actions

You might realize at this point that there is an inherent tension in the libertarian position. On the one hand, this theory holds that some of our actions are not caused by earlier events (including mental states). But on the other hand, if the decision to do an action is not caused, then it's spontaneous and random, which is not how anyone—libertarians or non-libertarians—wants to explain our actions. Determinism fairs much better here. Consider this example.

I have a class to teach at 10:00 am. I have the belief that the class starts at 10:00 am, I have the desire to be in the classroom a few minutes before it starts, and I have the belief that I will be there on time if I leave my home by 9:25 am. These mental states cause my action: leaving at 9:23 and heading to campus.

We can say that I *chose* to go to campus or *decided* to go to campus, but, given that I had those mental states and not other ones (and given that there were no other extenuating circumstances), it doesn't seem that I could have acted differently. If I had the belief that my class began at 10:00 am and the desire to be there, but, yet, I stayed home or went somewhere else, we wouldn't say that I was acting freely. We would say that I was acting oddly or, perhaps, psychotically. Hence, counterintuitively perhaps, for our actions to make sense and be meaningful, we need them to be determined by our mental states.

We might also consider a case where we are very aware of two competing options, and we have reasons for doing both.

Let's say that I have the option to visit my sister in Virginia or my sister in North Carolina. I would like to do both, but that's not possible. So, what causes my action? I have beliefs about when I last saw each sister, when, if not on this trip, I will be able to see each one, how much time and effort it will take to get to each of their homes, and so forth. I also know how much I want to spend a few days with each one and her family and how important travel time and costs are to me. Let's say that, ultimately all of these beliefs and desires weigh in favor of going to Virginia, and so I travel there.

In this case, I might just decide to flip a coin, but if I don't, then my beliefs have to be considered and my desires have to be weighed. But my mental states—the strongest desires and the best reasons—will still cause my action.

When we first encounter it, determinism seems cold and impersonal, but the world would be much colder and more impersonal if all of my beliefs and desires pointed me toward one action, but somehow, I found myself doing the other one.

5. Can you believe that the wall is red?

To complete the picture for determinism, it must also be the case that we do not choose our mental states. If we can, then, although they cause our actions, our actions could still be free. This may seem like an opening for libertarianism, but, in fact, it's generally agreed, by both determinists and libertarians, that we don't choose our beliefs, desires, and other mental states. Beliefs, for each of us, simply record what we take to be true. You can see this by trying a simple experiment. Assuming that you are inside, you can see the color of the nearest wall. In my case, I can see that it is light blue, and that perception causes my *belief that the wall is light blue*. Can I just choose to believe that the wall is some other color, say, dark green? I can

utter the sentence, “I believe that the wall is dark green,” but I can’t actually have that belief because that’s not the way that the world presents itself to me.

Of course, there are more complex cases, but they seem to follow the same rule. There are also instances when people change their beliefs, but those, as well, appear to follow the rule that beliefs must track the way that we think the world is.⁵ Take a belief that might seem to be one that you did choose: either (a) the belief that Jesus of Nazareth rose from the dead, or (b) the belief that Jesus of Nazareth did not rise from the dead. Whichever belief you hold, you didn’t acquire it in the same way that you acquired your belief about the color of the wall. Nonetheless, it’s just as clear in this case that if you believe (a), then you can’t just choose to believe (b), or vice versa. People do, occasionally, switch between (a) and (b), but when they do, it’s because they’ve read or heard something relevant that causes the change. It’s not because they just decided to switch beliefs. (Or if it ever were simply a switch without the person being exposed to new ideas or points of view, then, again, it would seem odd or, perhaps, a sign of psychosis. We don’t actually want our beliefs to change without reasons for them to do so.)

In addition to beliefs, our actions are caused by our desires, emotions, character, habits, determination, and, perhaps, other types of mental states. These sorts of mental states don’t represent information in the same way as beliefs do, but they do, in a variety of ways, push us toward one action or

⁵ There are also beliefs for which, because our information is incomplete, we only have a certain degree of confidence. For instance, I might have *the belief that I probably have a meeting next week*. That doesn’t really change anything, though. If my confidence level that I have a meeting next week is around 70 percent, I can’t choose to believe either that I definitely do have a meeting next week or I definitely don’t have a meeting next week.

another. We can see that we do not choose our desires, emotions, character, and so on, with the same test that we used for beliefs. Let's just take desires. Think of a food that some people really find appetizing, but you don't—for instance, maybe deviled eggs. Can you, all of a sudden, choose to want or desire deviled eggs? You can say that you want them. You can force yourself to eat them. And maybe if you eat them long enough, you'll find that they aren't as disgusting as you thought. But you can't just flip a switch and desire them. We have the desires that we have, apparently, because of some mixture of our experiences, upbringing, and genetics.