

Free will & determinism

The midterm exam is in class, Thursday, March 4, the Thursday before spring break.

That day, you will be given a blue book along with a sheet of paper which will include four quotes taken from the readings for this course. No optional readings will be used, and each of the quotes will be central to some part of the author's argument. (I will choose them for their importance, not their obscurity.)

The readings from which the quotes may be taken extend from the beginning of the semester until the readings for February 16, on the topic of free will and determinism.

With respect to **three** of these four quotations, you will be asked to do the following three things:

1. Identify the author of the quote.
2. Explain, clearly and in your own words, the argument of which the quote is a part. (You need explain only the particular argument of which the quote is a part, not the author's whole argument.)
3. State and briefly evaluate at least one objection to that argument. The objection may be one discussed in class, or something that you have come up with on your own.

You will have 50 minutes (the usual class period) to complete the exam. Accordingly, you will have just a bit more than 15 minutes, on average, to work on each question. If you are prepared for the exam, it might well take you less time than that.

Our topic today is the nature of free will; more specifically, it is the relationship between freedom of the will and the thesis of determinism. But before moving on to that topic I'd like to briefly conclude our discussion of the argument from evil and the free will defense.

You will recall that the argument from evil went like this:

The argument from evil

1. God exists.
 2. If God exists, then God is omnipotent.
 3. If something is omnipotent, it can do anything.
 4. If God exists, then God can do anything. (2,3)
 5. If God exists, then God is wholly good.
 6. If something is wholly good, it always eliminates as much evil as it can.
 7. If God exists, then God eliminates as much evil as God can. (5,6)
 8. If God exists, then God eliminates all evil. (4,7)
 9. If God exists, then there is no evil. (8)
 10. There is no evil. (1,9)
 11. Some evil exists.
-
- C. There is evil and there is no evil. (10,11)

The free will defense is an objection to this argument. More specifically, it is an objection to premise 6 of this argument, which goes roughly as follows:

Because free will is a good, a wholly good being might wish for others to have free will. But it is impossible to both give free will to creatures and stop them from using that free will to do evil. (To do the latter would be to take away, to that extent, their free will.) Hence a wholly good creature might well **not** eliminate evil which it was within its power to eliminate, when doing so would be an infringement on the free will of the creature causing the evil.

But this free will defense gives rise to some further questions, which I'd like to spend a bit of time discussing.

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This objection could be summarized as follows:

Mackie's objection to the free will defense

- 1 It is possible for all people to have free will and never cause evil.
 - 2 If it is possible for the world to be a certain way, then God could have made it that way.
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- C God could have made the world such that all people have free will and never cause evil.

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The first is Mackie's objection to the free will defense:

"if God has made men such that in their free choices they sometimes prefer what is good and sometimes what is evil, why could he not have made men such that they always freely choose the good? If there is no logical impossibility in a man's freely choosing the good on one, or several occasions, there cannot be a logical impossibility in his freely choosing the good on every occasion. God was not, then, faced with a choice between making innocent automata and making beings who, in acting freely, would sometimes go wrong: there was open to him the obviously better possibility of making beings who would act freely but always go right."

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It is obviously a crucial part of this objection that it is impossible for God to both give us free will and prevent any evil from occurring. But if Mackie's argument is sound, this is simply a mistake.

One response would be to deny premise 1. But, in the end, this does not seem very plausible. Surely God wished that we would not use our free will to bring about evil; was God, irrationally, wishing for something impossible to be the case?

Intuitively, what one wants to say is that it is possible for everyone to always freely do the right thing, but impossible for God to **make** them freely do the right thing. This suggests that the free will defense's best objection to Mackie's argument is to reject premise 2, not premise 1.

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This assumption -- that it is impossible for God to ensure that everyone freely chooses to avoid evil -- involves some substantial assumptions about the nature of free will. We will turn to those after we conclude our discussion of the problem of evil.

This also introduces some puzzles about the nature of omnipotence. Earlier, we discussed the idea that even an omnipotent being could not bring about an impossible state of affairs, like a round square. But now we are saying that there are some **possible** states of affairs that even an omnipotent being could not bring about. So what does omnipotence mean, anyway?

We now know that if we want to accept the free will defense, we must reject this definition:

A being is omnipotent if and only if it can bring about any possible state of affairs.

This pushes us towards a more complicated definition of the following sort:

A being, B, is omnipotent if and only if it can bring about any state of affairs such that it is not impossible for B to bring that state of affairs about.

As noted above, we can then contrast the following two definitions of omnipotence.

A restricted understanding of omnipotence

A being, B, is omnipotent if and only if it can bring about any state of affairs such that it is not impossible for B to bring that state of affairs about.

Unrestricted omnipotence

A being, B, is omnipotent if and only if it can bring about any state of affairs, whether possible or impossible.

We have seen that responding to Mackie's objection to the free will defense seems to force us into the restricted view of omnipotence sketched above.

One thing you may want to think about is how one might respond to the argument from evil if one had a more unrestricted view of what omnipotence implies.

But, quite apart from this, the notion of omnipotence can, as Mackie says, seem to lead to a paradox. A reasonable argument can be made that **the very idea of an omnipotent being is contradictory**. If this were true, then this would, for obvious reasons, be a problem for traditional theistic views.

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One way to present this paradox is via the following question:

Could God create a stone so large that God cannot lift it?

Yes

No

Then there is something that God cannot do, namely lift the stone.

Then there is something that God cannot do, namely create such a stone.

Suppose we endorse some restricted view of omnipotence like the one given in the above definition. Then how should we respond to the dilemma?

Suppose that one wants a less restricted notion of omnipotence, such that an omnipotent being can do absolutely anything -- including bringing about impossible states of affairs. Then how should we respond to the dilemma?

It seems that, whichever way we think of omnipotence, this dilemma is fairly easily resolved. So it does not seem to present a very serious problem for the view that there is an omnipotent being.

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These versions of the argument grant that the existence of God is consistent with the existence of **some** evil - and therefore grant that Mackie's argument to the contrary is unsuccessful - but argue that the existence of God is inconsistent with the **amount** and **type** of evil that we find in the world.

One kind of evil we observe in the world which is immediately problematic from the point of view of the free will defense is **natural evil**: evil which is not directly caused by human free actions. The suffering which results from various natural disasters is an obvious and important example of evil of this kind.

It is worth noting that many of the examples on which we naturally focus are actually mixed cases: cases in which the evil in question is partly the result of human free action, and partly not. So, for example, though Hurricane Katrina was a natural disaster, its effects were certainly made worse through poor management of the relief effort and insufficient protection for the city; perhaps hurricanes are made more violent by human-caused climate change; etc. But it is very implausible that we can explain all of the evil which results from natural disasters in this way.

So what should the proponent of the free will defense say about the problem of natural evil? This is a difficult question. Here are some of the things one might say:

- Though earthquakes and the like are not caused by human free actions, our inability to avoid the harm caused by them is. In particular, the event of human beings removing themselves from the care of God - an event symbolized in the Judeo-Christian tradition by the story of the Garden of Eden - placed human beings in a world in which they were subject to natural forces which they were then unable to avoid. (This is the sort of story than van Inwagen develops in much more detail in the optional reading.)
- It is important that the world be governed by laws of nature; otherwise, it would be impossible to know the effects of our actions, and hence impossible to take responsibility for the outcomes of those actions. However, it is impossible to create a world governed by laws of nature which does not also include some natural events which cause suffering; so even an omnipotent being could not have created a law-governed world which was free of natural disasters.
- Though earthquakes and the like are not the result of human free actions, they are the result of the free actions of nonhuman agents, like fallen angels. So the free will defense applies to these events just as directly as to events caused by human choices.

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One might also adopt some combination of these ideas.

Something you may want to think further about is this: suppose that we accept the free will defense as an explanation of the possibility of evil caused by human free action, and one of the above as an explanation of the possibility of evil not directly caused by human free action. Would this suffice to explain the fact that God does not, in the case of an **individual instance of terrible evil**, intervene to stop it?

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To answer understand this topic, we first need to get clear about what “determinism” means. Here is what van Inwagen says:

Determinism is the thesis that it is true at every moment that the way things then are determines a unique future, that only *one* of the alternative futures that may exist relative to a given moment is a physically possible continuation of the state of things at that moment. Or, if you like, we may say that determinism is the thesis that only one continuation of the state of things at a given moment is consistent with the laws of nature.

The example of “rolling back history” as an illustration of what determinism implies.

It is common to use “determinism” as name for the thesis that we have no free will. This is the source of much confusion. **“Determinism” is the name of a thesis about the laws of nature, and that is all. It is not a thesis about free will, or about what we can predict, or anything else.**

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Our question is whether determinism is compatible with free will. We now know what “determinism” means; but what does it mean to say that we have free will?

Here no neat definition is possible, since there is disagreement about what, exactly, it takes for an action to be free. But we can offer some helpful paraphrases: to freely choose between A and B is **to be able** to do either of A and B; to freely choose between A and B is for both of A and B **to be open** to you.

The question of the compatibility of free will and determinism is then: can it ever be the case that choices A and B are open to you, despite the fact that the laws of nature (and the prior state of the universe) are consistent only with you doing A?

The **incompatibilist** says “No.” The **compatibilist** says “Yes.”

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Now that we have these views on the table, we can see a connection between these views about free will and the use of this notion made in the free will defense. Remember that the free will defense relies on the assumption that **it is impossible for God to make you freely choose to do something**. (If this were possible, then Mackie would be right, and God could have made us always freely choose to do good.)

But now imagine that compatibilism is true, and that we can have free will in a deterministic universe. If that were the case, then it certainly seems as though God could have created a universe which is such that the initial conditions + the laws of nature determined that no one would ever choose to do evil. And, if compatibilism is true, it seems that such a universe could include beings with free will.

For this reason, it seems that the free will defense works **only if incompatibilism is true**.

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Many people have a strong initial intuition that free will and determinism are incompatible, and hence that compatibilism must be false.

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This argument relies on a principle that van Inwagen calls the “no choice principle”:

Suppose that p and that no one has (or ever had) any choice about whether p . And suppose also that the following conditional (if-then) statement is true and that no one has (or ever had) any choice about whether it is true: if p , then q . It follows from these two suppositions that q and that no one has (or ever had) any choice about whether q .

As van Inwagen says, this principle seems intuitively very plausible: “how could I have a choice about something that is an inevitable consequence of something I have no choice about?”

But if this principle is true, we can show -- with the assumption of two other plausible principles -- that free will is inconsistent with determinism.

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Each of the additional principles in van Inwagen's argument says that we have no choice about something.

The first principle is: We have no choice about events which happened in the distant past.

The second principle is: We have no choice about what the laws of nature are.

Putting these principles together, we can construct an argument for the incompatibility of free will and determinism.

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To state the consequence argument, let 'DINOSAUR' stand for the state of the universe during some time when dinosaurs roamed the earth, and let 'DECISION' stand for my decision to not sing the Notre Dame fight song 10 minutes from now.

The no choice principle

If I have no choice about p, and no choice about whether if p, then q, I have no choice about q.

We have no choice about events which happened in the distant past.

We have no choice about what the laws of nature imply.

Determinism

The laws of nature + the state of the universe at a time determine a unique future. In particular, the laws determine that if DINOSAUR is the case, then so is DECISION.

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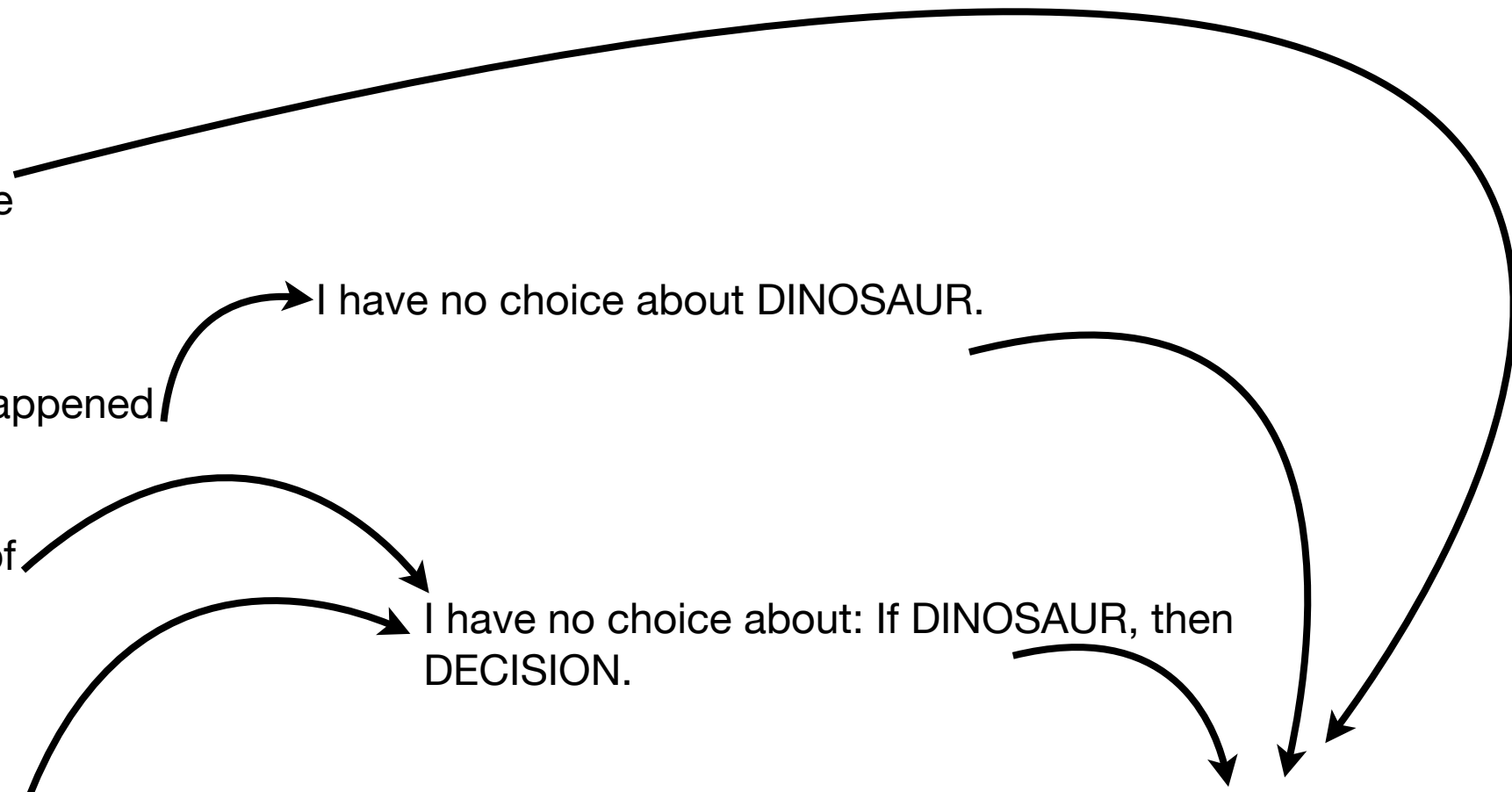
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I have no choice about DINOSAUR.

I have no choice about: If DINOSAUR, then DECISION.

I have no choice about DECISION.



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It is important to be clear about the nature of this argument. We begin by assuming the four principles at left, and from them derive that I have no choice about some future action. Since there is nothing special about DECISION, it seems clear that the argument generalizes to show that I have no choice about any of my future actions. So, if we assume these four principles, we can show of any particular action that it is unfree. Hence, if we assume these four principles, we can show that no action is ever free.

If the first three principles are true -- the No Choice Principle + the claims that we have no choice about the laws of nature or the past -- then, what the argument shows is that **if** determinism is true, **then** we have no free will.

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So to demonstrate the incompatibility of free will and determinism, we assume the truth of determinism, and argue from there to the absence of free will. This is a style of argument called **conditional proof**. To prove the truth of a statement

if p, then q

we assume p as a premise, and argue from this premise, using only other true premises, to q as our conclusion. If we can construct a valid argument with p + some true statements as premises for q, it follows that the conditional statement

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must be true. Here p = the truth of determinism, and q = the denial of the existence of free will.

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We can lay out the consequence argument in premises as follows:

The consequence argument		
1	The laws of nature + the state of the universe at a time imply a unique future. In particular, (let's suppose) the laws imply that if DINOSAUR is the case, then so is DECISION.	Determinism (premise assumed for conditional proof)
2	If the laws of nature imply that X is the case, then we have no choice about X.	No choice about the laws of nature
3	We have no choice about the fact that if DINOSAUR, then DECISION.	1, 2
4	We have no choice about events which happened in the distant past.	No choice about the past
5	We have no choice about DINOSAUR.	4
6	If I have no choice about p, and no choice about whether if p, then q, I have no choice about q.	No choice principle
C	We have no choice about DECISION.	3, 5, 6

If premises 2, 4, and 6 are true, then it follows that if Determinism is true, there is no free will. Hence, if these premises are true, then Incompatibilism is true.

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4	We have no choice about events which happened in the distant past.	No choice about the past
5	We have no choice about DINOSAUR.	4
6	If I have no choice about p, and no choice about whether if p, then q, I have no choice about q.	No choice principle
C	We have no choice about DECISION.	3, 5, 6

If the consequence argument succeeds, it establishes only the conditional claim that if determinism is true, then we have no free will (and so also that if we have free will, the world must not be deterministic).

One way to think about this is in terms of the following chart illustrating four possible combinations of views about free will and determinism:

free will + determinism	no free will + determinism
free will + no determinism	no free will + no determinism

In terms of this chart, what the consequence argument establishes, if successful, is that the upper left box does not describe a way the world could be.

It does not, by itself, establish that we do or do not have free will; and it does not by itself establish that determinism is false, or that it is true.

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It does not, by itself, establish that we do or do not have free will; and it does not by itself establish that determinism is false, or that it is true.

However, it does limit our choices. One option is that we **deny the existence of free will**; a second option is that we **accept the existence of free will, but say that this is only possible in an indeterministic world**.

The first of these is an extremely difficult option to accept, for at least two reasons.

First, it is simply extremely hard to believe that I have no choice about what I will be doing 5 seconds from now. And second, it seems that if there is no free will there is no moral responsibility; and it certainly seems that people are sometimes morally responsible for their actions.

So at this point the view that free will exists, but requires the falsity of determinism, looks like a pretty attractive option.

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However, upon reflection this view too can seem difficult to accept, because it can seem difficult to see how the falsity of determinism could make room for free will.

A good way to introduce the first sort of argument is by way of van Inwagen's example of Jane's decision. We are imagining that Jane is deciding whether to say something, and we are granting for now the incompatibilist's idea that if this decision is free, it must not be determined. Then we can imagine the case going like this:



Make a Mental Picture of Yourself

Each contemplated action will, of course, have antecedents in Jane's cerebral cortex, for it is in that part of Jane (or of her body) that control over her vocal apparatus resides. Let us make a fanciful assumption about these antecedents, since it will make no real difference to our argument what they are. (It will help us to focus our thoughts if we have some sort of mental picture of what goes on inside Jane at the moment of decision.) Let us suppose that there is a certain current-pulse that is proceeding along one of the neural pathways in Jane's brain and that it is about to come to a fork. And let us suppose that if it goes to the left, she will make her confession, and that if it goes to the right, she will remain silent. And let us suppose that it is undetermined which way the pulse will go when it comes to the fork

We now imagine the current pulse traveling through Jane's brain.

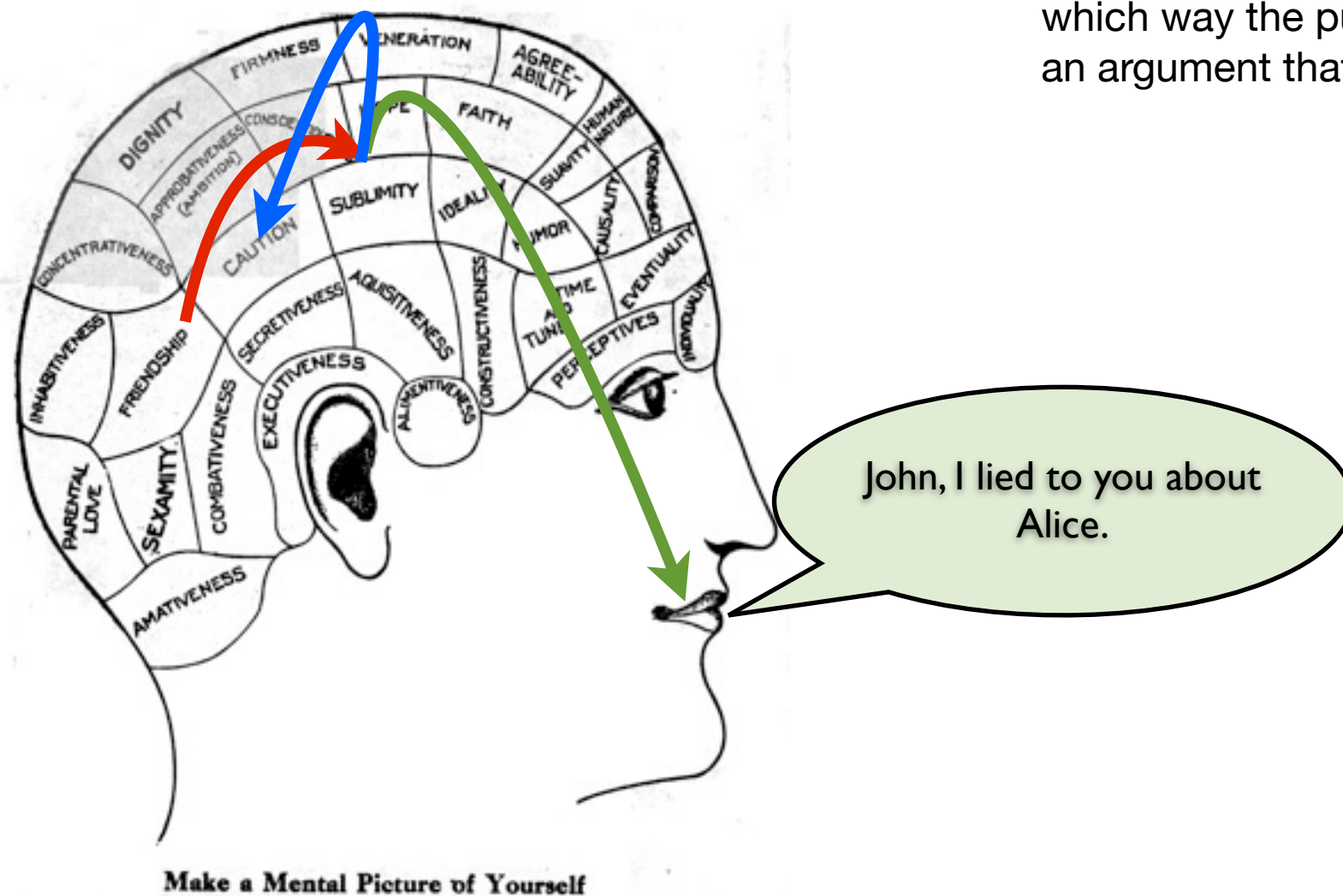
The pulse could go one of two ways. Which way it goes will determine whether or not Jane speaks; and which way will go is not determined by the the laws of nature + the state of Jane's brain (or the state of anything else).

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The key question, now is: is Jane free to decide which way the pulse will go? van Inwagen gives an argument that she is not:

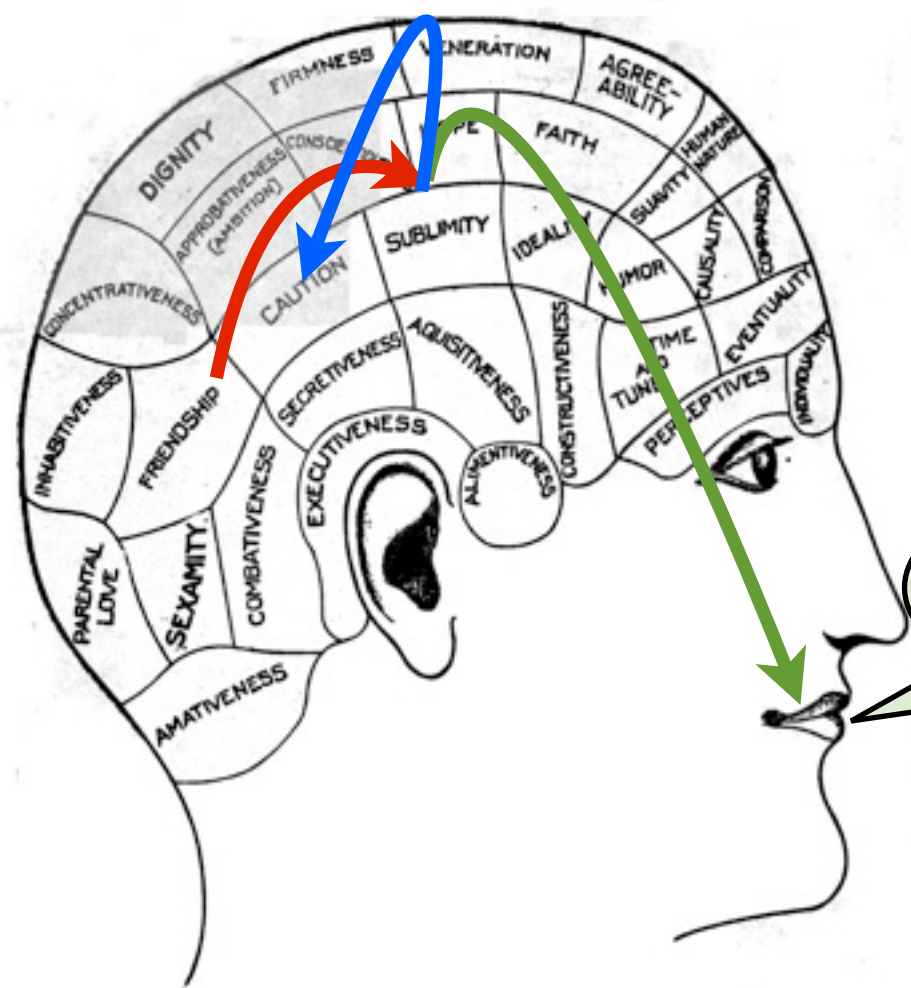


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Now let us ask: Does Jane have any choice about whether the pulse goes to the left or to the right? If we think about this question for a moment, we shall see that it is very hard to see how she could have any choice about that. Nothing in the way things are at the instant before the pulse makes its "decision" to go one way or the other makes it happen that the pulse goes one way or goes the other. If it goes to the left, that *just happens*. If it goes to the right, *that* just happens. There is no way for Jane to *influence* the pulse. There is no way for her to *make* it go one way rather than the other. Or, at least, there is no way for her to make it go one way rather than the other and leave the "choice" it makes an undetermined event. If Jane did something to make the pulse go to the left, then, obviously, its going to the left would *not* be an undetermined event. It is a plausible idea that the only way to have a choice about the outcome of a process is to be able to arrange things in ways that will make it inevitable that this or that outcome occur. If this plausible idea is right, then it would seem that there is no way in which anyone could have any choice about the outcome of an indeterministic process. And it seems to follow that if, when one is trying to decide what to do, it is truly undetermined what the outcome of one's deliberations will be, then one could have no choice about that outcome.



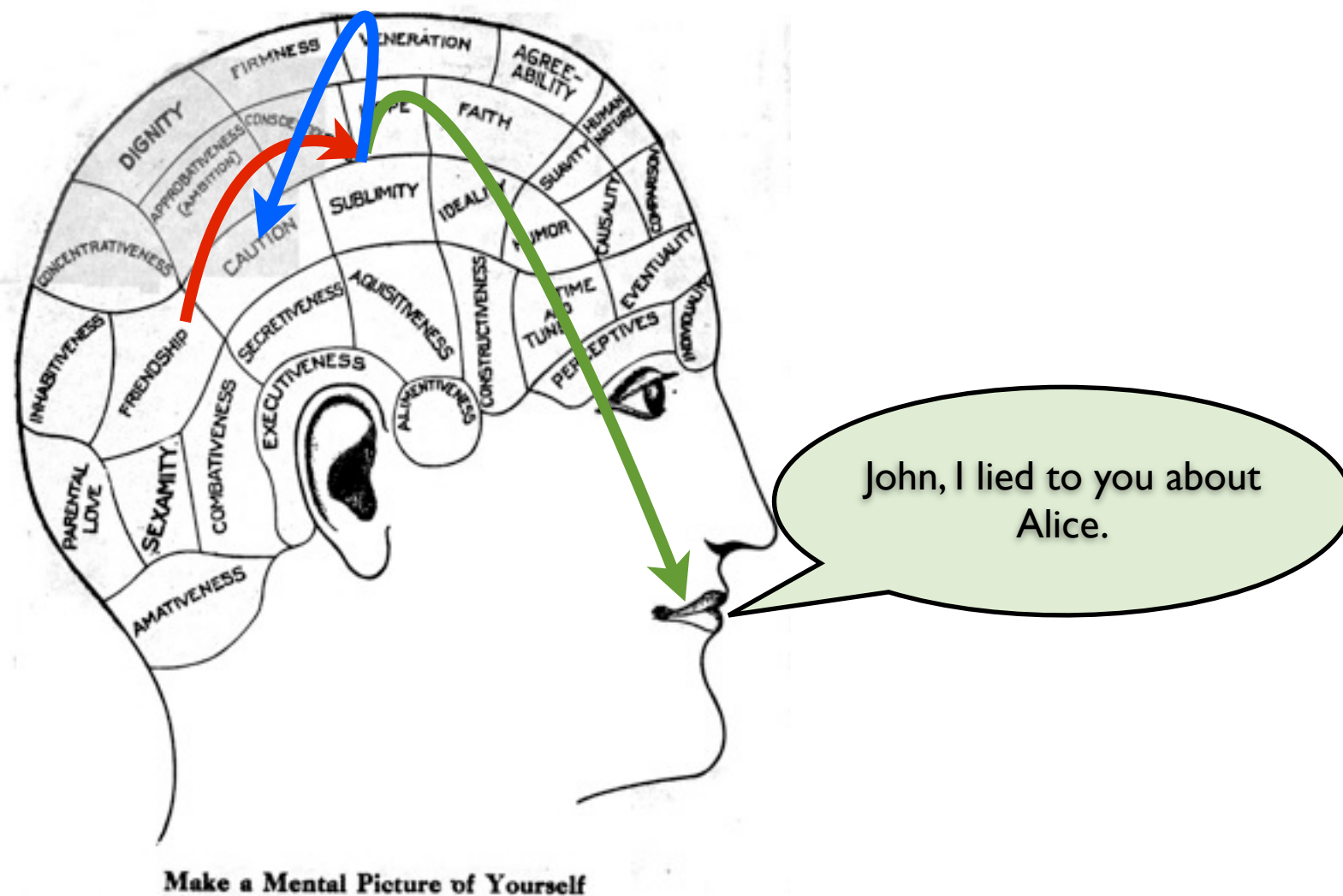
John, I lied to you about Alice.

Make a Mental Picture of Yourself

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The pulse could go one of two ways. Which way it goes will determine whether or not Jane speaks; and which way will go is not determined by the laws of nature + the state of Jane's brain (or the state of anything else).

The basic idea seems to be this: if we think about the causal chain leading up to some putatively free action A of Jane's, then, if A is really free and incompatibilism is true, there must be some event, E, in this causal chain which is not determined by prior events plus the laws of nature. Further, it seems that for A to be free, Jane must have had a choice about whether E happened. But it is hard to see how Jane could have had a choice about whether E happened, since the entire state of the universe prior to E, including everything Jane does and thinks, is consistent both with E happening and with E not happening. But then it was **not up to Jane** whether E happened at all.

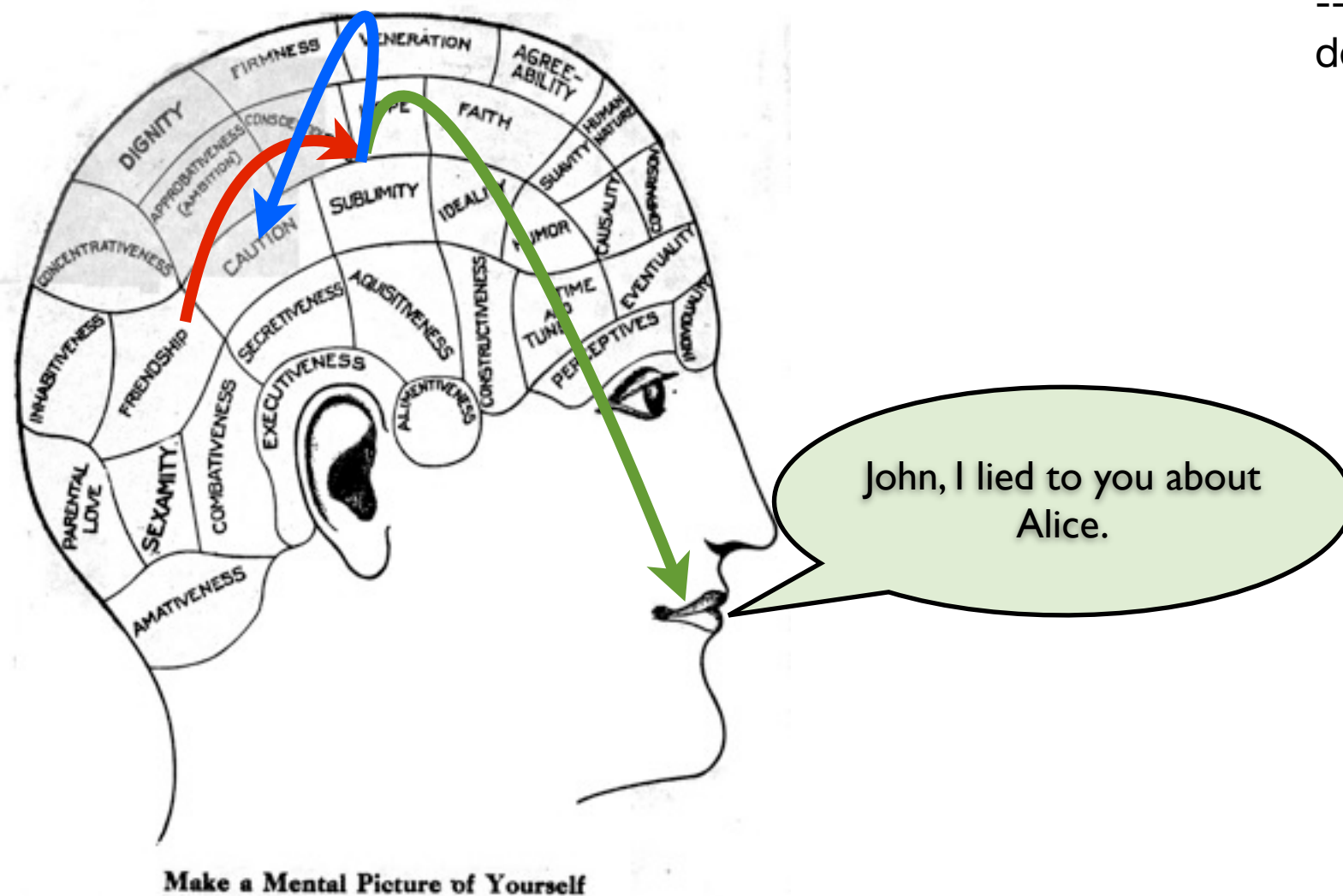


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This argument seems to rely on some principle like the following:

If nothing determines whether someone chooses A or B, the choice of A or B is random, and hence not a free choice.

If any principle of this sort is true, this is serious trouble for the incompatibilist who wants to believe in free will. After all, this sort of principle seems to show that free will **requires** determinism -- or at least requires that human actions be determined.



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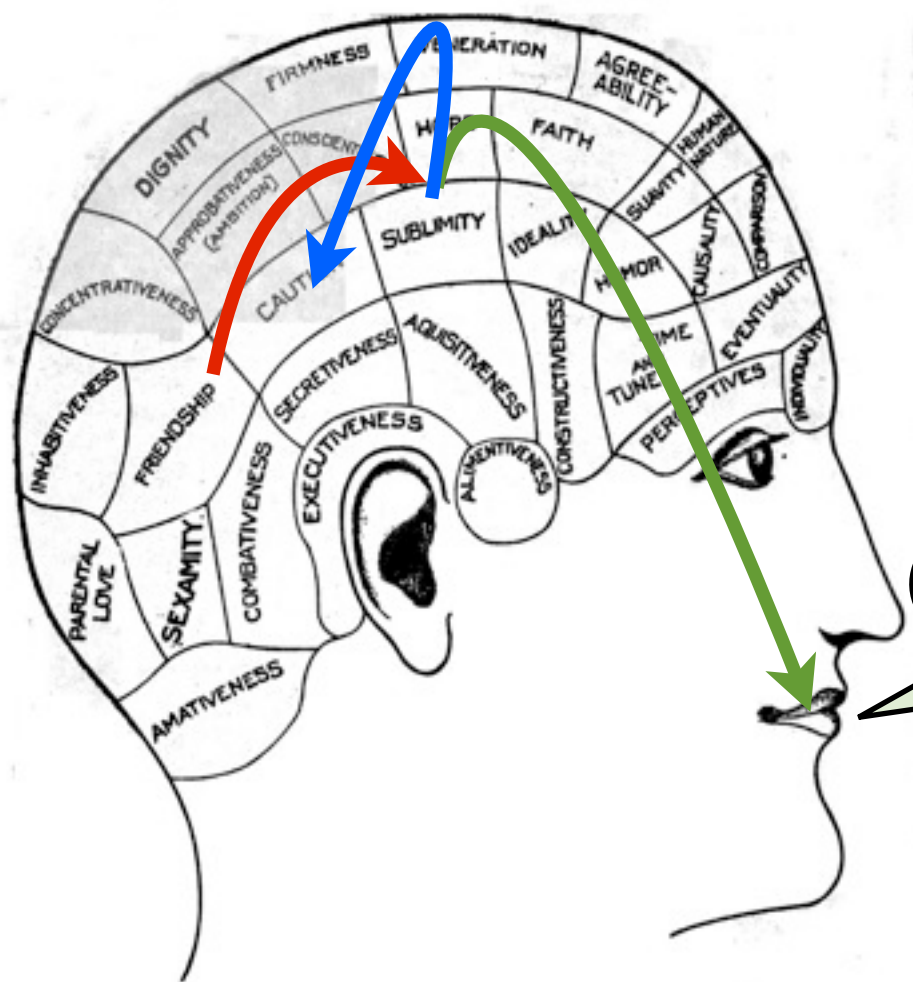
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Something like this was the view of David Hume. He thought that genuine free will requires that one's actions be determined by one's prior motives, and that the idea that there is a conflict between determinism and free will just rests on a confusion:



'Tis commonly allow'd that mad-men have no liberty. But were we to judge by their actions, these have less regularity and constancy than the actions of wise-men, and consequently are farther remov'd from necessity. Our way of thinking in this particular is, therefore, absolutely inconsistent ; but is a natural consequence of these confus'd ideas and un-defin'd terms, which we so commonly make use of in our reasonings, especially on the present subject.



John, I lied to you about Alice.

Make a Mental Picture of Yourself

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But now a disquieting possibility suggests itself. Perhaps the explanation of the fact that both compatibilism and incompatibilism seem to lead to mysteries is simply that the concept of free will is self-contradictory. Perhaps free will is, as the incompatibilists say, incompatible with determinism. But perhaps it is also incompatible with *indeterminism*, owing to the impossibility of anyone's having a choice about the outcome of an indeterministic process. If free will is incompatible with both determinism and indeterminism, then, since either determinism or indeterminism has to be true, free will is impossible.

Recall our chart of possible views about free will above:

free will + determinism	no free will + determinism
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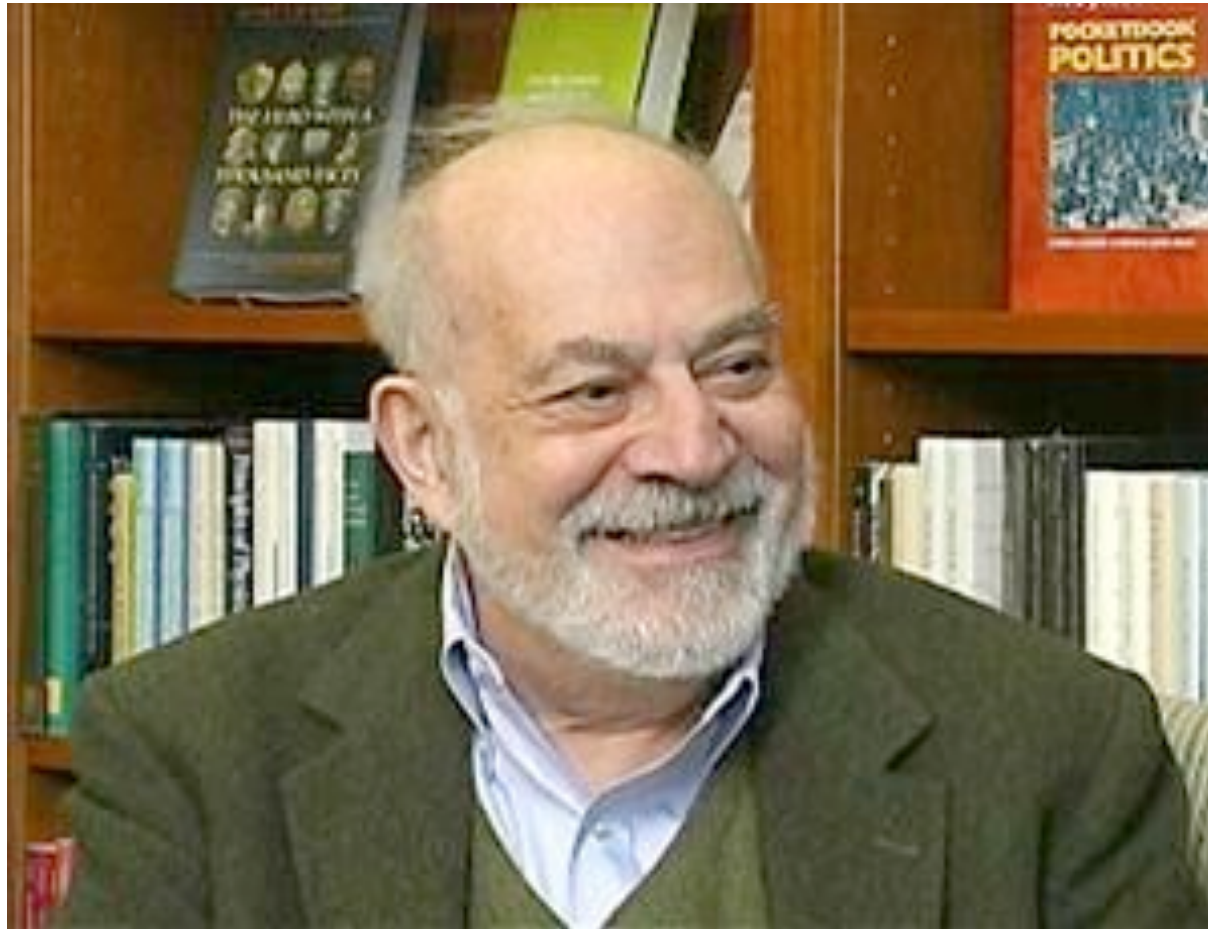
The consequence argument seems to rule out the top left square. But now the example of Jane makes it hard to see how indeterminism could make room for free will, which seems to rule out the bottom left square.

This leaves us only with the right column of the chart - both boxes of which involve denying the existence of freedom of the will.

But before we accept this conclusion, perhaps we should re-examine the compatibilist view that was the target of the consequence argument.

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“Suppose someone --- Black, let us say --- wants Jones to perform a certain action. Black is prepared to go to considerable lengths to get his way, but he prefers to avoid showing his hand unnecessarily. So he waits until Jones is about to make up his mind what to do, and does nothing unless it is clear to him (Black is an excellent judge of such things) that Jones is going to decide to do something *other* than what he wants him to do. If it does become clear that Jones is going to decide to do something else, Black takes effective steps to ensure that Jones decides to do, and that he does do, what he wants him to do....

Now suppose that Black never has to show his hand because Jones, for reasons of his own, decides to perform and does perform the very action Black wants him to perform. In that case, it seems clear, Jones will bear precisely the same moral responsibility for what he does as he would have borne if Black had not been ready to take steps to ensure that he do it. It would be quite unreasonable to excuse Jones for his action ... on the basis of the fact that he could not have done otherwise. This fact played no role at all in leading him to act as he did.... Indeed, everything happened just as it would have happened without Black's presence in the situation and without his readiness to intrude into it.”

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Suppose, at time T, that Black decides that he wants Jones on a bus out of South Bend by some later time, T+3. He hopes that Jones will get on the bus of his own accord, but, if he doesn't, plans to force him onto the bus.

Now suppose that, at time T+1, Jones is deliberating about whether or not to take a bus out of South Bend. He goes back and forth, but eventually decides to board the bus.

At time T+2, Jones boards a bus leaving South Bend. This seems (certainly, at least, to Jones himself) to be a free action. Since it never got to time T+3, Black never had to execute his nefarious plan.

But now think about Jones' decision making at time T+1. At that time, it was already determined that Jones would be boarding a bus out of South Bend. After all, Jones must either decide to board the bus, or not. In the former case he gets on the bus, and in the latter case, Black forces him on the bus, so again he gets on the bus. So facts fixed prior to his decision making process determined that he would get on the bus. Nonetheless, his decision to get on the bus seems to be a free action.

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This seems to be some sort of evidence that free actions can coexist with determinism, and therefore seems to be an argument **for** compatibilism.

This is why the problem of free will seems so hard: no matter what view one takes of the relationship between free will and determinism, one faces some difficult challenges.

And each of these options, as mentioned, has its costs.

Basically, we have three options:

Deny that there is any such thing as free will.

Affirm the existence of free will, and say that this is compatible with determinism being true.

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Either deny that anyone is ever morally responsible for anything, or explain how moral responsibility is possible without free will

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This is why free will seems to be such a great mystery. It is clear that one of the views listed at left must be true, but it is hard to see how any of them could be.