The aim of this short piece is to emphasise a point about the conflict between libertarianism and compatibilism, that that human experience of choosing is neutral between the two. There cannot be a plausible ‘argument from experience’ for libertarianism. Think about the following case, which is meant to favour libertarianism, from a leading proponent. It is offered by the libertarian Robert Kane. He is countering the frequently-made criticism made by compatibilists that such libertarianism is indistinguishable from randomness or whimsy. He supposes a woman driving to work who meets an accident and realizes that if she stops she will be late, but if she does stop she may nevertheless be able to lessen the distress of those involved in the accident. Kane says

[U]nder such conditions, the choice the woman might make either way will not be “inadvertent,” “accidental,” “capricious,” or “merely random” (as critics of indeterminism say) because the choice will be *willed* by the woman either way when it is made, and it will be done for*reasons* either way—reasons that she then and there *endorses*…So when she decides, she endorses one set of competing reasons over the other as the one she will act on. But *willing* what you do in this way, and doing it for *reasons* that you endorse, are conditions usually required to say something is done “on purpose,” rather than accidentally, capriciously, or merely by chance. Robert Kane, ‘Libertarianism’, in J.M. Fischer, R. Kane, D. Pereboom, & M. Vargas (eds) *Four Views on Free Will* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing), 5-43. (29, emphases in the original)

Some of this is reminiscent of the late C.A. Campbell’s view of contra-causal freedom, a free act being one that is done from duty and against the causal flow of desire. I won’t go into that view here. (When the situation is described as one having reasons or conditions the compatibilist freely claps his hands with glee). It is easy to see that the situation as described by Kane is easily incorporated into compatibilism. For compatibilism has no difficulty at all in allowing for conflicts in the self between one set of desires and another, or of a stalemate between the two settled by the preference for one of them; of willing what one does as a result of settling the claims of competing reasons; of sudden decisions following periods of hesitancy and even of decisions which when the decision is made, surprise the agent. All these are what we may call the phenomena of conscious choice, cannot be used as an argument in favour of libertarianism. They are equally open to the compatibilist and the libertarian; but when they are described as Kane describes them above then this is *obvious*.

But there is more. Libertarianism has the following it has because it is claimed that it provides a clear criterion of human responsibility, a necessary and sufficient condition of it. The usefulness of this criterion for that purpose, establishing that he is morally responsible and what he is responsible for, is in fact impossibly difficult. Such a choice is weird. It is that human beings have the power in a situation in which A is preferred to choose B instead of A, *all other states of affairs being exactly unchanged*. Claims of this type are empirically unverifiable and unfalsifiable and require us to believe that each of us possesses and exercises such a power when not the least piece of empirical evidence is produced for it.

This is to underline the point that indeterminism either lapses into an account easily dealt with by the compatibilist, and is not an empirical theory, verified by an appeal to human experience, but postulates an indeterministic choice as a metaphysical postulate.

So Jerry Walls (who is not a friend of compatibilism any more than he is a friend of Calvinism) has observed:

Compatibilists, moreover, like Pharoah’s magicians, seem capable of duplicating in their own terms every power and ability that libertarians claim their view distinctively grants to agents. (Jerry Walls ‘Why No Classical Theist, Let Alone Orthodox Christian, Should Ever Be a Compatibilist’, *PhilosophIa Christi*, 13, no.1 (2011), 75-104. On page 77 Walls cites Stewart Goetz with approval, ‘Stump on Libertarianism and the Principle of Alternative Possibilities’ *Faith and Philosophy,* 18 (2001) pp. 93-191.)

The presumption that libertarianism is nevertheless the default position, so common in current philosophy of religion, is clearly visible here. Compatibilists are said to be like hard-hearted Pharoah’s magicians, not the friends of the people of God, while indeterminists are like God-fearing Moses, presumably.

I agree with Walls. Another way of putting this is to say that libertarians cannot give an example of libertarian choice without falling into compatibilism.

The argument for libertarianism is supported by the claim that only absolute alternativity can provide a sufficiently strong notion of contingency.

Human actions may have these properties too, the property of being brought about by unforeseen factors and so of being capable of surprising us. Such ‘contingency’, hiddenness, is necessary for the contemplation and execution of human decisions to act. If the action is to be spontaneous, free from external coercion, as compatibilists affirm, then if it is deliberated then it must be undertaken in the presence of a veil of ignorance as to what a person will decide to do at that point.

In such a case the individual’s ignorance may not only be a feature of a person’s lack of knowledge only of *others’* actions, but someone will encounter such a lack of knowledge regarding *his own* actions. We are frequently unable to tell for sure how we are going to make up our minds. Until we do so, we do not know what we will do until the point of choice. Some way off that point the decision may, as far as we are concerned, go either way; it may be a choice of A if at that point there’s a predominating reason for A, or a choice of B if it is preferred. It is not until we have finally and irrevocably made up our minds that we ourselves can be said to *know* what we have decided to do; and the decision may be surprising to us. Even actions that we ourselves may consider doing, and do, may be like this too. So Joe may decide to wear his new tie this morning, and be rather surprised by his decision.

As we engage in new deliberations and new choices there are new indeterminacies until these choices have been made, and our minds are irrevocably made up. As we have suggested, the choices made may surprise us, even if they are our own choices, and we have a sufficient reason for them. The epistemic openness of compatibilism throws light on the intelligibility and freedom of the agent’s action, and distinguishes the determinism of compatibilism from that of fatalism and of course of openness, even if there is no detectable difference in practice between logical indeterminacy and epistemic openness.

The decree of God and human agency

The operation of a divine decree such as Calvinists maintain does not take away such powers of choice with respect to creaturely causes, because the decreer also decrees that the end should come about by the person making his mind up for himself in a state of ignorance as to what his choice may turn out to be.

It may surprise some than no less authentic a Calvinist than John Calvin himself says this:

Hence as to future time, because the issue of all things is hidden from us, each ought to so apply himself to his office, as though nothing were determined about any part.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The basic idea here is that the divine decree does not smother or collapse or override the distinction between causes that are forced and causes that are ingredients in free choices. So that while all things that are decreed are necessitated by the decree, for the agent they involve the resolving of a state of personal indecision.

This is part of the story why the phenomena of choice cannot distinguish the libertarianism from compatibilist.

1. John Calvin, *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God*, (1552) trans. J.K.S. Reid, (London, James Clarke & Co. 1961, 171) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)