

# **Determinism: Do Untutored Intuitions Feed the Bugbears?**

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**Abstract:** Philosophers have since long been relying on their own intuitions to shore up their own belief about agency and about the possibility of reconciliation with the domain of physical events that seems to be freewheeled by an underlying necessitarian process. In a certain philosophical circle, a trend has now emerged to put unprimed intuitions to test through psychological experiments, in order to figure out whether philosophers should exercise some temperance in bringing their own belief about agency to the fore, and the possible sources of the intuitional dilemma. This paper aims to explore the folk concept of agency and figure out the implications of the extant empirical work for our concept of free will.

**Keywords:** Determinism, Indeterminism, Compatibilism, Incompatibilism, Folk intuition.

“Something is inevitable *for you* if there is nothing *you* can do about it. If an undetermined bolt of lightning strikes you dead, then we can truly say, in retrospect, that there was nothing you could have done about it. You had no advance warning. In fact, if you are faced with the prospect of running across an open field in which lightning bolts are going to be a problem, you are much better off if their timing and location are determined by something, since then they *may* be predictable by you, and

hence avoidable. Determinism is the friend, not the foe, of those who dislike inevitability.”<sup>1</sup>

## 1. Determinism: The Prelims

There seems to be a subliminal fear among the philosophic fraternity, concerning the question whether the laws that govern the world of atoms and molecules may wreak a havoc on our free will and moral responsibility, if we ever discover that our acts are not as belief and desire-driven as we suppose them to be. Such undercurrent of apprehension forms the crux of the Problem of Free Will and Moral Responsibility. Daniel Dennett refers to this fear as a much-hyped “bugbear”<sup>2</sup>, a “nonexistent evil”, and a *raison d’être* of all the polemic and misgiving surrounding human agency. What exacerbates the issue of free will, that is, that whether free will is subjugated to the principle of determinism, is a lack of unanimity regarding the interpretation of determinism itself. In its traditional formulation, determinism has come to be known as the “thesis that the past and the laws of nature jointly determine a unique one among the possible or internally consistent futures to be *the* future, the actual future”.<sup>3</sup> Many philosophers have taken this definition of determinism to be suggesting that nothing could have been averted; nothing could have been done otherwise. Thus, if determinism is true, we are not left with any alternate possibilities and are therefore not free to choose, as on the determinist principle, all human actions are reduced to *inevitable* outcomes of the prior states of the world and the Laws of Nature that we seem to have no control over. Libertarians, for instance, believe that determinism comes intertwined with this implication. They make the claim that a choice or a decision can be rightly claimed untrammelled only if the agent in question can aver that “I could have done otherwise” (the famous CDO principle that has for long invited a skein of arguments both for and against it) and therefore, raise objection to determinism construed this way. The apprehension that seems to drive them

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<sup>1</sup> Dennett: 2003, p.60.

<sup>2</sup> For a brief but insightful discussion on how some of the misgivings underlying our concept of free will and moral responsibility as pitted against determinism are misplaced, see Dennett: 1984b, pp.7-15.

<sup>3</sup> Van Inwagen: 1983, p. 190.

is that the sphere of human agency involving choices and decisions is not amenable to any *inevitability* which determinism conspicuously demands or so they think. However, such apprehension may emerge as a result of conflating determinism with fatalism,<sup>4</sup> often called the logical determinism. Eddy Nahmias seeks to allay what, according to him is a misconception about determinism- the conception that determinism invites *predestinarianism* or *necessitarianism*, so to speak. He is rather in favor of highlighting the causative factor of determinism. He writes something to this effect:

“Determinism entails that  $[(Po \ \& \ L) \supset P]$  – i.e., necessarily, *given* the actual past state of affairs (Po) and the actual laws of nature (L), there is only one possible present state of affairs (P). But determinism does *not* entail (fatalism) that  $\Box P$  (or that  $\Box Po$  or  $\Box L$ ) – i.e., that the actual state of affairs (or the actual past or laws) are necessary (could not be otherwise).”<sup>5</sup>

Again, Dennett suggests that determinism gives us a predictive power that may not ride on *inevitability*. The citation from Dennett (1984) used at the beginning of this chapter reflects this view. He notes that it may not be within our capacity to turn back the repercussions of an undetermined event, say, a thunderbolt striking me, which really comes across as a bolt from the blue, as it were. Nevertheless, we can certainly avert the event in question, if, for example, we have the knowledge about the exact location where and the exact timing when the thunderbolt would strike (which are something determined by physical laws and conditions) and thereby may turn the results. Determinism, then, according to Dennett, does not embrace inevitability.

However, there are philosophers who would counter the idea that determinism entails predictability. They would point out that since

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<sup>4</sup> Fatalism at the first blush may appear nothing more than a tautology as it claims that “what will be, will be”, but the Cartesian concept of causality seems to give fatalism some more weightage. As Jennifer Trusted (1984) notes: “If we accept that all events are causally related and that the relations exemplify immutable laws of nature, then all events are determined and, at least in principle, predictable. Everything that does happen must inevitably have been going to happen” (pp. 48-49).

<sup>5</sup> Nahmias: 2006, p. 222.

determinism claims, “everything that happens is completely caused by what happens earlier”, any lapse in understanding any of these preconditions or prior causal states would spoil our chances of making prediction about a particular event. They would point out the case of a chaotic system (and we cannot rule out the possibility that most physical systems are chaotic) whose later states may well be determined by its earlier states, but “the connection is so delicate that the slightest error in describing an earlier state can lead to an enormous error in predicting a later state.”<sup>6</sup>

It does not exactly come within the ambit of this paper to delve into the deep and unsettled imbroglio regarding the interpretation and corollaries of the thesis of determinism. We would, however, accept that there is a common thread that binds the different variants of determinism - that “everything that happens is completely determined by what happens earlier”, be it the physical laws (in case of physical events), or the intentional states like belief, desire etc. or the neural states (in case of mentalistic events and human actions).

A brief account of the different forms of determinism now seems to be due. The type of determinism discussed in the foregoing paragraph is better known as the Physical Law Determinism. However, different species of determinism are available across the board. Anthony Kenny in his *The Metaphysics of Mind* has classified all the versions of determinism viz. Fatalism which rests on the tautologous truth of “what will be, will be”, Theological Determinism or Predestinarianism according to which whatever happens, happens necessarily owing to God’s prescience and omniscience, Psychological Determinism that hinges on the notion that human behaviour is the outcome of internal motivating forces operating in the mind and Physiological Determinism, which says that all human activity is the invariable resultant of brain states<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> Morton: 2004, p. 374.

<sup>7</sup> Kenny, op.cit. Ch.10.

## **2. Determinism on Free Will and Moral Responsibility: Philosopher's Dilemma**

It will now be convenient to ramify different existing stances about free will and moral responsibility<sup>8</sup> that rest on either the truth or falsity of determinism, so that the folk psychological beliefs and intuitions regarding the same can be positioned vis-à-vis the well fleshed out theories developed by philosophers.

### *2.1. Incompatibilism*

This makes the claim that if determinism is true, no human actions are free and the practice of praise and reward, blame and punishment is rendered useless. To use Strawson's term, the pessimists endorse such skeptical view about our ability to have free will at our disposal:

“Some philosophers say they do not know what the thesis of determinism is. Others say, or imply, that they do know what it is. Of these, some - the pessimists perhaps - hold that if the thesis is true, then the concepts of moral obligation and responsibility really have no application, and the practices of punishing and blaming, of expressing moral condemnation and approval, are really unjustified.”<sup>9</sup>

Now incompatibilists can run their argument in two opposite directions based first on the truth of determinism and second on the falsity of determinism. The Hard Determinists show the incompatibility between determinism and free will (allied with moral responsibility) in the following manner:

*I. If determinism is true, none acts freely and none can be morally responsible for what one does.*

*II. Determinism is true.*

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<sup>8</sup> For a simplistic account of Compatibilism and Incompatibilism see Morton: 2004, pp. 375-377.

<sup>9</sup> Strawson: 1980, p.1.

*III. Therefore, none acts freely and none is morally responsible for what one does.*

The Libertarians, on the other hand, construe the incompatibility in question in the following way:

*I. If determinism is true, then none acts freely and none is morally accountable.*

*II. We have the power to act freely and thus can be held morally responsible, our choices being subject not to physical laws but to the causally efficacious operations of will.*

*III. Therefore, determinism is not true.*

It may be noted that it is indeterminism enshrined in the second premise of the Libertarians, which they make a cornerstone of their thesis. What do we mean by indeterminism? Just as determinism claims that the known physical laws and a particular state of affairs in the past ensure the entailment of a particular future state of affairs, what indeterminism entails is unpredictability, or, at best, a probable outcome of events. Indeterminism may not deny that events of the world have causes i.e. one set of events preceding another set of events; what it denies is the clause of ‘necessity’, that it is necessary that from a certain set of events certain other set of events would invariably follow, without any exception. The notion of indeterminism has been made famous by Quantum Theory - a twentieth century development in Physics. According to the Heisenberg’s Uncertainty Principle, elementary particles are given to “random swerves”; predictable deterministic laws not exactly explain their behavior from quantum jumps in atoms to radioactive decay. Their movement at best can be called stochastic and their exact positions and momenta may not be known by an intelligent system.

In light of the foregoing discussion, it can now be understood why Libertarians pin so much hope on indeterminism, as can be found from what they claim in the second premise of their argument. They believe that alternative possibilities i.e. the agent’s *power to do otherwise*, is a necessary condition for acting freely and the truth of determinism precludes this *power*

*to do otherwise*. It must then be indeterminism, whose hallmark is stochasticity that can be taken to be compatible with our concepts of freedom of action as it is on the principle of indeterminism that alternate possibility, the possibility that *we can act otherwise* gains ground.

## 2.2. Compatibilism

Compatibilism can be broadly defined as the thesis that the truth of determinism does in no way undermine our natural abilities to act and make decisions. Compatibilism is sometimes called a close sibling of Hard Determinism in that the former tries to uphold the case of free will and moral responsibility, without contravening determinism and is thus sometimes referred to as Soft Determinism. The position, in addition to allaying the metaphysical burden, also exudes some optimism. To quote Strawson once again:

“[...] the optimists perhaps—hold that these concepts and practices [the concepts of reward and punishment] in no way lose their *raison d’être* if the thesis of determinism is true.”<sup>10</sup>

There may be several variants of Compatibilism depending on which form of determinism (say, Psychological Determinism or Physiological or Genetic Determinism) one prefers to go with. Hume, for example, is a classical compatibilist who envisages no inconsistency between the concept of determinism (he supports Psychological Determinism) and the concept of free will insofar as our decisions are determined by our will. He says:

“By liberty, then, we can only mean *a power of acting or not acting, according to the determinations of the will*; that is, if we choose to remain at rest, we may; if we choose to move, we also may.”<sup>11</sup>

A crucial question in understanding folk intuitions concerning human agency is whether they regard their own choices as deterministic or

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<sup>10</sup> Strawson, *op.cit.* p.1.

<sup>11</sup> Hume : 1994. Section VIII, Part 1, p.77.

indeterministic. Let us now turn to the next section that would address this question through the presentation of a series of recent experiments on lay intuitions.

### **3. Are Choice-making Events at par with Purely Physical Events? A Survey of Folk Intuitions**

According to the exponents of the Descriptive Project, finding out whether the laypeople view the realm of human behavior as something fixed (deterministic) or something probable (indeterministic) with alternatives open to them, will set the stage for one of the major questions to be addressed in this dissertation- the question of whether untutored intuitions are more predisposed towards Compatibilism or Incompatibilism. It is to be noted here that by the term laypeople, reference is being made to those who have not been introduced to the philosophical technicalities concerning determinism and free will and the allied concept of moral responsibility. The objective of this particular segment of the project is to find out whether non-philosophers perceive any fundamental difference between purely physical events and human choice events. Uncovering whether they brand the latter category of events deterministic or indeterministic may enable us to figure out which theory (Compatibilism or Incompatibilism) has more preponderance. The exponents of this ambitious research project spearheaded by Shaun Nichols, Joshua Knobe, Adina Roskies et al on one hand and Eddy Nahmias, Thomas Nadelhoffer, Jason Turner et al on the other, are hopeful that this project has all the potential to give them a better grounding to address the following:

“a) why people believe what they do regarding issues relevant to philosophical debates, (b) why people sometimes express conflicting beliefs, (c) why some mechanisms that generate beliefs more reliably track the truth (or at least generate more consistent beliefs) than other mechanisms, and potentially (d) why certain philosophical debates may



derive in part from conflicting intuitions generated by competing psychological mechanisms.”<sup>12</sup>

### 3.1. *Unravelling Indeterministic Intuitions*

Let us now shift our focus to the findings of the Descriptive Project.<sup>13</sup>

a) Participants in this experiment run by Nichols were given descriptions of two universes and subsequently asked which of the two universes they judge more akin to their own. Care was taken to couch determinism and indeterminism in a fashion that would not pose any difficulty for the volunteers, all of whom were university undergraduates. In Figure 1, the first box shows that given that *everything up until the occurrence of any event including human choices was the same* (denoted by PL+ PC) [PL here stands for physical laws, whereas PC stands for past conditions], the event that “Mary decided to have French Fries” *had to happen the way it did* (denoted by the arrow) provided that the antecedent conditions remained the same. On the contrary, the same rule applies to all else except for a class of events that involves human choices and decisions that explicitly require mental exertions and only implicitly, physical manipulations in universe B. The rules of the latter universe does not make it necessary that Mary would decide to have French fries, if she, at all, wants to have something; she may opt for something different instead, although *everything in the universe was exactly the same* up until Mary made her decision (see the second box, Figure 1). The outcome of the experiment was that the majority (more than 90%) of the participants marked universe B as their answer. The provisional conclusion for Nichols therefore was to draw that at least some people think that such mental events as choice-making do not come under the purview of causal laws and prior states of affairs (deterministic law was interpreted in the experiment as: *if everything in the*

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<sup>12</sup> Nahmias, op.cit. pp. 216-217. For more on the merit of the Descriptive Project see Nichols: 2006.

<sup>13</sup> Details of the empirical evidence presented here can be found in Nichols & Knobe: 2007, Nichols: 2006 and Nichols: 2004a respectively.

world was same up until a particular event was made, the event had to happen)

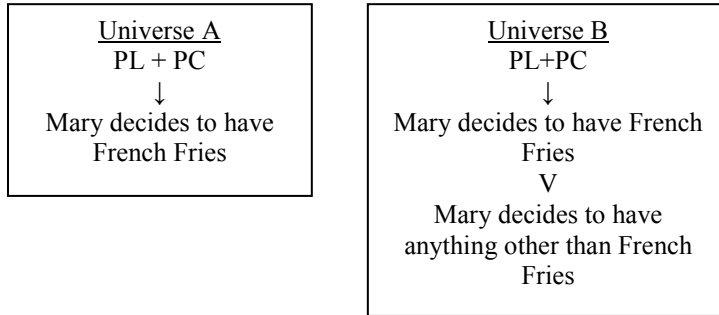


Figure 1

b) In another experiment run with the same description of determinism it was found that children and adults alike are more inclined to think that physical events, say, water coming to boil, *had to happen the way they did if the antecedent conditions were the same* and that moral choice events, such as, stealing a candy bar, *did not have to happen* this way.

c) That children are determinists about events in the physical world and indeterminists about choice events was further shored up. In this experiment, children were placed either in the agent condition or in the object condition. In the agent condition, the experimenter slid the lid of a box and touched the bottom. In the object condition, on the other hand, the experimenter manipulated the sliding lid of the box so that a ball resting on the lid drops inside. The question put to the children once again was which of the events could have happened differently. And the responses obtained clearly indicated that children were more prone to think that the agent could have done otherwise than that the physical event of the ball sliding down could have been averted.

The conclusion Nichols seems to draw from these responses is that in folk psychology human behaviour is viewed as indeterministic- the folk nurture a libertarian concept of agency- whereas physical events are generally considered deterministic. Philosophers like Nahmias would,

however, offer a different explanation for these putative indeterministic responses. He notes that:

“[...] it is likely many people simply respond as indeterminists about certain *complex* processes. For simple processes, such as water boiling, holding fixed prior events may be considered sufficient to ensure the culminating event, but for complex processes, such as the weather, holding fixed prior events may *not* be considered sufficient to ensure later events. Some human decisions may be seen as complex in this sense and this might explain the pattern of responses Nichols got.”<sup>14</sup>

Nahmias’ contention is, when people label a choice as indeterministic, it is quite likely that they view this kind of events as too complex to be predictable (and predictability for some is a hallmark of determinism). They, however, may not be sure whether the unpredictability is due to purely indeterministic processes or to complex deterministic processes beyond our present understanding and knowledge of them. An indeterministic response does not necessarily suggest that there is a dominant belief that human behaviour comes under a different rubric other than that which encompasses physical events like boiling of water or earth’s diurnal movement.

Nahmias proposes to test this hypothesis through an experiment <sup>15</sup> in line with the one carried out by Nichols and Knobe, which we cited in the foregoing. Like Nichols, Nahmias also presents his subjects with a description of determinism that reads:

If the universe were recreated repeatedly, with the same initial conditions and the same laws of nature, then everything would happen the same way they did in the previous universe.

He, however, does not ask them to take its truth for granted. The subjects - there were 99 of them - were then asked to judge the likelihood of the occurrence of a physical event (thunderbolt hitting a tree), a non-moral

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<sup>14</sup> Nahmias, op. cit. p. 219.

<sup>15</sup> For details of the experiment, vide Nahmias, op. cit. pp. 219-220.

choice-event (choosing a vanilla ice cream over a chocolate ice cream) and a moral choice-event (stealing a necklace) with the deterministic proviso. The results were predominantly indeterministic across all the three scenarios (vide Table 1 below). However, as Nahmias found out, there was more to it than met the eye.

|                            | Would occur | Won't occur | Undecided |
|----------------------------|-------------|-------------|-----------|
| Thunderbolt hitting a tree | 42%         | 49%         | 8%        |
| Choosing vanilla ice cream | 36%         | 52%         | 11%       |
| Stealing necklace          | 36%         | 55%         | 8%        |

Table 1

Nahmias not just classified the deterministic and indeterministic responses, he also identified the hardcore determinists who answered across all three scenarios that the thunderbolt hitting a tree would invariably occur even if the universe were recreated, as well as the loyal indeterminists who responded with a resounding ‘No’ to all the three scenarios. Nahmias made a provision for the participants to offer explanations for their answers. Now, of all the 30 determinists, most of them expressly said, “Certain things happen as a result of what happened before it. If the situations were recreated exactly, then there would be no other choice but for the occurrence to happen”. Although such responses have a prima facie deterministic leaning, this does not give us enough reason to suppose that the respondents harbour staunch (hard) incompatibilist intuitions about human behaviour.<sup>16</sup> However, around half of the indeterminist subjects offered such explanations as “In a universe where things happen randomly all the time why, if reversed, would those same random things happen the exact same way?” This seemingly points to a pattern of belief endorsing the possibility of a chaotic or haphazard nature of things in the universe, but does not show that the respondents differentiate choice-making events from physical events on the basis of a palpable randomness in the former category of events.

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<sup>16</sup> Nahmias grants that: “These ‘determinists’ did not, however, suggest that they thought the choices were thereby unfree” (Nahmias: op. cit. p. 220).

Again, of the 29 “complex cases” who gave a motley response to the scenarios, only 9 people were found to draw a clear-cut distinction between physical phenomena and human choices in terms of determinism and indeterminism as instantiated by statements like “Humans may be able to change their thinking and their ways. The lightning strike does not fit into this because it was inevitable”. Based on these results, Nahmias concludes that a) at least some people are determinists about choice, though they may not be hard determinists and b) some people display a belief in an indeterministic nature of human behaviour. Such an intuition is, however, quite deceptive. On closer examination, it has been revealed that people display indeterminist notions about choices and decisions merely because they do not have any clear-cut idea about where to draw the line between the domain of mental acts and purely physical phenomena.

### *3.2. Evidence for Deterministic Intuitions*

Nichols, too, found a pattern of deterministic intuition and thus concluded that we would be mistaken if folk intuition about free will were thus labeled inveterately indeterministic. In this experiment, participants (30 undergraduates in the introductory philosophy class) were found to come up with deterministic responses when asked whether a slightly physically different psychological counterpart of a person on earth, would also simultaneously embark on the same action (e.g. walking a tightrope), although on a different planet which is physically, biologically and even psychologically a facsimile of the earth. Of the 30 participants, responses of 13 participants were revoked because they failed to abide by the parameters of thought experiments by focusing on the trivial physical difference between the person on earth and his psychological counterpart. Of the remaining 17 participants, 14 gave deterministic responses i.e. they thought it was highly likely that if the person on earth desired to walk a tightrope, his psychological duplicate on another planet would also wish the same. In another experiment conducted via e-mail with the same content, 6 out of 8 participants gave deterministic responses. Of the two remaining participants, who gave indeterministic responses due to their admitted focus on the physical difference between the two persons in two different spaces, one

participant switched to deterministic mode of thinking after having understood and followed the rules of thought experiment.

#### **4. Putative Psychological Mechanisms**

Nichols suggests that the mind-reading system that has been handed down to the human species through biological evolution may maneuver psychological determinist intuitions whereas a notion of obligation or introspection may engender indeterministic intuitions.

##### *4.1. The Mindreading System*

Nichols presents the idea that the assumed ability to predict, the tried and tested capacity for prognosis for short-term practical purposes powers our deterministic intuitions about choice-making events. These are the kind of intuitions that led the participants (in Nichols' experiment) to declare that their psychological clone in another world would simultaneously maintain the same pattern of action to theirs. Evolutionary biologists would claim that what accounts for this ability is a capacity for reading other's minds which in turn has been shaped by various self-defensive activities, say for example figuring out the predator's next move. Thus the confidence with which the children claim that the ball had to slide down the box (see Experiment c) ) irrespective of whatever incident preceded it is a prediction-making aptitude that can be attributed, according to Nichols, to the evolved capacity for gauging and assessing other mind that has grown into a system.

The question as to how the mind-reading system springs into action naturally arises. Nichols and Stich address the question by introducing three conditions for prediction-making capacity, which they name the *Goal and Strategy*:<sup>17</sup>

1. A strategy or set of strategies for attributing goals to other mechanisms.
2. The mental capacity of figuring out the optimal strategy to achieve the goal in the target's situation.

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<sup>17</sup> Nichols and Stich: 2003, p. 63.

3. The inclination to believe that the target would follow the same route to achieve the goal.

This account of third person Mindreading that employs belief detecting and belief ascribing mechanisms are invoked by Nichols when he attributes deterministic intuitions to the Mind-reading System.

#### 4.2. *Introspection vs. Obligation*

There have been attempts to find recourse to introspection to account for our belief that the sphere of human agency involving conscious will, choices and decisions is not governed by deterministic necessity. To begin with, the exponents of introspection-based account claim that no such necessity, that is generally thought to be governing physical events, is found to percolate into our decision in retrospect. Although our introspection may be viewed as an instrument for revelation that our decisions are not determined by any physical laws and states of affairs preceding our choices for action, such explanation needs further support as it can clearly be seen that any reference to the psychological mechanism that can at least provisionally be adopted to account for indeterministic agency is missing. Nichols proposes an alternative account of the acquisition of belief in indeterministic choice that hinges on our notion of obligation. He derives the plausibility of his account from the oft-quoted Kantian maxim *ought to imply can*:

“Thus, if we say that a person *ought* to have behaved differently, this implies that the *person could have done otherwise* (in an indeterminist sense) [...]. Indeed, the child applies notions of obligation in a variety of contexts including contexts of moral transgressions (you shouldn't kick people), conventional transgressions (you shouldn't eat steak with your hands), and even simple cases of advice (you should put on sun screen). If children apply some notion of obligation that carries the Kantian implication *could have done otherwise*, (in indeterminist sense), then the child has the essential ingredients for coming to believe that decisions are not determined.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Nichols: 2006, p.71.

Nichols, however, is quick to admit that by far there has not been any confirmatory evidence demonstrating that children make any such extrapolation from *ought* to *can*. He contends, however, that there is some likelihood that children's understanding of breach of moral norm may spur feeling in them that the violator of the norm could have done otherwise.

“It is likely that children embrace *some* kind of ought-implies-can view. If you ask whether it was wrong for the paraplegic not to swim to save a drowning victim, children will presumably say that it's not wrong because he *couldn't* swim. But it will be harder to show that children think that obligations carry the implication of *indeterminist-can*.”<sup>19</sup>

By the term *indeterminist-can*, Nichols adverts to the concept of libertarian agency. He has explored the possibility in one of his papers, of an early acquisition of the concept of an agent-causationist kind of libertarian agency. Agent-causal account of agency is libertarian at heart, in that it accepts that an agent is free to choose to do something on the proviso that the agent in question *could have chosen to do otherwise*. Agent-causationists, however, add a further condition to their doctrine of agency and it is on this condition that they rest their condition of alternate possibilities. The agent-causationists thus make a twofold claim:

1. The agent has a causal relation with the action he does. In other words, the power to generate an action lies in none but the agent himself.

To quote Reid, one of the exponents of the agent-causal theory:

“The language of all mankind, and their ordinary conduct in life, demonstrate, that they have a conviction of some active power in themselves to produce certain motions in their own and in other bodies, and to regulate and direct their own thoughts.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid, p. 72.

<sup>20</sup> Reid: 1969 [1788], p.269.



2. Just as it is within the power of an agent to cause an action, it is also within the power of the agent not to have caused a particular action. In other words, the agent *could have done otherwise* than he originally wanted to.

Let us now present, following Nichols, the empirical evidence in favour of the claim that we harbour agent-causationist variety of free will from an early age. Nichols ran an experiment with children aged four on an average. The ingeniousness of the method of the experiment lied in the way Nichol's gave a dressing to the concept of agent-causation. The concept was formulated in such a way so that the experimenters could figure out whether children believe in the ability of an agent to choose to do something in the face of external constraints that translate into the non-availability of that particular action with or without the agent knowing about it. Accordingly, Nichols developed two scenarios. Children were first shown a doll and a table with pennies glued onto it. The first scenario (Nichols calls this the no attempt condition) read:

This is Mary. She is walking by this table and sees the money on it. She is trying to decide whether to take the money. Look - the money will not come off the table - it is glued on! - but Mary doesn't know it. Mary does not try to pick up the money, so she does not know that it will not come off the table. She thinks she can take the money off the table. She says, 'I guess I'll leave the money on the table'.

Following this, they were asked whether Mary could have chosen to leave the money on the table. We can see that the scenario is sketched to elicit responses from children that can then subsequently track whether they grant the possibility of a capacity to embark on an action, though the possibility of the action to be done is nil.

Now compare the second scenario (Nichols calls this the attempt condition). Here the same participants were given the following instruction:

This is Susan. She is walking by this table and sees the money on it. She is trying to decide whether to take the money. Look—the money will

not come off the table—it is glued on!—but Susan does not know it. Susan tries to take the money and sees that it will not come off the table. She says, ‘I guess I’ll leave the money on the table’.

The experimenter then asked the child, ‘Did Susan choose to leave the money on the table?’

The result was that children in the no-attempt condition were more likely than children in the attempt condition to say that the person chose to leave the money on the table. Nichols takes this evidence to suggest that we may have a natural tendency to ascribe power to an agent despite presence of external impediments to the action the agent wants to execute, if we come to know that the agent is not aware of the impediment. This tendency, according to Nichols, reveals a willingness to ascribe freedom in the *could have done otherwise* sense to agents.<sup>21</sup>

Going back to the topic of how belief in indeterminist agency is acquired, Nichols argues that obligation based account has a certain edge over the introspection based account in that the former not only gives a tentative explanation of how indeterministic intuition is fostered, but also suggests why some would never attribute moral responsibility to a person allegedly accused of a dastardly crime if there was no evidence that he “could have done otherwise”—a judgment reflecting incompatibilistic intuition. Simply put, Incompatibilism maintains that either free will and moral responsibility cannot be maintained with determinism being true and hence the latter has to be abandoned (Libertarianism) or determinism is true and free will is an illusion (Hard Determinism). Nichols’ suggestion is that the social knowledge of moral obligation (that I ought to have done a certain act and ought not to have done certain other) is the source of incompatibilistic intuition. He nurtures the possibility that the folk may find it more plausible to judge whether an accused person *could have acted differently* before holding him responsible for the wrong act.

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<sup>21</sup> A detailed account of the two experiments can be found in Nichols: 2004b, pp. 483-484. The exact wordings used by Nichols to instruct children have been kept unmodified.

## **5. Is the Could Have Done Otherwise Nostrum Worth It?**

It should be noted here that all of Nichols' experiments and formulations of some psychological mechanisms employ the notion of libertarianist "could have done otherwise" principle, which has drawn much flak in recent times. Dennett, for one, has something against this CDO principle- the idea that our concept of free will and moral responsibility involves such a conditional principle as "could have done otherwise". Dennett cites three circumstances to drive home that the converse of "could have done otherwise" may not imply any deterministic straitjacketing of choices and decisions. Let us consider these three scenarios following Dennett:

a) The utterance of "I could not have done otherwise" may be an "avowal of frailty" a manifestation of a weakness of will.

b) The utterance of "I could not have done otherwise" may translate into just the converse-strength of will.

c) We may sometimes think that we are rather blessed with the ability not to do otherwise so as not to be held responsible for situations in which it is a shame to be responsible.

The first case is instantiated by a situation where the circumstances of a person require him to board a plane and fly to safety. Unfortunately, daunted by his phobia of airlift, he stands rooted on the ground, as he "can do no other". For obvious reasons, this utterance cannot be taken to mean a genuflection to any binding physical laws or genetic determinism. Martin Luther King's famous clarion call - "I can do no other" as a resolute crusade against apartheid has been cited by Dennett as an instance of the second case; such utterance does not express any evasion of responsibility. Again, sometimes we wish we could say, "We can do no other", or to put it differently, we cannot but be all goody-goody lest we should be branded as a traitor, an anti-social, immoral person, courtesy our years of moral training. Here we find Dennett at his best, bursting the intuition pumps.

And by unravelling this diverse usage of “could have done otherwise”, he certainly compels the proponents of this principle to think otherwise.<sup>22</sup>

### **Postscript**

The agenda set for this paper was to report apparently conflicting folk intuitions regarding determinism and indeterminism in the area of agency that seems to further stoke rather than mitigate the debate between indeterminist agency and determinist agency as well as free will compatibilism and free will incompatibilism. On Nichols’ interpretation, folk may have a primordial belief in indeterminist agency. Let us recall the Universe task once again to understand the point. Participants were given the impression that in Universe A, the domain of human behavior is such that, the coming into being of any choice or decision is the reflection of a rule or a law that the prior conditions of that particular choice always make its occurrence necessary and irreversible. Universe B, in sharp contrast, was designed not to come under such a rule insofar as the domain of human behavior was concerned. Just as the Universe A condition could lead the participants to believe in the logical possibility (if not empirical) of predicting an agent’s act by dint of knowledge of its antecedent conditions, the Universe B condition also gave reason to believe in the empirical possibility that at least human choice-making events could be spared from any causal necessity (such a possibility was stoked by the phrase: “...even if everything in the universe was exactly the same up until Mary made her decision, it *did not have to happen* that Mary would decide to have French Fries”). And when the time came for them to identify which of these two beliefs they found more reliable than the other, we know that an overwhelming number of participants sided with Universe B (the indeterministic universe). Although Nichols’ purpose to ask this initial question was “simply to see whether subjects believe that our own universe

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<sup>22</sup> Vide Dennett: 1984b, p. 133 and Dennett: 1984a, pp. 555-556.

is deterministic or indeterministic,” this result may be taken as an indicator of two vying possibilities:

1. The folk are staunch indeterminists, inveterately agent-causationist style; they may of course be libertarian indeterminists without being agent-causationists. They gauge an agent’s freedom of action and will by considering whether the person in question caused that action by dint of his own will; and that being the case, they believe that it is quite an (empirical) possibility that Mary could have chosen to have something other than French Fries as she, like all humans could but be left on her own will. They think that a necessitarian causal law will mar this possibility. The folk are thus incompatibilists.

2. The folk believe that it is important that an agent is able to do otherwise than he originally wanted to. However, this ability to exercise a climb-down is made possible only when the agent modifies his original belief states or desire states or plans. Mary could have had an ice cream instead of French Fries only if she wanted to (a change in her desire state ensured it). The folk thus might be psychological determinists and still compatibilists. This opens up yet another possibility that the folk rest their (arguable) belief in compatibilism on a conditional analysis of *could have done otherwise* which is not in agreement with the libertarian concept of *could have done otherwise*. Nahmias notes that there is indeed certain compatibilist accounts that employ a conditional analysis to interpret the concept of *could have done otherwise* that is in stark contrast with the way libertarians employ the notion:

“Some compatibilists offer a *conditional* analysis of ‘could have done otherwise’ according to which ‘*S* could have done otherwise than *A*’ is true if and only if, for some (particular) condition *C*, this counterfactual is true: ‘Had *C* been the case, *S* would have done otherwise than *A*’. Libertarians most emphatically do not mean *that* by ‘could have done otherwise’. Rather, they have an *unconditional* analysis in mind: agents have an ability to do otherwise such that it is possible that they do otherwise while everything (the laws of nature and the complete history of the universe) up until the moment of choice remains exactly as it was.”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Turner and Nahmias: 2006, p. 599.

Again, as has already been noted by Nahmias, the possibility that the folk have a flawed understanding of indeterminist agency cannot be ruled out. The case in point is a very low number subjects making an actual differentiation between physical phenomena and such mentalistic phenomena as choosing. It would thus be a tricky business to give a dictum about whether folk belief in agency has a deterministic or an indeterministic undertone.

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