

## Du Châtelet's Libertarianism

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**Abstract:** There is a growing consensus that Emilie Du Châtelet's challenging essay "On Freedom" defends compatibilism. I offer an alternative, libertarian reading of the essay. I lay out the *prima facie* textual evidence for such a reading. I also explain how apparently compatibilist remarks in "On Freedom" can be read as aspects of a sophisticated type of libertarianism that rejects blind or arbitrary choice. To this end, I consider the historical context of Du Châtelet's essay, and especially the dialectic between various strands of eighteenth-century libertarianism and compatibilism.

**Keywords:** Du Châtelet, Samuel Clarke, freedom, principle of sufficient reason

Emilie Du Châtelet's essay "On Freedom"—completed by 1737, never published in her lifetime, and long misattributed to Voltaire—has recently been getting more of the attention it deserves. In a rich and historically astute discussion, Julia Jorati (2019) has argued that Du Châtelet defends a compatibilist position in the essay; other commentators have shared this conclusion.<sup>1</sup>

I'll argue that Du Châtelet instead defends a libertarian account of freedom. There is compelling direct textual evidence for a libertarian reading (see section 2). Furthermore, I explain certain apparently compatibilist remarks in the essay, and show that they are in no conflict with Du Châtelet's libertarianism (sections 3 and 4). On her view, an efficient-causal power to do otherwise is compatible with explanation by motives or reasons. As such, she does not take libertarianism to entail that action is random or inexplicable.

In some important respects, "On Freedom" fits into a broader pattern of eighteenth-century libertarian thought (section 1). During this period, following Clarke's example, libertarian freedom was sometimes considered consistent with the principle of sufficient reason. This eases the tension between a libertarian reading of "On Freedom" and Du Châtelet's enthusiastic endorsement of the principle of sufficient reason in her major philosophical work, the 1740/1742 *Institutions de Physique*. Moreover, in these debates the term 'will' sometimes meant a prevailing desire or motive that threatens psychological determinism. As such, we find both Clarke and Du Châtelet denying that the will, if understood in this sense, suffices to determine our actions. This denial is an important part of their defense of libertarianism.

### 1. Clarke, Leibniz, and Libertarianism

The background of early eighteenth-century debates over free choice—especially the views of Clarke and Leibniz—is essential for understanding "On Freedom." Here I only sketch

some general points. A major upshot is that Clarkean libertarians and rationalist compatibilists, even as they disagreed on central metaphysical questions regarding freedom, could agree on key points of moral psychology and action theory, as well as in their rejection of materialism.

Before getting into the historical details, let's begin with some terminological clarifications. Contemporary discussions often define determinism in terms of laws of nature and physical possibility. That is, determinism is true just in case at any time, there is just one physically possible future: this future is entailed by the (physical) laws of nature plus the past sequence of (physical) events. Libertarianism, as the thesis that we are free and our freedom is incompatible with determinism, entails the denial of determinism.

In the eighteenth century, there was no consensus that determinism should be defined this way. Cartesian dualism, Spinozism, and Leibnizian idealism all present non-physical domains which could turn out to be deterministic. Debates on freedom in this period also dealt with various kinds of theological determinism, which stand apart from questions of physical possibility in the contemporary sense. Finally, the bounds of the physical realm were up for debate, and there was arguably even less agreement than there is now about what counted as physical laws.

It is more appropriate for this period, then, to call determinism the thesis that at any state of the created world, there is just one possible future consistent with the laws of the created world. This allows for non-physical laws, as with the laws governing Leibnizian monads (Leibniz 1989, 223). It also leaves open the possibility that God could miraculously break the laws of the created world, even if we cannot do so.

This broad definition of determinism is helpful in Du Châtelet's case because of the metaphysical idealism she endorses by 1740. In her view, the things we deal with in our everyday lives are phenomena. As such, they depend on a more fundamental level of created reality, as do the laws governing them. There are at least two kinds of substance at the fundamental level: mind-like souls, but also simple active substances that are not mind-like.

We will see that Du Châtelet's libertarianism entails the falsity of determinism at least at the fundamental level. In some texts, she is also committed to indeterminism in the realm of phenomena. But I am not sure the texts conclusively settle what her considered views were on this issue. Either way, her commitment to the falsity of determinism at the fundamental level differentiates her position from Leibniz's compatibilism. For Leibniz takes both the fundamental level of monads and nonfundamental levels of phenomena to be causally determined. Mere causal determination need not, on his view, interfere with freedom.<sup>2</sup>

By contrast, Samuel Clarke's libertarianism is not developed in the context of idealism. His position straightforwardly entails that determinism in the material or physical world is false. Nevertheless, I will argue, Clarke's account of freedom and moral psychology importantly influenced Du Châtelet, though she transposed it into an idealist metaphysical setting. She was hardly the only eighteenth-century thinker influenced by Clarke's conception of freedom. Voltaire's account of freedom in the 1730s was basically Clarkean. In Britain, Clarkean libertarianism was enthusiastically defended for over sixty years (e.g. Strutt 1730; Price and Priestley 1778).

Clarke's case for libertarianism rests largely on our self-conscious first-personal experience of freedom. His key metaphysical conclusion is that free agents possess a power of self-motion, which is the proper and immediate efficient cause of action. This power is genuinely active, by Clarke's lights, because it involves a power to do otherwise.

All Power of Acting, essentially implies at the same time a Power of not acting:  
Otherwise 'tis not acting, but barely a being acted upon by That Power (whatever it be)  
which Causes the action. (Clarke 1717, 421)

If it does not involve the power to do otherwise, Clarke is saying, a capacity is merely passive, and not a genuine power at all. Therefore freedom, as a power of acting, requires the ability to choose to do otherwise at the moment of action, without being fully determined by prior causes. This ability can be exercised even if we are prevented from carrying out what we choose to do: it is “not at all prevented by chains and prisons” (Clarke 1998, 75).

Clarke clarifies that the exercise of this power is not fully determined by prior “Motives or Reasons” (Clarke 1717, 426). So whether or not motives and reasons are considered as efficient causes, Clarke rejects a kind of psychological determinism, where actions are strictly determined by prior mental states. The psychological determinists Clarke responds to directly are Anthony Collins and (writing anonymously) John Bulkeley. But as I discuss further in section 3, Hobbes’s reductive account of the will is in the background of the debate.

Psychological determinism, as Clarke understands it, is connected to a particular approach to moral psychology and action theory, one that threatens to dissolve action into a set of sub-agential motivating factors. In that case, it is hard to see how an agent or person *does* anything. Against this threat, Clarke urges that liberty just “consists in” agency (1717, 401; 1998, 74). He echoes Locke, who had stressed that liberty is a power “over...the whole Agent, the whole Man” and is not a mere modification of the will (1975, II.XXI.7; this quotation is from the 1690 edition of the *Essay*).

Psychological determinism may be most readily associated with empiricists and materialists, such as Hobbes, Gassendi, and Collins. But rationalists such as Leibniz and Wolff were often seen, rightly or wrongly, as endorsing psychological determinism as well. If the conclusion of a practical syllogism is taken simply to *be* an action, then we have a broadly rationalist model on which actions are necessitated by the premises of practical syllogisms.<sup>3</sup> Clarke emphasizes, in his correspondence with Leibniz, that if choice were strictly necessitated by prior reasons or intellectual motives, then it would be “merely passive,” just as a balance is passively determined to move by weights placed on it (Leibniz and Clarke 2000, 29; cf. Clarke 1717, 410; 420–21).

Clarke does not, however, think that our agent-causal power to move ourselves is merely blind or random, as in ancient Epicurean attempts to ground freedom in the indeterministic atomic swerve. Rather, this power is guided by reasons. A comparable position was standard among medieval Latin thinkers, who construe voluntary action as irreducible to prior motivational forces, but not as thereby blind or rationally inexplicable (Pink 2004). Clarke presents so-called moral determination by reasons as irreducible to efficient causality and consistent with libertarian freedom (Clarke 1998, 21; 53–54; 73–75).

Libertarianism, Clarke holds, is therefore consistent with the principle of sufficient reason (Leibniz and Clarke 2000, 11). This is so even where God must choose between equally good but mutually exclusive options. God’s choices are made for good reasons, even if a contrastive explanation of a given choice is not available (Leibniz and Clarke 2000, 32; Clarke 1717, 414). In moral theory, Clarke unequivocally denies that moral obligation stems from divine “will or command,” tracing it instead to a rationally graspable “law of nature” (Clarke 1991, §§ 246–7; cf. 1738, 96–100).

Clarke even insists that a causal version of the principle of sufficient reason entails that at least one agent possesses freedom of choice (1998, 53–54). A causal version of the principle of sufficient reason, he contends, demands full causal explanation for everything. If only dependent natural causes existed, they would form an “infinite series of dependent effects” (1998, 54). But no full causal explanation is possible on the basis of an infinite series of dependent effects.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, if the causal principle of sufficient reason holds, then at least one undetermined non-natural cause exists: a free “first and supreme cause” of the series of effects we observe (Clarke

1998, 54). And if libertarian freedom is possible in one case, nothing prevents its being possible in the case of finite agents like us. We needn't find this argument persuasive to appreciate that, for Clarke, libertarian freedom is hardly excluded by the principle of sufficient reason.

Leibniz disagreed: libertarian freedom of indifference collapses into mere chance or randomness, such that agents undertake actions either for no reason whatsoever, or for reasons that do not adequately explain the action (Leibniz and Clarke 2000, 16; Leibniz 1880, VI:400–3; Leibniz 2006, 93). In either case, libertarianism is incompatible with Leibniz's principle of sufficient reason. I cannot further examine this debate here.<sup>5</sup> The main lesson for our purposes is that Clarke, and other libertarians in his wake, saw themselves as rejecting blind or random choice, and argued against it.

There is also an important point of agreement between Clarke and Leibniz. Leibniz emphasizes that for an action to be free, it must stem from an internal source. In turn, a power of self-motion, for eighteenth-century libertarians, does not merely afford agents alternative possibilities of action. It also means that agents are the causal source of their actions. During this period, as Jorati has rightly stressed, compatibilists as well as libertarians regularly espoused agent causation and took it to be required for freedom (2019, 269). Libertarians and Leibnizians could agree, against Hobbes or Collins, that a necessary condition for freedom is being the source of one's actions, and not at the mercy of outer physical causes (Leibniz 1880, VI:388–99).

But Clarke and his followers insist that genuine alternative possibilities are also needed for freedom (1717, 413). By contrast, Leibniz seems to think freedom does not require the ability to do otherwise (Sleigh 1990, 80–81; Jorati 2017, 115). Leibniz's metaphysics of non-interacting monads ensures that each finite agent's actions cannot be traced back to created causes outside the agent, but only to God. Yet creaturely actions are entirely determined in virtue of God's choice to create the best possible world.

In the 1695 “New System,” for example, Leibniz suggests that a finite mind resembles a “spiritual automaton” (*Automate spirituel*) in being wound up by its creator and acting thereafter in virtue of internal but deterministic causes or grounds (Leibniz 1880, IV:485).<sup>6</sup> Mere automata, Leibniz notes, are not rational agents. But that is irrelevant to the basic metaphysical point at hand, which concerns the determination of action by prior causes or grounds (even if in this case the priority is not temporal). Given this setup, one might ask whether a finite Leibnizian agent, as opposed to its creator, can be considered the ultimate source of its actions. This is not a question I can settle here.

## 2. *Du Châtelet's Libertarianism: Textual Evidence*

In this section, I lay out *prima facie* textual evidence for a libertarian reading of “On Freedom.” Some context: in the late 1730s, Du Châtelet was familiar with Clarke's correspondence with Leibniz and some of Clarke's other works. This can be seen from a letter to her publisher (Du Châtelet 2018, I:367), and from other evidence, helpfully surveyed by Sarah Hutton (2012, 83–87). In 1738, moreover, Du Châtelet aligned herself with Clarke on all major points in his dispute with Leibniz, except for the question of *vis viva*.<sup>7</sup>

Du Châtelet was also involved in Voltaire's composition of the “*Traité de Métaphysique*” at the time she wrote her own essay on freedom (Wade 1941, 17–24; Brown and Kölving 2003; Jorati 2019, 256). This unpublished piece, first drafted around 1734 but revised through 1738, defends Clarkean libertarianism. Voltaire posits a Clarkean “moving” and “primitive” power to “act” or to “determine oneself or not” (Voltaire 1961, 187; 191). He then offers Clarkean responses to two main objections: (i) the possibility of acting, akratically, on “violent passions” (189) and (ii) a Hobbes- or Collins-style objection that prior motives strictly determine action (191). Similar objections and responses appear in “On Freedom.” By 1734, moreover, Voltaire already owned

and had annotated Clarke's *Demonstration* (Porset 1990, 237n15). The *Demonstration* contains the argument from the principle of sufficient reason to libertarian freedom discussed above, and could have influenced the "Traité." Du Châtelet's close involvement in the composition of the "Traité" thus provides evidence that she engaged with Clarke's ideas.

The backdrop of Clarkean libertarianism helps in understanding some puzzling aspects of "On Freedom," as we shall see. Although Jorati reads Du Châtelet as a compatibilist, she grants that "On Freedom" contains "elements that appear to be based on...Clarke's libertarian account" (2019, 256).

Yet "On Freedom" is no mere recapitulation of either Clarke or Voltaire. Although Du Châtelet defends a broadly Clarkean position, her responses to objections go beyond those made by Clarke himself. As already noted, "On Freedom" was originally supposed to be integrated into the ambitious *Institutions*, which cannot be described as a Clarkean work.

As for Voltaire, while some points made in "On Freedom" closely track the "Traité," many others do not.<sup>8</sup> It is striking that the "Traité" embraces a robust metaphysical account of freedom, given the work's skeptical caution on various other philosophical debates. In later works such as the 1765 "Philosophe Ignorant," Voltaire abandoned libertarianism in favor of Lockean compatibilism, adding a Spinozist critique of our alleged first-personal experience of freedom (Voltaire 1961, 886–888).<sup>9</sup> So it is possible, though difficult to prove, that the libertarianism of the "Traité" was influenced by Du Châtelet.

Du Châtelet's essay defines freedom in terms of an introspectively obvious "power [*pouvoir*] to think of a thing or not to think of it...to move oneself or not" or "to act or not to act" (1989, 493; 485; 491; my translations). This power is the "true and sole source of freedom," on her view (487). This characterization of freedom as a causal power suggests a kinship with Clarke. But must it be a power to do otherwise? Taken in isolation, Du Châtelet's definition might describe a power that is determined in each case, but only activated some of the time. In certain cases this power produces action, but in others it does not.

In fact, the examples by which Du Châtelet explains her conception of freedom indicate that she has in mind a genuine power either to act or not act *in a particular case*. She considers a binary choice between going to bed or taking a walk. She emphasizes that a free choice in favor of one of these options *rather than* the other—for example to take a walk rather than to go to bed—is not "determined," for example by prior judgments or motives (485; 491–3). As she puts it, "before and after the last judgment of the understanding," our power of self-motion is in precisely the same state: it is still able to choose among more than one possible action (493). This is an undetermined power to do otherwise in a particular case. As such, she also describes freedom in terms of a power to "determine ourselves" (494). I take this to be a power to (sometimes) determine ourselves at the moment of action.

This power to act is, at least in part, a power to bring about physical effects. It is a "self-moving" efficient cause by which we literally bring about physical "movements" (493; 502). This language echoes Clarke. As Du Châtelet elaborates:

The physical power to act [*pouvoir physique d'agir*] is...that which makes man a free being, whatever use he makes [of this power], and the privation of this power would suffice to make him a purely passive being, despite his intelligence, for a stone that is thrown would be no less a passive being, whether or not it had the inner sentiment of motion that I give to it an impress on it. (494)

Since we live in a physical world, exercising this physical power is incompatible with at least physical determinism. "On Freedom" itself is reticent about the issue: the penultimate draft of the essay begins by setting aside detailed discussion of how the conservation of motion or force relates to freedom (while stressing that our freedom is of "infinitely" greater practical interest

than the status of these conservation principles) (1989, 484 note 1). Three other pieces of textual evidence, however, confirm that Du Châtelet endorses the incompatibility of freedom and physical determinism, and also clarify her position.

First, in a well-known letter to Maupertuis from April 1738, Du Châtelet worries that a power of self-motion conflicts with physical conservation laws; Leibniz had raised this objection against mind-body dualism more generally (1880, VI:540–41). Jorati (2019, 270–71) helpfully discusses Du Châtelet’s letter, which expresses a potentially uncertain belief in libertarian freedom, given the apparent conflict with physics. “Enfin je me crois libre,” Du Châtelet proclaims, but she does not spell out whether this is a mere subjectively firm conviction, or a true belief corresponding to a real power to do otherwise (2018, II:342).

A second letter to Maupertuis from a little over a week later, however, decisively settles the metaphysical issue in favor of freedom from prior physical determination, while remaining noncommittal as to exactly *how* freedom is possible.

I would wish to...say that God could have established laws of motion for the impact of inanimate bodies, by which laws these bodies conserve or communicate or consume in effects the force that is impressed on them; but that this would in no way prevent that in animate things there be a self-moving power, which would be a gift of the creator, as are intelligence, life, etc. For if I am free, it must absolutely be the case that I can begin motion, and if my freedom is proven, it must be admitted that my will produces force, although the *quomodo* is hidden from me. (2018, II.347; my translation)

Freedom and conservation principles must be accepted as basic facts, in other words, even if we cannot understand how they are compatible. She goes on to suggest that such a doctrine concerning freedom is on the same footing as commitment to other mysterious yet undeniable facts, such as divine creation.

A third striking statement appears in the final section of the so-called Paris Manuscript of the *Institutions*, written and revised over the period 1738–1740. Here Du Châtelet claims that “living forces and their conservation are not at all contrary to freedom,” even though such conservation “seems at first to interfere” with it (Du Châtelet 1738–40, sheet 369 verso; my translation).<sup>10</sup> Instead, she suggests, although our freedom violates the conservation of motion, it does not violate the conservation of *vis viva*. She makes this point through an especially clear version of the claim that our freedom involves counterfactual alternative possibilities:

Our will doubtless produces motion, for if it is up to me to take a walk or to remain seated, it is certain that in walking, I will produce a motion that I would not have produced [que je n’eusse pas produit] if I remained on my chair. (Du Châtelet 1738–40, sheet 369 verso)

Nevertheless, she thinks, this does not entail that my will can create force in the sense of *vis viva*. While it is unclear how, physically speaking, Du Châtelet’s proposal is supposed to work, she is squarely confronting the fact that freedom as she understands it seems to bring about motion, thus violating at least one physical conservation principle.

Let’s return to “On Freedom.” We’ve seen that in eighteenth-century debates, psychological determinism was often distinguished from physical determinism. Indeed, Jorati’s compatibilist reading of Du Châtelet relies on this distinction. Although our free actions are not physically determined, on this reading, they are psychologically determined.

In fact, “On Freedom” does discuss psychological determinism, but presents it as a serious threat to our freedom. If it were true, prior motives and judgments would be “so many little beings,” jointly necessitating our actions (1989, 492). Du Châtelet rejects this:

The last perception or approval of the understanding...can have no influence on the self-moving power in which freedom consists...an abstract notion can have no physical

influence on the self-moving physical power that resides in man, and this power is exactly the same before and after the last judgment of the understanding. (493)

Clarke defends his libertarianism in similar terms: reasons and motives are mere “abstract Notion[s]” which cannot “be the efficient Cause of Motion in a Man’s Body” (1717, 425–26). For both Clarke and Du Châtelet, then, ‘self-motion’ involves libertarian freedom from antecedent inner as well as outer determination.<sup>11</sup>

By contrast, Leibnizian compatibilists accept something like this form of psychological determinism, at least for determination by reflective cognitive faculties such as the understanding and judgment. Leibniz’s compatibilist conception of freedom focuses on the absence of determination by finite substances and forces outside the agent; “little beings” *within* the agent are not necessarily a threat to freedom. Some have found a similar view in Descartes (Lennon 2015). To be sure, Leibniz and Descartes reject the Hobbesian idea that we are solely determined by brute sensory or non-rational motives. But for Du Châtelet, psychological determinism eliminates freedom even if the relevant “ideas” are not mere results of “sensation” but are reflective and intellectual (1989, 490).

This point illuminates Du Châtelet’s discussion of our ability to suspend the influence of passions and desires.

We have the faculty to suspend our desires and to examine that which seems best to us, so as to be able to choose it: this is a part of our freedom. The power to then act in conformity with this choice, is indeed that which makes this freedom full and entire. (1989, 494)

This passage importantly does not identify free action with suspending desire. While suspending desires is “part” of our freedom, it does not suffice for the “power to then act” once desires are suspended, that is, for “freedom full and entire.” One might suspend a desire, but then not exercise the self-moving power that’s constitutive of free action.

It would be unwise, then, to rest a libertarian reading of Du Châtelet solely on her account of the suspension of desires. As Jorati (2019, 261) persuasively argues, endorsing a mere ability to suspend the influence of some motives (say, non-rational desires and passions) does not entail a commitment to libertarianism. An ability to suspend or override desire could result from the deterministic activity of our rational faculties.<sup>12</sup> The question of whether we act on rational or non-rational motives is distinct from the question of whether we have a power to do otherwise when we act.

On my reading, however, even if the suspension of desires turns out deterministic, Du Châtelet’s core account of freedom is not undermined. She stresses that rational motives and judgments cannot fully determine our Clarkean self-moving power if we are to act freely. In virtue of our self-moving power, our actions are not fully determined by the influence either of non-rational passions and desires, or of what she calls judgments of the understanding. Our motives and judgments, rational or otherwise, do not fully determine actions.

That said, Jorati is partly correct in calling Du Châtelet an agent-causal compatibilist. Du Châtelet is not a compatibilist, but agent causation plays an important role in her account of freedom. Free actions must have an internal source, just as they do for Leibniz and Clarke. Freedom, as a self-moving power, “resides in” individual agents; complete determination by “something other” would rob an agent of freedom (1989, 493; 496; cf. 491). The *Institutions* later depicts rational agents as immaterial souls (1740, II§21; VII§128), though this is not detailed in “On Freedom.” On these points, Du Châtelet could agree with Leibniz against materialists, whether they are determinists or Epicurean indeterminists (cf. Jorati 2019, 263–64).

Yet the fact that an action has an internal source, once again, is not a sufficient condition for its being free. When Du Châtelet discusses cognitive acts such as perceiving or reflectively

“judging that something is true and reasonable,” she grants their apparently internal source in the agent (1989, 492). If she took freedom merely to consist in an internal source of action, we would expect her to focus on proving that such acts really *are* internal to the agent. Instead, she stresses that judgments and similar cognitive acts are “passive,” and do not suffice to determine our actions (1989, 492). They are contrasted with our active power of self-motion. So a rational power need not be an active power. Instead, the difference between active power and passive capacity consists in the ability to choose among alternative possibilities, through the exercise of an undetermined power of self-motion.

A final line of textual evidence for Du Châtelet’s libertarianism is found in her discussion of divine foreknowledge. She proposes that God may not be omniscient, and “could...have been ignorant of the use his creations would make of the freedom he gave them” (1989, 500). While she does not fully commit to this position, she expresses willingness to do so if this is needed to safeguard our freedom.<sup>13</sup> Giving up divine omniscience in this way is a radically heterodox move. The fact that it is on the table suggests that Du Châtelet endorses a libertarian account of freedom.

To see why, contrast the relative ease with which divine foreknowledge fits into Leibniz’s compatibilism. In his correspondence with Arnauld, another compatibilist, Leibniz is mainly concerned to show how God’s creative choice is not strictly necessary. He grants that any finite agent’s actions follow necessarily from God’s choice to create the best possible world (Leibniz 1880, II:37–47). So divine foreknowledge of our actions is, apparently, straightforward (cf. Leibniz 1989, 101–4). By contrast, if freedom requires that an agent’s power to do otherwise is genuinely undetermined, then it is much more plausible that freedom and divine foreknowledge conflict.

In sum, there is compelling textual evidence that for Du Châtelet, freedom requires an active causal power to do otherwise that is independent not only of physical causes, but also of prior psychological motives, whatever their character.

But this does not settle the matter. As Jorati (2019) has argued, several passages in “On Freedom” apparently rule out a libertarian reading. Furthermore, problems for my interpretation seem to be raised by Du Châtelet’s embrace of the principle of sufficient reason in the *Institutions de Physique*. In the next two sections, I respond to three of the most pressing textual worries for a libertarian reading.

### 3. *Free Actions and Reasons: Defending a Libertarian Reading*

A first difficulty for a libertarian reading is that Du Châtelet disparages what she calls the liberty of indifference, claiming that on such a definition of freedom, non-rational animals would be more free than rational humans (1989, 492). Instead, she writes, agents are more perfect to the extent that their actions are “based on good reasons” (494; 487; cf. Jorati 2019, 259–60). God, the most perfect agent that can be conceived, is morally necessitated to always do the best (495). Yet Du Châtelet asserts that God “is free” (501). This might suggest that her conception of freedom is compatibilist: God is both free and morally necessitated.

A second, closely related challenge: in the *Institutions*, Du Châtelet enthusiastically endorses the principle of sufficient reason. She concludes from this principle that our actions are undertaken for reasons (1740, I§§8–11). This might seem to contradict libertarian freedom.

Clarkeans, however, do not take libertarianism to entail that actions are performed for no reason, or arbitrarily. They deny that libertarianism conflicts with the principle of sufficient reason. As we saw in section 1, Clarke asserted that prior ‘moral’ determination (by motives and reasons) does not override an agent’s power of efficient-causal determination (by the power of



self-motion). So there is conceptual space, and historical precedent, for reconciling Du Châtelet's emphasis on the non-randomness of action with its basis in a libertarian power to do otherwise.

Du Châtelet in fact holds that three kinds of necessity must be "distinguished with care": moral, physical or efficient-causal, and absolute (1989, 494). Moral necessity is compatible with both physical and absolute contingency, as she makes clear in discussing cases of akrasia (496). A wise person can arrive at a correct rational judgment as to which course of action is "best," yet still go on to act foolishly (493–94). Some psychological determinists might call this scenario a "contradiction" (494), but Du Châtelet denies that this is so. A rationally correct judgment may have so-called "moral" necessity, but it does not necessitate the agent's "power to act": there is no "physical" contradiction, let alone a logical contradiction, in coming to prefer a wise judgment about what to do, and then going on to commit a foolish, akratic act (494).

I take her to be influenced by Clarke's notion of moral necessity here. Clarke had claimed that "moral necessity, in true and philosophical strictness, is not indeed any necessity at all," at least with respect to actions (1717, 430). This holds even for God. Although God's moral attributes, such as goodness, necessitate a unique judgment of what would be best to do, Clarke denies that divine actions are strictly determined (414).

Likewise, Du Châtelet holds that a wise person is more perfect than a fool in virtue of correctly judging what it's best to do, but not thereby more free in any particular action. "Being determined by that which seems to us the best," she writes, "is as great a perfection as the power to do that which we've judged it to be" (1989, 494). Like Clarke, she distinguishes between a judgment as to the best, and a free power to act, or not act, on that judgment. Thus, Du Châtelet's libertarian definition of freedom, as requiring an undetermined physical "power to do"  $\varphi$  rather than an alternative, need not rule out either (i) a moral but not efficient-causal explanation of  $\varphi$  in terms of judgments and reasons or (ii) some prior determination of these reasons themselves.

When it comes to the origins of our reasons or motives, Du Châtelet endorses the traditional idea that we are naturally motivated to seek "the best" or at least the good (1989, 495).<sup>14</sup> She reaffirms this in her later work on happiness (2008, 107). But this is an account of what grounds our motives, and ultimately our judgment of what is best, not of how these motives relate to free action. Although every agent has a reason or motive to seek the best, it does not follow that every agent acts on this motive and in fact pursues the best. This is how we should understand Du Châtelet's otherwise puzzling remark that God is *more morally necessitated* to pursue the best than we are (495).<sup>15</sup> She means that God, in each case, freely acts on the motive to seek the best. We humans are likewise motivated to seek the best, yet often freely choose not to do so.

This is further evidence that Du Châtelet's conception of moral necessity is Clarkean rather than Leibnizian. For as Jorati reads him, Leibniz denies that moral necessity can come in degrees (2019, 273). Moreover, Leibniz sometimes argues that moral necessity is compatible with freedom, as morally necessitated actions can stem from an internal source (Leibniz 1880, VI:254–55). If, as I've argued, Du Châtelet does not take these conditions to be sufficient for freedom of action, she will not accept this Leibnizian conception of moral necessity.

Let's turn to the principle of sufficient reason. Strictly speaking, for Du Châtelet, this principle guarantees that the reasons "why" contingent truths are the way they are can be *understood* by an intelligent being (1740, I§8). This explanatory requirement need not be satisfied by an efficient cause. Perhaps it could be satisfied by invoking reasons or motives. Indeed, Du Châtelet draws a relevant distinction between efficient causes and "occasions" of action (1989, 393). Her idea is that reasons and motives do not suffice to efficiently cause action, but they do influence or occasion the operation of our power of self-motion, and distinguish its operations from merely groundless or random events.

Du Châtelet does not explain exactly what this non-causal influence amounts to, so it may be helpful to turn once again to the historical background. Jorati (2019, 266–67) points out that Clarke used similar terminology. For Clarke, reasons and motives cannot cause or necessitate actions—they are passive, and have less being or perfection than actions—but can nevertheless occasion them (1717, 423–4). Our actions remain free despite the occasioning influence of reasons and motives, as this influence is not that of a “physical or efficient cause” (424).<sup>16</sup> Whether we label this as a non-efficient, ‘occasional’ sort of causation, or instead as a kind of non-causal determination or grounding, the key metaphysical point is that it does not necessitate an agent’s power of self-motion. So it does not undermine the ability to do otherwise.

As noted above, related views were standard among medieval authors, for whom actions “respond” to “practical or action-guiding reasons” (Pink 2004, 127). Actions’ partial determination by reasons prevents them from being merely blind or random, but this is not strict causal determination. The rough idea is that free action may be partly grounded in prior rational beliefs, a point granted even by voluntarists such as Ockham (Adams 2006, 255). But free action is not fully grounded in or caused by these prior mental states, as an effect is grounded in its total cause. Leeway is left for alternative possibilities.

This broad strategy found supporters well after the medieval period. Aside from Clarke, several interpreters have argued that Leibniz distinguished between reasons and causes, at least in some texts (Sleigh, Chappell, and Della Rocca 1998, 1259–60; Murray 2005). He may have done so precisely to limit the efficient-causal implications of his principle of sufficient reason and so avoid causal determinism. And a generation after Du Châtelet, certain passages in Kant’s first *Critique* suggest a similar distinction between reasons and causes. For example, he refers to an “intelligible” determination of action that rests not on the chain of natural causes but “on mere grounds of the understanding” (Kant 1998, A545/B573). So Du Châtelet is in good company here.

Du Châtelet, in the *Institutions*, also endorses a causal principle that is closely connected to the principle of sufficient reason (1740, II§19; II§28). How can this be squared with libertarian freedom? In the *Institutions*, Du Châtelet distinguishes between the phenomenal realm of matter, where the known laws of physics hold, and a domain of more fundamental simple substances (including nonmental substances and souls).<sup>17</sup> She seems committed to the denial of causal determinism at the level of simple substances. While we cannot observe simple substances directly, indubitable introspective assurance that we are free is our best guide to the causal order among simple substances (cf. 1989, 487).

A more difficult question concerns how things stand with causal determinism in the phenomenal realm. Some of the passages discussed above portray freedom as involving an absolute power to begin motion, without prior causal determination. We saw that according to the manuscript version of the *Institutions*, when I freely choose to go for a walk, my power of self-motion is not fully determined by prior causes, since I could also have chosen not to go for the walk. This would falsify causal determinism among the phenomenal realm of material things. And such a view would indeed be in tension with her apparent endorsement of causal determinism for phenomena.

Nevertheless, I think her considered view could involve granting phenomenal causal determinism, while basing the exercise of freedom in the fundamental realm of simple substances. This is consistent, at least, with her claims that the reconciliation of conservation laws and freedom is a mystery, even if each of these is well-supported. An examination of Du Châtelet’s manuscript versions of the *Institutions* suggests that her full embrace of metaphysical idealism came relatively late in the development of the book; this conclusion is shared by other commentators.<sup>18</sup> Some of Du Châtelet’s statements on freedom, then, may predate her full adoption of metaphysical idealism. But even if her idealism is already in place in “On Freedom,”

her examples of free action could be read as helpful illustrations that are not meant to be completely precise. For example, getting out of a chair may be an easy example to grasp, but need not be meant as a metaphysically strict characterization of free action.<sup>19</sup>

Still, it must be said that Du Châtelet's texts do not settle whether she is committed to phenomenal indeterminism (bringing her position closer to Clarke's) or whether indeterminism only exists among more fundamental substances (as in Kant). Nor do her writings detail exactly how the phenomenal and fundamental realms relate. Given that Du Châtelet did not publish "On Freedom," she may not have reached definitive conclusions on these questions.

Either way one falls on this interpretive issue, however, Du Châtelet's embrace of the principle of sufficient reason does not provide clear evidence against a libertarian reading of "On Freedom." Du Châtelet may well have held a consistent position on which indeterminism is only present at the fundamental level of reality, not among phenomena. Suppose she instead held the potentially inconsistent view that the causal principle holds in the phenomenal realm, and that there is phenomenal indeterminism stemming from the exercise of libertarian freedom. Even then, we've seen that Clarke and his followers provide a clear historical precedent, which Du Châtelet was aware of, for endorsing libertarianism alongside a causal principle of sufficient reason. This means that a principle of charity does not yield a clear case against reading Du Châtelet as a libertarian. If she is read as upholding phenomenal determinism, then her position is consistent. If she allows phenomenal indeterminism, she would be doing the same as Clarke, who considerably influenced her conception of freedom.

#### 4. *Two Conceptions of the Will*

A third challenge for a libertarian reading is Du Châtelet's surprising claim that the will "can have no physical influence on the self-moving physical power in which freedom consists": it does not efficiently cause our actions, but is a mere "abstract notion" (1989, 493; 496; cf. Jorati 2019, 265–68). How could a libertarian deny that the will influences our actions?

It needs to be stressed that 'will' has been defined in an unusual way here. It is equated with "the last perception or approval of the understanding" (493).<sup>20</sup> In context, Du Châtelet is responding to the psychological determinist threat that prior motives and judgments determine our power of self-motion. She considers this *specific* "sense of the word" 'will' because it is most "relevant for" a determinist's "objection" to freedom (493).<sup>21</sup>

It is telling that Clarke brings up an equivalent definition of 'will' in response to objections from Collins:

As to *Willing*; This Word...has a great Ambiguity in it, and signifies two distinct Things. Sometimes it signifies the last Perception or Approbation of the Understanding, and sometimes the first Exertion of the Self-moving or Active Faculty....[the first is] entirely *passive*, belonging to the Understanding only, and has nothing to do with the Question about Liberty; The [second] is truly *active*. (1717, 436–7)

The first definition of 'willing' mentioned here matches Du Châtelet's, almost word-for-word. As for the second definition, Du Châtelet also sometimes equates the will with Clarke's power of self-motion.<sup>22</sup> In this passage, Clarke denies that the will, if understood in the first sense, causally determines action. We've seen that both Clarke and Du Châtelet describe such acts of understanding or judgment as abstract notions that do not suffice for free action (Clarke 1717, 425–26). Since both Clarke and Du Châtelet take the locus of freedom to be a self-moving power that is not fully determined by prior reasons and motives, their denial that the will as Collins understands it causally determines action is entirely consistent with their libertarianism.

In these passages, both Clarke and Du Châtelet may seem to deny that prior motives and judgments have *any* influence whatsoever on action. But Du Châtelet in fact only denies

“physical influence,” which I take to mean the influence of a total efficient cause, which strictly determines its effect. These passages are also polemical, and may be exaggerated for rhetorical effect. As we’ve seen, both philosophers argue at length against regarding free action as arbitrary or lacking a reason. Their considered view is that reasons influence action without strictly determining it.

### 5. *Conclusion*

I have defended a libertarian reading of Du Châtelet’s “On Freedom,” starting from first-order textual evidence. We’ve also seen that when the historical context is considered, a libertarian reading can explain passages in “On Freedom” that have usually been taken to endorse compatibilism. There need not be any conflict between Du Châtelet’s libertarianism and her endorsement of a principle of sufficient reason in the *Institutions de Physique*, or with her assertion that the will (in a certain sense) lacks physical influence. Most importantly, I hope to have shown that Du Châtelet’s position is consistent and defensible.<sup>23</sup>

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Moriarty (2006, 208–209), Reichenberger (2016, 41), and unpublished work by Julia Borcharding. Hagengruber (2017), by contrast, seems to suggest a libertarian reading of “On Freedom.” To the best of my knowledge, however, no detailed response to Jorati’s reading has appeared. Du Châtelet’s essay is transcribed in the standard edition of Voltaire’s works, Du Châtelet (1989); the original manuscript is at the National Library of Russia, St. Petersburg (NLR BV 5-240, vol. 9, f. 126–132 v.). The manuscript is heavily corrected in her own hand, and she assigns it chapter and section numbering consistent with the *Institutions de Physique*; for more on the attribution of the essay, see Janik (1982).

<sup>2</sup> This contrast with Leibniz is one reason Kant’s approach to freedom is often described as libertarian, even though on standard readings, Kant’s non-fundamental realm of appearances is strictly deterministic. See for example Pereboom (2006).

<sup>3</sup> Aristotle gives the example of a practical syllogism with two premises: (1) the universal belief that everything sweet must be tasted, and (2) the belief about particulars that this particular thing is sweet (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1147a24–31; *De Motu Animalium* 701a18ff). On the rationalist model I have in mind, the conclusion is just *my action* of tasting the sweet. So my action is determined by the premises, at least if nothing interferes. Anscombe (1957, 59–60) and Normore (2007) attribute this sort of view to Aristotle; Schneewind (1998, 437–8) ascribes it to Wolff. Such readings are not just recent inventions. Normore notes that Peter Olivi saw rationalist determinism in Aristotle. Pietist libertarians such as Crusius found it in Wolff. The view is mentioned without attribution (as a “sophism”) in Voltaire’s “Traité” (1961, 190). Still, we should be cautious about these readings. Charles (1984) argues that for Aristotle, the conclusion of a practical syllogism is in the first instance propositional, rather than a sheer action. There is a gap between endorsing the conclusion of a practical syllogism and acting, allowing for akratic action. Wolff too may leave room between volitions (as conclusions of practical syllogisms) and free actions proper.

<sup>4</sup> Compare Kant (1998, A445–46/B473–74). For more on Clarke’s argument see Sangiacomo (2018, 425–32).

<sup>5</sup> The debate turns, in part, on delicate questions about what is needed to ground or explain actions in order for the principle of sufficient reason to be satisfied (Normore 2007, 52; Schierbaum 2020, 184–86).

<sup>6</sup> Du Châtelet likely read this essay, which appeared in French in the *Journal des Savants*. She herself published anonymously in this journal, and was intensely interested in issues of scientific journals from the late seventeenth century: see her 1739 letter to Prault (Du Châtelet 2018, I:367).

<sup>7</sup> See a letter to Maupertuis from around March 1, 1738, which states that “Leibniz...n’avait guère raison que sur les forces vives” (Du Châtelet 2018, I:337). If taken literally, this passage is evidence that Du Châtelet did not accept Leibnizian compatibilism in 1738. Leibniz’s compatibilism, insofar as it rests on denying causal interaction between created substances, also conflicts with the broadly Newtonian cosmology of causally interacting substances that Du Châtelet already accepted in her (1738).

<sup>8</sup> See Jorati (2019, 256n5). Significant though these differences may be, Jorati understates the Clarkean libertarian elements of the “Traité” (256n7).



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<sup>9</sup> Descartes had asserted at *Principles* I.41 that we have an indubitable first-person awareness of our freedom of indifference (1982, 19). On such arguments from the first-person experience of freedom and Spinoza’s influential criticisms, see Barry (2016). And see Lascano (2021) on Du Châtelet’s response to worries that our experience of freedom is illusory.

<sup>10</sup> I am indebted to Anne-Lise Rey (2017) for bringing this passage to my attention. Along with the final five and half pages of this manuscript, the passage is canceled out. The content of these pages was not included in the published editions of *Institutions* from 1740 and 1742, which end abruptly. This must have been a relatively late decision: there are earlier, more granular revisions of these manuscript pages, including in the passage on freedom, in Du Châtelet’s own hand. Given that “On Freedom” itself was excluded from the published *Institutions*, its status is not altogether different from that of this manuscript passage.

<sup>11</sup> Contrast Jorati (2019, 264): “Du Châtelet’s self-moving power is best understood as compatible with determinism in much the same way in which Leibnizian spontaneity is compatible with determinism”; on Leibnizian spontaneity see further Jorati (2017, 37–58; 114–47). That is, the criterion for freedom is *self*-motion. The ability to do otherwise is not required. However, Jorati also writes that for Du Châtelet, deterministic “causal chains would undermine freedom,” and that if “God is the ultimate cause...of human actions,” then “human beings are elaborate divine puppets” rather than free agents (263; 275). Taken literally, these interpretive claims suggest an incompatibilist reading of Du Châtelet.

<sup>12</sup> Locke, who may be a source for this suspension doctrine, claims we have an ability to suspend at least some of our desires (1975, II.xxi.47). But interpreters such as Walsh (2014) have denied that Locke is thereby committed to libertarianism. For helpful discussion of this topic, see also Stuart (2013, 459–76).

<sup>13</sup> As such, it is potentially misleading to characterize Du Châtelet’s position on foreknowledge as “uncertain” (Jorati 2019, 274). She fully endorses a conditional claim: if divine foreknowledge of our actions is incompatible with their freedom, then there is no divine foreknowledge of our actions. Only the truth of the antecedent is uncertain.

<sup>14</sup> Aquinas and others in the medieval Aristotelian tradition endorsed this idea. It can still be found in modern thinkers such as Locke (1975, I.III.3). There is also a tradition of disagreement over what this idea amounts to and what it means for freedom (Murray 1996; Normore 2007).

<sup>15</sup> A referee points out that Du Châtelet implies God has a greater “share” of freedom than we do, just as God has a greater share of intelligence (1989, 501). This passage is at first difficult to understand in terms of a self-moving power to do otherwise, which seems to be all-or-nothing. It might seem to make more sense on a compatibilist reading where free actions are merely those based on relatively good reasons. However, the passage goes on to stress the idea that God is *always* free, with respect to *all* objects, whereas we are only free in certain cases, with respect to certain objects (502). For example, in some cases our senses no longer obey our power of choice—we may be drunk or carried away by violent passions—but this is not possible for God (486). So Du Châtelet’s point is not that God has a greater portion of freedom than us with respect to *any given* free action. Rather, her point is that God can exercise freedom in a *wider range of cases*. What God does wield in each action is a higher degree of agential perfection, in virtue of acting on better reasons than we do (494–95).

<sup>16</sup> Jorati denies that Du Châtelet follows Clarke on this point, despite the similar language. On Jorati’s reading, to occasion an action is to strictly determine or necessitate it (2019, 269). Jorati

here appeals to Nadler's (2011) exposition of occasional causation among the Cartesians. But no direct textual evidence is provided that Du Châtelet adopted this sort of Cartesian position, and it is not clear from Nadler's characterization that Cartesian occasional causation must be deterministic (2011, 33–6; 164–88). For Descartes himself, occasional causes are accidental and secondary, unlike efficient causes. Descartes gives an example (Nadler 2011, 34). Workers efficiently cause their work. They follow orders from a supervisor. The orders are an occasional cause, but the workers might have done the work without the orders. In this example, the occasional cause is neither necessary nor sufficient for the relevant effects.

<sup>17</sup> On the phenomenal realm, see 1740, VI§43; VII§163; VIII§152–53. While Du Châtelet typically applies the principle of sufficient reason to phenomena, it ranges in principle over all contingent truths, not just truths about phenomena. . So although Du Châtelet places the soul, as a ground of free action, beyond the phenomenal realm (as Kant would later do), she does not pursue the Kantian strategy of safeguarding libertarian freedom by explicitly restricting the scope of the principle of sufficient reason to phenomena.

<sup>18</sup> See Janik (1982, 98ff) and Jorati (2019, 277–78). One relatively clear example: the manuscript discusses ultimate, partless substances. But these are not the non-spatiotemporal simples of the published *Institutions*: they are spatially bounded material parts, roughly like atoms (Du Châtelet 1738–40, 158 verso–159 recto; 216 recto).

<sup>19</sup> Kant likewise employs the example of getting out of a chair: “ich...ohne den notwendig bestimmenden Einfluß der Naturursachen, von meinem Stuhle aufstehe” (1998, A450/B478). But this example, while relatively easy to understand, is hardly a reliable guide to Kant's considered conception of freedom. Strictly speaking, my getting out a chair, as a bodily movement, is determined by prior causes within the realm of appearances. To be sure, there may exist *some* free action (*Handlung*) in virtue of which I freely get out of the chair. But this action would not be a bodily motion or even an ordinary mental event: it must take place outside the realm of appearances and the “strings” (*faden*) of spatiotemporal “nature and fate” (1998, A463/B491).

<sup>20</sup> This definition is a generalization of Hobbes's definition of ‘will.’ Hobbes identifies will with exclusively irrational or brute appetites and aversions (Hobbes 1994, Chapter VI; Jorati 2019, 261). By contrast, Du Châtelet describes the will of “intelligent” beings as determined by judgment and reflection, a point reiterated in the “Discours sur le bonheur” (1989, 496; 494; 2008, 114). Medieval thinkers such as Abelard also identified will with prevailing desire, and tied moral responsibility to intention and consent rather than volition.

<sup>21</sup> In context, she goes on to emphasize that mere approval of the understanding “is not at all an action”; such rational approbation is “passive” rather than “active” (492). So the will, *if* equated with the last perception or approval of the understanding, cannot be identified with our active power of self-motion. Another pertinent passage attributes acts of willing to non-human animals, while denying them a power of self-motion (487). Here too, willing cannot be equivalent to the power of self-motion.

<sup>22</sup> In the passage discussed above from the manuscript of the *Institutions*, for example, she describes the will as producing a motion that an agent could have chosen not to produce (Du Châtelet 1738–40, sheet 369 verso).

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