**DETERMINISM AND LUCK**

**NOTES ON SOME CONTEMPORARY DISCUSSIONS OF FREE WILL**

Determinism is the thesis that, from any point in time, there is only one causally possible future given the actual past of the physical world to that point, and that this future has been determined down to its tiniest details by the operation of non-rational, purely physical causes over which human agents have no control. The consequences of the truth of this doctrine for human existence are truly horrible to contemplate, which I suppose is why more people have not been willing to contemplate them. This essay is an attempt to force them to do so.

A survey of the recent literature on free will reveals a bewildering number of views on the topic ranging from positions that call themselves “libertarian” to a variety views describing themselves as compatibilist, to modern restatements of what used to be called “hard determinism.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Despite the wide number of views in the field, all of these views, regardless of what they call themselves, agree on two central points. First, all these views endorse naturalism, and indeed, physicalism. Human beings are wholly material beings, in no way possessed of any non-physical elements or powers, in such a way that both they and their behavior are completely integrated into “the order of nature.” Human beings are in no way “metaphysically special” and their behavior is ultimately explicable in the same way as that of any other being in the universe. Second, all affirm determinism as I defined it in the opening sentence of this essay. It may seem impossible to affirm this sort of determinism and still affirm “libertarianism,” but to suppose this fails to give sufficient credit to the power of the philosophical imagination. Whether one can do so sensibly, of course, is another question. We shall see; in each case, whether incompatibilist or compatibilist, proponents of these views contend that the sort of determinism I am worried about is no threat to our freedom – or at least, to any sort of freedom worth having. I shall argue that this is not the case, beginning with the consequences of determinism for deliberation and practical reason.

**The Consequences for Deliberation**

According to Hilary Bok, the truth of determinism leaves everything unchanged as far as deliberation and the function of practical reason are concerned.[[2]](#footnote-2) Since it is not possible for us to predict our own future actions, even if they are determined, we cannot know what we have been determined to do, and thus if we are to act at all, cannot evade the need for deliberation. As such, for purposes of deliberation, we can do no better treat all epistemically possible actions (all actions that, for all we can know, we can do if we choose) as genuine possibilities for choice.

On the other hand, if determinism is true there is only one action that I can perform at any given time (namely the action that I actually will perform at that time), and what that action is has been determined prior to my act of deliberation. Now suppose that I believe that determinism is true. In that case, in order to deliberate I must believe that there are a number of different actions I can perform if I choose to at T, while at the same time believing that there is at most one action that I can actually perform at T, and that this act has been determined prior to, hence independently of, my deliberation. These beliefs cannot both be literally true at the same time. Since determinism is a substantive, theoretical claim and excludes the possibility that there are more than one action that I can perform at any particular time T, the claim that there are a number of different actions I can perform if I choose at T cannot be *literally* true. To say, “There is more than one action that I can choose to do at T” is to say, at best, “There is more than one action that, for all I know, I have been causally determined to do by non-rational, purely physical causes outside of my control at T.” In such case, deliberation cannot be for the purpose of “deciding what to do,” “making up one’s mind,” “judging which option I have the best reason to do,” or “choosing,” unless “deciding what to do” (etc.) means something like “initiating a process that will reveal to me what I have been determined to do by non-rational, purely physical causes outside of my control.” Even this, however, is asking too much of deliberation – see below.

Further, my action of deliberation, being an action, is also determined by the operation of non-rational, purely physical causes over which I have no control. Thus, whether or not I deliberate prior to T will be the consequence of the operation of non-rational, purely physical causes outside of my control. In no way, then, is my “initiating” the process by means of which it will be revealed to me what I have been determined to do at T by non-rational, purely physical causes outside of my control something that it is within my power to do or refrain from doing at some point prior to T. Like all acts, it is something that I will do if I have been caused to do so by non-rational, purely physical causes outside of my control, in which case I cannot refrain from doing it, or something that I have been prevented from doing by non-rational, purely physical causes outside of my control, in which case my deliberating in that instance is not causally possible after all. If I believe that it is, I am simply mistaken: the truth of determinism entails that I can *actually* do only what I *in fact* do and that it was never causally possible for me to do otherwise.

Further, if determinism is true the course of my deliberation, my judgment about what it is best to do, my decision in light of that judgment, and my act of choice are all the products of the operation of non-rational, purely physical causes outside of my control. Thus, the considerations that occur to me, the weights I assign them, and all the other elements of deliberation leading up to judgment have the features they do and exert the influence they have on me solely through the operation of the non-rational, purely physical causes outside of my control that produce them. As such, if determinism is true I cannot change, direct, control, or contribute to the course of deliberation in any way and the process of deliberation must as be as mechanical as the operation of an adding machine. Deliberation can be nothing more than the process described by Hobbes, who converts deliberation from something I do to something I merely suffer. If it feels or seems to be different to me, then I am merely deluded.

More than this, every practical error, miscalculation, false judgment, erroneous decision, and incompetently enacted choice are also the products of the operation of non-rational, purely physical causes outside of our control and could neither be prevented nor avoided by those who make them. In the same way, deliberations, judgments, decisions, and choices that an ideal observer who was capable of judging to be error-free, correct, and competent from the rational point of view will themselves be the product of the operation of non-rational, purely physical causes outside of the actor’s control and thus merely a matter of luck, and a gift of fortune. If determinism is true, the agent in such a case has made no independent, irreducible contribution to that outcome and thus bears no causal responsibility for it.

It is also arguable that, if determinism is true, deliberation plays no essential role in the production of our actions even when we engage in it. That I will do some particular action at T was already determined by non-rational, purely physical causes outside of my control *prior* to my deliberation concerning it. This means that, at best, my deliberation is THe a means through which non-rational, purely physical causes outside of my control have brought about my doing that action at T. However, there is no necessity even in this. If I really am causally determined by non-rational, physical causes outside my control to do some action A at T, then my doing A is already in the cards regardless of the results of my deliberation prior to T. If I am indeed casually determined to A, then I will A, come what may. Thus, supposing that I choose to do some action contrary to A as a result of deliberation, it will nevertheless obtrude that some other factor, itself the product of the operation of non-rational, purely physical causes outside my control, will intervene to bring it about that I (e.g.) change my mind, forget, act contrary to rational judgment, etc. and do A after all. As such, my deliberation is not even capable in every case in initiating a chain of causes that will reveal to me what I have been determined to do by the operation of non-rational, purely physical causes outside my control. The only way for me to know what I will do at T is to wait and see what I in fact do at T.

**Determinism and “Multi-level Control”**

Bok suggests, and other philosophers such as Frankfurt and John Martin Fischer explicitly contend, that we can have a sense of “command” and “rational control” over our actions just so long as it is possible for us to exert second-order “rational” influence over our first-order, spontaneously arising impulses and desires.[[3]](#footnote-3) Bok suggests that, as long as it is possible for me to subject my deliberations, judgments, decisions, and choices to further rational review and reflection in order to confirm that they are in fact error-free, correct, and competent, no serious questions can be raised about the propriety of my use of practical reason even if determinism is true. For Frankfurt, I am free if I can do what I want and want the wants that I have, i.e. if my first-order and second-order desires coincide. For Fischer, who calls himself a “semicompatibilist” (sic), determinism rules out “regulative” control of our actions but not “guidance” control. The latter is the sort of control exercised by the agents who, in Frankfurt-style cases, voluntarily choose to the do the only action that is in fact available for them to do, one that is “reasons-responsive” and thus employs practical reason.

The difficulties with all these suggestion are obvious. First, as Susan Wolf points out, one could meet all of the above conditions even if one was *morally* insane or sociopathic.[[4]](#footnote-4) Nero, Vlad the Impaler, Marquis de Sade, Hitler, Stalin, and the average juvenile delinquent exercise guidance control over their actions, use practical reason to attain their ends, and have no second-order desires that inhibit their acting on their wicked intentions. They are, in this respect, at peace with themselves.[[5]](#footnote-5) Further, just like everyone else, if determinism is true their desires, characters, and so on are the product of the operation of non-rational, purely physical causes beyond their control. As such, they bear no causal responsibility for their condition. Wolf goes on to suggest that moral sanity (and Thomas Scanlon that subscription to his own version of contractarianism) is a necessary condition for full moral responsibility. This overlooks the obvious reply that whether or not one is morally sane or a contractarian of Scanlon’s stripe is, from the point of view of the operation of non-rational, purely physical causes outside our control, something for which we are not in any way causally responsible. There but for the grace of non-rational, purely physical causes outside my control go I; it is all a matter of luck. In that case, an appeal of this sort seems completely *ad hoc* and ultimately pointless,

Further, If determinism is true, my choice to review my deliberation, judgment, decisions, and choices from the second-order point of view will, if I actually make it, be the product of the operation of non-rational, purely physical causes outside of my control, hence no more within my power than any other act of choice. It will thus be either causally necessary or causally impossible for me and thus in no way up to me either to do or refrain given the way the world actually is. Further, if determinism is true, the outcome of this second-order reflection, whether correct or erroneous, will itself have been determined by the operation of non-rational, purely physical causes outside my control prior to my engaging in it. Thus, if I was causally determined to re-affirm my first order deliberation, judgment, decision, or choice I will inevitably do that and it was never causally possible for me to have done otherwise. On the other hand, if the operation of non-rational, purely physical causes outside my control has determined me to deliberate anew, suspend judgment, revise my decision, or alter my choice, then that was already in the cards prior to my beginning my second-order reflection, and it was never causally possible for me to have acted in accordance with my original judgment. In the same way, since every consideration pro or con my original deliberation, judgment, decision, or choice (as well as their impact on my consideration) is the product of the operation of non-rational, purely physical causes outside my control, I am no more in control of this second-order evaluative process than I was of the first-order process by means of which I was originally determined to decide what to do. In no case does my deliberation involve or provide anything like we would ordinarily call “guidance” to my action.

This is just as well, for two reasons. First, since my second-order reflection is just as much the product of non-rational, purely physical causes outside my control as was my first order-reflection, so too will any errors, mistaken revisions, or incompetent conclusions to which that second-order reflection leads. Once again, our having arrived at a correct evaluation of our first-order deliberations, etc. will be a matter of mere luck, since it will be entirely the product of the operation of non-rational, purely physical causes outside our control, and thus something to which we are unable to make any contribution that we were not caused to make by the operation of those causes. We ordinarily think that second-order reflection is more reliable than first-order reflection because it is more detached and objective. That, however, is because we suppose that practical reason is autonomous in its employment, and that rational judgment is the product of our apprehension of the facts, evidence, and logical properties of the arguments and explanations bearing on the situation of choice. If determinism is true, however, our rational judgments are always the product of the operation of non-rational, purely physical causes outside our control whose causal influence always precedes our formation of those judgments. Since this is universally the case if determinism is true, there is no way for us to escape the influence of these non-rational, physical causes outside our control. No matter how many levels we rise in the vain attempt to escape the operation of these causes, we can never attain a vantage point from which we can mediatize their influence and view matters from a purely rational point of view. As such, we have no more reason to trust the results of second-order reflection than that of the first-order operations of practical reason they are invoked to certify. While such sequences may involve a phenomenological “reasoning episode,” it hardly counts as “reason-responsive.”

I conclude from this that the evidential or justificatory value of the reasons that I think of as “swaying me to one choice rather than another” plays no essential role in the full and complete explanation of why I do what I do, and my impression to the contrary is merely an illusion. To the extent that these reasons do play any role in this matter it will only be an accidental and ancillary one through their association with the operation of a non-rational, purely physical causes that would be fully capable of determining my action even in their absence. As such, if determinism is true, even though we may act *in accordance with* reasons (if we are caused to do so by non-rational, purely physical causes outside our control) we can never act *solely from* reasons *independently* of the influence of non-rational, purely physical causes outside our control. As such, whether we act in accordance with reasons will, once again, be a mere matter of luck. Further, although we may be caused by non-rational, purely physical causes outside our control to believe that we are acting solely from reasons, if determinism is true this belief will be an illusion. It thus obtrudes that only a free agent can act solely *from* reasons; a determined agent can and will only act from those reasons he or she has been caused to act from by non-rational, purely physical causes outside his or her control. Further, no other reasons can actually move his or her will, given the actual past that precedes his or her choice.

Second, not only is the outcome of second-order reflection already causally determined prior to my undertaking it by non-rational, physical causes outside my control, so too is the action that I will perform subsequent to that reflection. Once again, if I am determined to do A at T, then I will do A at T *willy-nilly*, regardless of the outcome of my second-order reflection on my first-order use of practical reason. Now it may well have been the case that I was determined to do A at T because of the outcome of my second-order reflection on my first-order decision to do A. In that case, my second-order reflection would have functioned as an intermediate, instrumental, or *secondary* cause of my doing A at T. However, even if I had been caused by non-rational, purely physical causes outside my control to judge on second-order reflection that it would be better for me to do other than A at T, given that I really am causally determined to do A at T, some other non-rational, purely physical cause outside my control will inevitably obtrude and bring it about that I do A at T. Thus, my second-order reflection contributes to my subsequent action at most as a secondary, instrumental cause, and need not even do that. Even when it does, it does so only through being the concomitant of some non-rational, purely physical cause that is sufficient on its own to cause my action even had that concomitant been lacking.

In the end, practical reason amounts to very little if determinism is true, and exercises no influence, causal or otherwise, of its own. The causal powers of practical reason reduce to those of the non-rational, purely physical causes with which they are accidentally associated and, if physicalism is true, no other sorts of causes exist in the natural world. In that the case, the surprising result will be that, even in those cases in which my reasons are relevant to the explanation of my actions, this will only be because I have been determined to do A at T independently of the presence of those reasons. Those reasons themselves (which, after all, are only the accidental concomitants of non-rational, purely physical causes outside my control that just happen to be the instrumental causes of my action) have no autonomous power to determine or inform my actions, even if they could be seen to justify it from the point of view of an ideal observer like the one described above, providing that observer is capable of autonomous rational judgment independently of the operation of non-rational, purely physical causes outside that observer’s control.

**More on Determinism and Luck**

Philosophers used to argue that free will presupposes the truth of determinism, since otherwise all of our actions would be causeless and therefore random and unpredictable. “Hume’s fork” was used to suggest that the distinction “caused/random” was mutually exclusive and mutually exhaustive of all possible states-of-affairs. In the same vein, free will was rejected as unintelligible and self-contradictory on the ground that, since free choices have no cause, they are utterly inexplicable, or rather, to the extent that they are explicable, they are causally determined, and to the extent they are not causally determined, they are merely random or chance events. One rarely hears this sort of argument anymore; it is now widely recognized that arguments of this sort beg the question against the proponent of free will.

In using this argument, the critic of free will takes it for granted that the only way to explain something is to reduce it to determining causes, then faults the proponent of free will for not being able to meet the (impossible) demand to supply the determining causes of free acts. Such a strategy, unfair as it is, might be allowed to stand if there were no alternate way of explaining free choice, but this does not seem to be the case. One’s choice can be intelligibly connected to one’s desires, character, situation, etc. without being causally determined by them. They can *incline without necessitating* through being resistible on the part of the agent who experiences them, thus motivating us to act without excluding the possibility of doing otherwise. In turn, a free agent can select among the available possibilities by using his or her autonomous power of practical reason to deliberate about them and arrive at a rational judgment concerning which alternative is best to enact. The agent can then use his or her power of free choice act in accordance with the deliverance of that judgment. In such case, the fact that my action was rationally justified, or at least inculpably seemed to me to be such, explains why I did it, without the reference to causes of any kind. When I act against the counsel of reason, my action is not rationally justified yet nevertheless still explicable. In such case, I succumbed to some non-rational motive that it lay within my power to have resisted, one that was incompatible with my doing what reason approved in that situation. All of this is perfectly familiar and unproblematic to anyone who is not antecedently committed to the view that no action-explanation is acceptable unless it involves reference to deterministic causes.

More recently, however, Galen Strawson has perpetuated the same error in a slightly different form.[[6]](#footnote-6) According to what he calls “the Basic Argument,” moral responsibility is an impossible notion. I can be judged responsible only for those things that lay within my power to do. At the same time, an action can only be accounted mine, as something I do rather than which merely happens to me, to the extent that it is related to my desires, character, and so on. Given this, I can only be responsible for those actions that are produced by my desires and character, and thus, only if I somehow have had a hand in determining what my desires and character will be. Strawson supposes, however, that the fact that I possess the desires and traits of character that I do can be traced to the operation of deterministic causes outside my control. I do not choose my original genetic endowment, my parents, or the circumstances of my birth and early childhood training. It is from these that I acquire my original deposit of desires and character-traits, including whatever desires and resources I may have to alter my character in various ways. As such, since whatever modifications I have made to my own character were the consequence of the influence of desires and character traits not of my own choosing, it is only through luck or good fortune, rather than my own efforts, that I was able to alter my desires and character as I did, or at all.

Therefore, in acting in accordance with my desires and character to alter my desires and character in various ways, I am ultimately acting at the behest of forces outside of my control, and due to that fact should not be held responsible for my possessing those desires, traits or for the actions that flow from them. In the final analysis, I could be held responsible for my actions only if I was the *ultimate* source or cause of my original deposit of desires and character, and this would be the case only if I could create myself *ex nihilo*. This, of course, I cannot do because it lies beyond my power as a finite being. Therefore, concludes Strawson, I cannot be held responsible for anything I do.

I agree that this argument shows that, if determinism is true, no one can be held responsible for his actions. However, the more general conclusion that Strawson claims to have proven only follows because assumes the truth of determinism from the very first, even going so far as to quote Novalis’s dictum that “character is destiny.” If my original deposit of desires and character traits merely incline without necessitating, rather than deterministically causing my actions, then practical reason and the power of free choice will provide the agent with the ability to freely alter his or her character and desires in accordance with, e.g., rational judgments about the human ideal, the good for the human person, virtue, etc., freely chosen and adhered to by that agent. Of course, this ability will lie fallow if that person’s desires and character are so ingrained and tightly connected with each other that there is no potentiality for change of any sort in either one’s desires or character. However, scarcely anyone is in this situation; for most of us, our desires are a mass of competing and often mutually opposed inclinations and our characters so far from being fully formed as to be even so much as altogether closed in any significant respect. For nearly all of us there is arguably significant motive and resources for moral improvement. Those few people who are incapable of this are rightly seen to be beyond being blamed for their actions.

The surprising conclusion to our examination of this argument is that the very same considerations that constitute the rationality of human actions from the theoretical point of view represented by natural science at the same time make those actions merely a matter of chance and luck when viewed through the lens of theoretical reason. To see human actions as the product of the operation of non-rational, purely physical causes outside of our control that are subject only to impersonal physical laws makes those actions scientifically intelligible by integrating them into the course of nature, physicalistically interpreted. This same account, seen from the point of view of practical reason in light of some conception of the human ideal or the good for the human person, makes our possession of the desires and character-traits that make possible the pursuit of, and approximation to, that ideal a matter of luck and chance, mere gifts of fortune. Strawson is right to see that the second view is the consequence of the first, if it is true. The two perspectives are clearly incompatible. Thus far we agree. However, Strawson and I disagree about which of these views is true, and which ought to be abandoned.

**Physicalism and Free Will**

Strawson shares the common commitment to metaphysical naturalism with the majority of his colleagues and contemporaries in the philosophy of mind. Indeed, even philosophers with pronounced “libertarian” leanings, such as Robert Kane, John Searle, Timothy O’Connor, Alfred Mele, and Randolph Clarke refuse to call the dominant system of metaphysics into question, typically dismissing the very idea of the immaterial mind or soul with evident contempt.[[7]](#footnote-7) Since physicalism, the most widely accepted version of metaphysical naturalism seems utterly to exclude the operation of any but non-rational, purely physical causes from any ultimate, irreducible role in the explanation of human action, it seems difficult to see how there could be any scope for free will in the determination of human actions. However, these clever and resourceful men have resolved to try and in so doing have achieved some surprising results.

In every case, the account turns on the possibility that quantum indeterministic events occurring in the brain play some role in the production of our actions. If such events exist, and occur within the sequence of events that lead to the production of our actions, then the basic conditions for an action’s being free have been realized: the act is the product of my beliefs and desires and not wholly determined by non-rational, purely physical causes outside my control. Rather, my actions are caused *non-deterministically* in such a way that, in the actual situation prior to T, the moment in which I acted, something different could have occurred instead. On this view, it is no longer the case that my doing A at T was already in the cards prior to T and bound to happen regardless of what I did or decided to do prior to T. Arguably, one could say that if this view is correct, nothing wholly determines my action prior to my doing it, so that it is my very doing of A at T that is the ultimate cause of the occurrence of A at T. In this sense, I can even see myself as the agent-cause of my own actions, such as A at T!

Really, you gotta love it. Of course, not everybody does. Two common objections seem difficult to ignore. First, even if my actions are causally determined in a probabilistic manner by forces outside of my control, forces outside of my control still determine what I will do. This means that what I do still is not up to me, and hence not freely chosen or enacted by me. My actions are still causally determined, and it is that, not their predictability, that threatens to rob me of agency. Second, we assume that our power of agency gives us ultimate control and disposition over our actions. However, this model of agency does not secure that all-important feature of agency, as we ordinarily understand it. Indeed, it makes the acts I do even less “mine” than classical determinism does, by making my mental state prior to my action less determinate and more subject to caprice. If anything, I have less control over my actions on this “libertarian” view than I do on classical determinism, since the production of my actions contains an irreducibly and uncontrollably random element.

I draw two lessons from this. First, the primary threat to agency – free will – does not reside in, and the predictability of those actions, the absence of genuine alternatives, or the manner in which those actions are caused by non-rational, purely physical causes outside of our control. All of these notions can be rescued, as they are in the above models, without preserving the concept of agency/free will. The primary threat to free will resides, wholly and simply, in the notion that our actions are *deterministically* *caused* by non-rational, purely physical causes outside our control – period. As such, there can be no free will in a physicalist universe in which human beings are wholly integrated into the “order of nature” and denied any “metaphysically special” status. There is no way to avoid this result without calling the physicalist metaphysics into question. More than this, however, it is necessary to affirm the view that there are *no* efficient causes, physical or non-physical, of our actions. Rather, our actions must the consequence of free choice, which either determines itself in accordance with what reason requires, or fails to do so and as able to do so only in those cases in which the reasons, motives, and inclinations that inform those actions were resistible by the agent who determined his action in accordance with them.

Second, since there is no prospect of agency in a purely physical world, it follows that the agent must be more than merely a physical object. To the extent that in the last analysis material things are in nothing but physical objects, either the agent must be conceived of as an immaterial substance or as an immaterial power inhering in a material thing that has causal powers irreducible to those possessed by any material thing *qua* physical object. While the latter view is available in principle, I see no reason for adopting or attempting to work out the staggering difficulties inherent in such a view. Instead, the simplest alternative is traditional substance dualism, which is much less problematic than unsympathetic critics, animated largely by what Descartes would have called “preconceived ideas,” have claimed. However, that is a discussion for another occasion.

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1. For examples of the latter approach, see the writings of Richard Double, Saul Smilansky, Derk Pereboom, and especially Ted Honderich, e.g. “How Free are You?,” second edition, New York, Oxford, 2002. I will not be discussing these views directly here. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See Bok’s “Freedom and Practical Reason,” reprinted in Watson (2003), pp 130-166. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See Bok (*op cit*.), Frankfurt, “Freedom and the Concept of a Person,” in *The Importance of What We Care About*, 11-25, and Fischer, “Compatibilism,” in Fischer, *et al*, *Four Views on Free Will*, especially 51-7. Further discussion of this idea can be found in their other writings on this topic as well. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See Wolf, “Sanity and the Metaphysics of Responsibility,” reprinted in Watson, 337-51. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Indeed, when the psychoanalyst Alfred Adler worked with juvenile delinquents in Vienna in the early twentieth century, he found that they generally lacked any conscience or moral feelings toward others. They saw nothing wrong with what they were doing and were perfectly at peace with themselves in this respect. As such, as he put it, he had to make them neurotic by giving them a superego and introducing conflict and dissatisfaction into their souls. He had to first make them sick in order to cure them and in so doing, make them better people. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Strawson, “The Impossibility of Moral Responsibility,” in Watson, 212-28. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See, for example, Clarke, *Libertarian Accounts of Free Will*, 212. For his part, O’Connor favors emergentism, but stops well short of affirming the necessity of a Cartesian substantial self as necessary for genuine agency; see *Persons and Causes*, 116-7, 121. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)