

## Free Will IV: Libertarianism

### AGENT-CAUSAL & EVENT-CAUSAL APPROACHES

So far we have understood causation as a relation between events: one event causes another to happen (although to make the account we looked at last week work, if we stick with events we will have to understand such events in a very fine grained way: the event of pecking at a red thing is different to the event of pecking at a scarlet thing). Many libertarians instead embrace the idea that an *agent* is the first relatum of the causal action relation, at least for those happenings that are free actions. It is far from obvious how to understand agent causation: what is it for an agent—rather than an agent doing or deciding something—to be the relatum of a causal relation? That is so whether we think of causation on a counterfactual or a regularity model. For the agent exists all along; why do we get the action at some particular time? Writers like Tim O'Connor and E.J. Lowe think that we should understand causation in terms of the causal powers of agents and objects; but it is unclear that this helps with the problem. (For a recent attempt to address this problem, see Nathaniel Baron-Schmitt, 'Thing Causation')

An alternative is for the libertarian to stick with event causation. Think of a volition (an agent's choosing) to be an uncaused event; and then think of it causing other events in a standard way. The libertarian doesn't seem to lose anything by thinking in this way.

### KANE'S ACCOUNT

We'll focus on one particular event-causal approach, that give by Robert Kane in his 'Two Kinds of Incompatibilism' (in later writings he gave a rather different account). He thinks that any successful account must resolve a tension between two ideas that it wants to respect:

- (I) The Explanation condition: the account gives us an explanation of why the agent did one thing rather than another. (This in turn is later broken into two parts: how the agent can produce the outcome, and how it can be done for a reason.)
- (II) The Ultimacy condition: the ultimate explanation of why the agent did one thing rather than another resides in the agent (that the agent did it) and nowhere else. (I have simplified Kane's presentation of these points)

Then the problem is as follows: the Ultimacy condition requires indeterminism. But undetermined events cannot, by their nature, be explained. And so the Ultimacy condition is incompatible with the Explanation condition. (Note that Kane he thinks that agent-causal accounts cannot resolve this problem, but it's not really clear that they have any more difficulty in explaining *this* problem than the event-causal approach he proposes.)

Before looking at whether Kane's account can resolve this problem it is worth asking in what sense undetermined events cannot be explained. Take a genuinely chance event: for instance, suppose that a given radium atom decays at a certain time *t*. Suppose that that decay in turn causes an alarm to be triggered. Can we give an explanation of why the alarm goes off? In a sense we can: we mention the radium atom, and of how its decay interacted with the alarm. But in another sense we can't: we can't give an explanation of why the alarm went off *rather than didn't go off*. This is because we cannot give an explanation of why the radium atom decayed rather than didn't decay: its decay is undetermined. David Lewis, to whom this distinction is

due, calls these different sorts of explanations ‘plain’ explanations and ‘contrastive’ explanations. In an indeterministic case we can give a plain explanation of why something happened, by charting the sequence of indeterministic events that led up to it. But we can’t give a contrastive explanation of why that event happened *rather than some other*. And it seems that what we want in the free will discussion is a contrastive explanation: we want to know why the agent did one thing rather than another.

Kane wants an account that respects both The Explanation Condition and The Ultimacy Condition. He thinks that free will arises in cases of deliberation. Suppose an agent is debating whether to do the moral or the selfish thing. They are pulled in both directions. The conflict is resolved by a ‘effort of will’, that results in a choice. Suppose that they decide to do the good thing. Then there are factors that cause the decision (the agent’s beliefs about what is right, their weighing of the circumstances, and so on); so this is not agent causation. But the decision is nonetheless indeterministic: it is not determined by those factors. One way of thinking about this is to imagine two agents, with the same history, one of whom chooses one way, and one of whom chooses the other. What is to explain the difference?

Doesn’t this mean that there is no explanation as demanded by The Explanation Condition? Of course there is a plain explanation of why they did what they did. But we are after a contrastive explanation. Can this be given? Kane says that the answer to this is that the agent came to believe that the reasons on which they acted were the best reasons. But why did they come to believe this? The answer is simply that this is what they chose. So the explanation is circular. (This is the question Q that is raised on p. 245. See also his response to Objection 1 on p. 247.)

Kane tries to argue that the circularity doesn’t matter, but doesn’t this really amount to the admission that there is no answer as to why the agent chose one course rather than the other? Moreover, if the circular account is acceptable, can’t the agent-causal libertarian make use of it? The problems that Kane raises for the agent-causal libertarian look more like problems for all libertarians.

If Kane’s approach doesn’t work, it looks as though the libertarian will have to give up on the Explanation condition. That is not out of the question, but it does seem to challenge something fundamental in our intuitive conception of freedom and responsibility: it is hard to think how an agent can be responsible for a choice if there is no explanation of why they did it. We could just say: that’s the brute fact of how we assign responsibility. But if we say that there, why criticize the compatibilist when they say that it’s just a brute fact that we do hold someone responsible, even though they were determined to do it?

Note though that the kind of compatibilist account we looked at last week seems to have just the same problems: whilst they can give an explanation at the physical level of why two psychologically identical agents might choose and act differently, they too cannot give an explanation at the psychological level. Should we see that as a mark against that account? Or should we rather think that it just shows us that nothing is to be gained by embracing libertarianism? (Note that List sometimes describes that as a form of libertarianism—‘compatibilist libertarianism’!) Alternatively, it might make you give up on free will altogether.