

free will vs. determinism

We've been discussing the free will defense as a response to the argument from evil. This response assumes something about us: that we have free will.

But what does this mean?

To say that we have free will is to say that some of our actions are up to us; it to say that, at least sometimes, we have the ability to choose what we do.

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The first argument starts with an apparent fact about moral responsibility: it seems (to a first approximation) that we are only responsible for actions which we freely perform.

But people are responsible for some of their actions. So, people have free will.

A second argument is similar, and starts from an apparent fact about relationships: genuinely loving relationships of a certain sort must be freely entered into.

But there are genuinely loving relationships between people. So, people have free will.

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A third argument begins with the premise that it really, really, seems as though we have free will. But when it really seems as though the world is a certain way, we should believe that the world is that way, unless we have evidence to the contrary.

So, unless we receive evidence to the contrary, we should believe that we have free will.

Freedom of the will is one of those things which, while it certainly seems real, can seem harder and harder to understand the closer we look. To many philosophers, it has seemed that, once we accept certain features of the world, we can see that they leave no room for freedom of the will.

In the next three classes, we will be asking whether freedom of the will is real. We will be discussing the three most important challenges to the reality of free will: the three most important attempts to show that free will is an illusion.

Our topic today is the challenge to free will posed by determinism.

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More precisely, our topic is the relationship between freedom of the will and determinism, and a cluster of arguments which seem to show that free will is incompatible with both determinism and indeterminism, and hence impossible.

What is “determinism”?

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.


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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 one of those things?

The incompatibilist says ‘No.’ The compatibilist says ‘Yes.’

This gives us three possible views about freedom of the will.



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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.

Determinism

Only one future is consistent with the state of the world at a time + the laws of nature.

The no choice principle

If no one has any choice about whether P, and no one has any choice about whether, if P, then Q, then no one has any choice about whether Q

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

No one has any choice about events which happened in the distant past.

No one has any 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.

To state the consequence argument, let 'DINOSAUR' stand for the entire state of the universe during some time when dinosaurs roamed the earth, and let 'DECISION' stand for my decision to eat a cheeseburger tonight.

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Determinism
Only one future is consistent with the state of the world at a time + the laws of nature.

No one has any choice about DINOSAUR.

The laws of nature say that if DINOSAUR happens, then DECISION happens.

No one has any choice about the fact that if DINOSAUR then DECISION.

No one has any choice about DECISION.

The no choice principle
If no one has about choice about whether P, and no one has any choice about whether, if P, then Q, then no one has any choice about whether Q



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2. No one has any choice about DINOSAUR.
(1)
3. Only one future is consistent with the state of the world at a time + the laws of nature.
(Determinism)
4. The laws of nature say that if DINOSAUR happens, then DECISION happens. (3)
5. No one has any choice about what the laws of nature are.
6. No one has any choice about the fact that if DINOSAUR then DECISION. (4,5)
7. If no one has about choice about whether P, and no one has any choice about whether, if P, then Q, then no one has any choice about whether Q.

C. No one has any choice about DECISION.
(2,6,7)

This argument seems to show that the combination of four theses — that we have no choice about the past, no choice about the laws of nature, the no choice principle, and determinism — rules out free will.

Since the first three of these theses seem quite plausible, the argument seems to show that if determinism is true, there are no free actions — and hence that free will is incompatible with determinism.

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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

if p, then q

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

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This is similar, though not the same as, a reductio argument. Like a reductio argument, it is an argument which is not intended to show the truth of the conclusion. (Van Inwagen believes in free will, after all.)

But unlike a reductio argument, it is not intended mainly to show that one of the premises is false. Instead it is intended to display a connection between one of the premises and the conclusion - to show that if the premise is true, the conclusion must be too.

Before I suggested that there were three possible views about freedom of the will.



van Inwagen's argument seems to rule out the first option. The last appears to be a position of last resort — so let's look at the possibility that free will is real, but incompatible with determinism.

Let's examine this position by way of van Inwagen's example of Jane's decision.

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

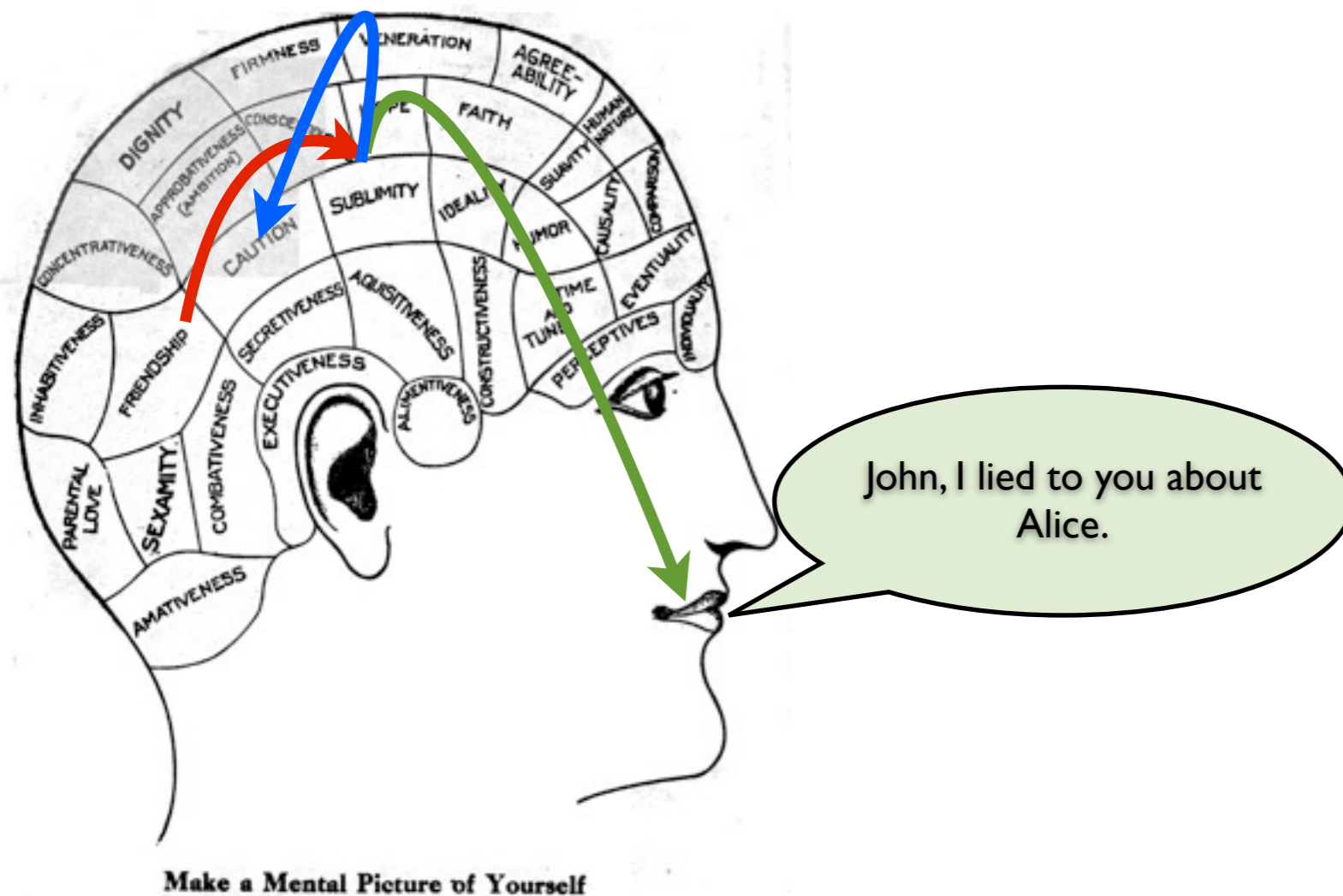


Make a Mental Picture of Yourself

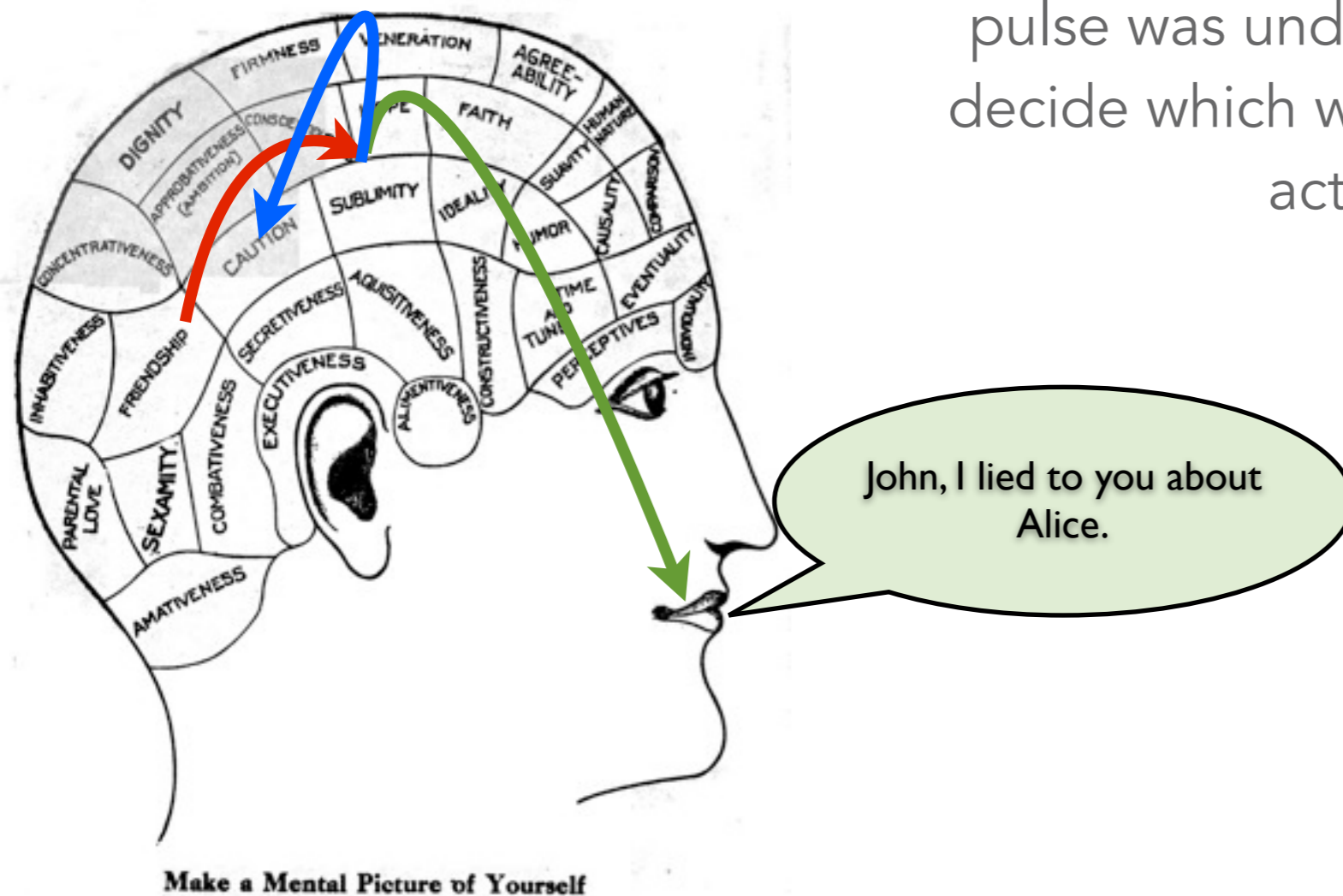
We now imagine the current pulse traveling through Jane's brain.

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

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. For her to be able to decide which way the pulse goes, she must do something prior to the pulse going one way rather than another which determines that the pulse goes that way. But we know that she did no such thing, since the direction of the pulse was undetermined. So she cannot decide which way the pulse goes and the action is not free.



More generally, the idea is 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.

This argument seems to lead to 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.

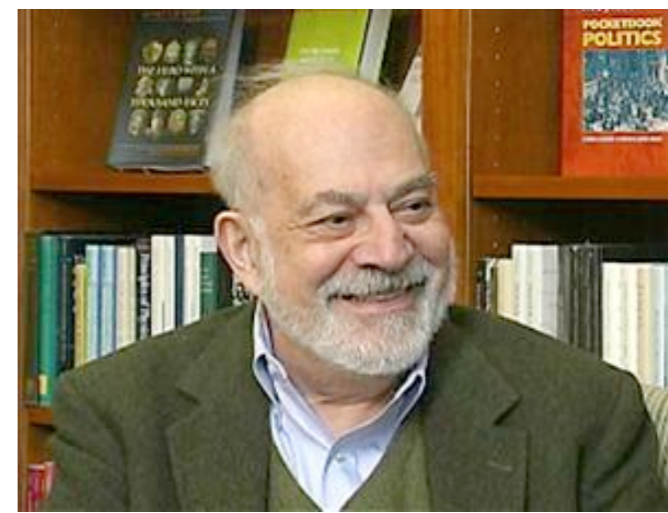
This is, however, hard to swallow, for at least two reasons.

First, it seems that moral responsibility requires free will — and it does seem that we are at least sometimes responsible for our actions.

Second, it is just hard to believe that it is not up to me whether I am going to scratch my nose in a few seconds.

Let's consider a style of argument which is sometimes used to defend the idea that, contra the consequence argument, free will is compatible with determinism.

These are due to the contemporary philosopher Harry Frankfurt.



“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.”

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 action of getting on the bus seems to be a free action.

Does this show that, if free will is possible, it is compatible with determinism?

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Explain how it can be that I have no
choice about p, and no choice about the
fact that if p, then q, and yet have a
choice about q.

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Explain how an action can be
undetermined without being random,
and hence not free.

Make sense of Frankfurt's example; either explain
why Jones is really not free, or why Jones's being
free is not a genuine example of a free action
determined by factors outside of the agent's
control.

freedom of the
will is an illusion

Make sense of the fact that it seems so
clear that what we will do in the near
future is something that we have a
choice about.

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