

Arguments for
free will

What is free
action?

Three views
about free will

The puzzle
of free will &
determinism

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.

Is it true that some of our actions are up to us, and that we sometimes are able to choose what we will do?

This is the question we'll be asking ourselves for the next two weeks. Our discussion will involve us considering the three strongest arguments **against** the view that we have free will.

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There are. The first argument starts with an apparent fact about moral responsibility: it seems (at least to a first approximation) that we are only responsible for actions which we freely perform. If you find out that someone's action was not done of their own free will, then it would be odd to blame them for their action.

But it also seems that people are at least sometimes genuinely responsible for their actions.

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The argument from moral responsibility

1. If someone's action is not free, then they are not responsible for that action.
2. We are all responsible for at least some of our actions.

C. At least some of our actions are free.

How should someone who does not believe in free will respond?

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.

This is not true of all loving relationships; for example, the love of a child for a parent is an obvious counterexample. But certain kinds of loving relationships, like those between spouses or friends, seem to require an element of freedom.

But if this is true then we can construct an argument in the obvious way:

The argument from loving relationships

1. Certain kinds of loving relationships must be freely entered into.
 2. These kinds of loving relationships exist.
-
- C. People in such relationships exercise free will.

A third argument begins with the premise that it really, really, seems as though we have free will.

This, by itself, might not seem to be a very impressive fact. But consider for a moment your beliefs about the color of the carpet. Do you have any reason for believing that the carpet is a certain color other than that it really seems to you to be that color?

Of course, you wouldn't form your belief about the carpet if you knew that you were wearing tinted glasses or otherwise subject to an illusion of some kind. But your current situation is not like that; you have no particular reason to doubt that the world is as it seems.

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But then we can argue as follows:

The argument from seeming

1. It seems to me that I have free will.
2. If the world seems to you to be some way, and you have no reason to doubt that the world is that way, then you should believe that the world is that way.
3. I have no reason to doubt that I have free will.

C. I should believe that I have free will.

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To introduce our first challenge to the reality of free will, it will be useful to begin with the question of what makes an action free.

Consider the following two examples:

Jim likes to annoy Dwight. Knowing that Dwight is fastidious about his office space, Jim encases Dwight's stapler in jello.

Bob likes to bring his stapler to the dining hall. One day while perusing the dessert bar, he drops his stapler into the jello.

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They both performed an act of putting a stapler into jello. But it seems that Jim's act was free, whereas Bob's was not. What's the difference? What makes Jim's act free, and Bob's not?

One obvious difference is that Jim wanted to do this, whereas Bob did not. This gives us a suggestion for what makes an action free: it is free when the action is one that you want to do.

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But, arguably, this is a bit too simple.

Let's look at another pair of cases.

Sam is a heroine addict, but desperately wants to be rid of his addiction. One day he is overcome with desire and takes some of the drug.

Bill enjoys taking heroine. One day he has the opportunity to take the drug, and does so.

They both perform the act of taking heroine. But at least arguably Bill's act is free whereas Sam's is not. However, both desire to take heroine.

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This suggests that freedom is not just doing what you desire.

Another more farfetched pair of cases brings out the same moral.

Maria likes pasta. One day she is in the dining hall, and eats some.

An evil neurosurgeon has implanted in Jane a chip which causes her to desire to eat pasta when in the dining hall. One day she eats some.

Again, both perform the same action, and both desire to perform that action. But it looks like Maria's action is free whereas (at least arguably) Jane's is not.

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These cases suggest that we need something a little more complicated than the idea that free will is just doing what you want to do.

What could this more complicated account be?

One idea is that you have to not desire to perform the action, but also desire to have that desire. Consider the case of the addicts. It looks like Bill desires to desire heroine, whereas Sam does not.

Another idea is that it has to be true that if you did not desire the action, then you would have been able to avoid performing it.

We are not going to worry about the details here. The main point is that both approaches suggest what we might call a **psychological theory of free will**. According to psychological theories of free will, for an act to be free is for it to fit into your overall desires, beliefs, and other psychological states.

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We will find some reason to doubt psychological theories of free will. At this point, though, it looks like this general approach is a pretty plausible way to understand the distinction between free and un-free actions.

This is enough background to get into our challenges to the reality of freedom of the will.

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.



It is worth noting two important things about these options.

The first is that if a psychological theory of free will is true, that would seem to count in favor of the first compatibility option. After all, it seems clear that even if determinism were true we could have beliefs and desires. (These would be just the beliefs and desires we were determined to have.)



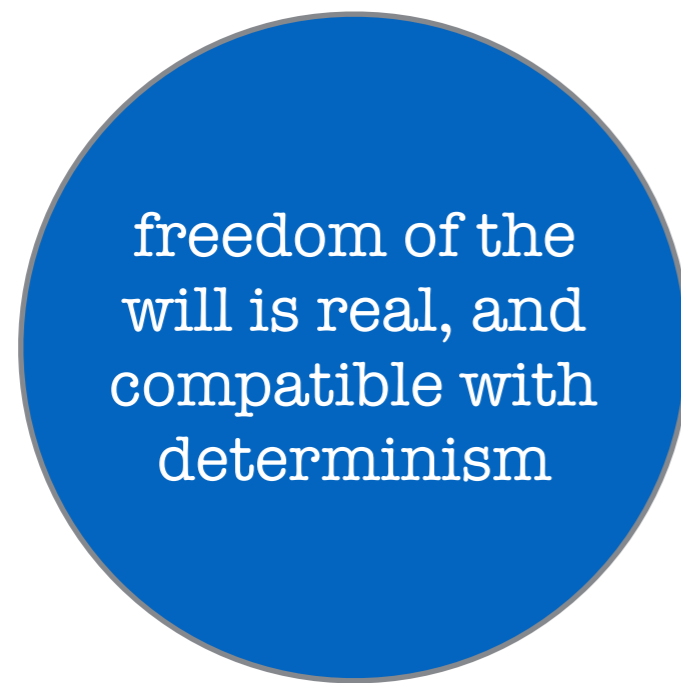
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Further, nothing would stop some actions from fitting in the right way with these beliefs and desires. So nothing in determinism, it seems, could prevent exercises of free will **if** a psychological theory of free will is true.



The second thing to note is that if the free will defense is to have any hope of explaining the existence of evil in the world, it looks like the second option (incompatibilism) must be true. Can you see why?

If freedom of the will is an illusion, then the free will defense is obviously a non-starter.

But less obviously, if compatibility were true, it is hard to see why God could not have set up the world in such a way that it was determined to lead only to free actions which caused no evil.



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The puzzle of free will is that it looks like there are strong arguments against both of the first two options. If that is right, then the very idea of free will is confused, and free will must be an illusion.

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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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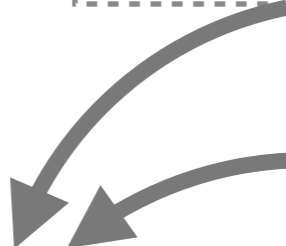
No one has any choice about DINOSAUR.

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

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

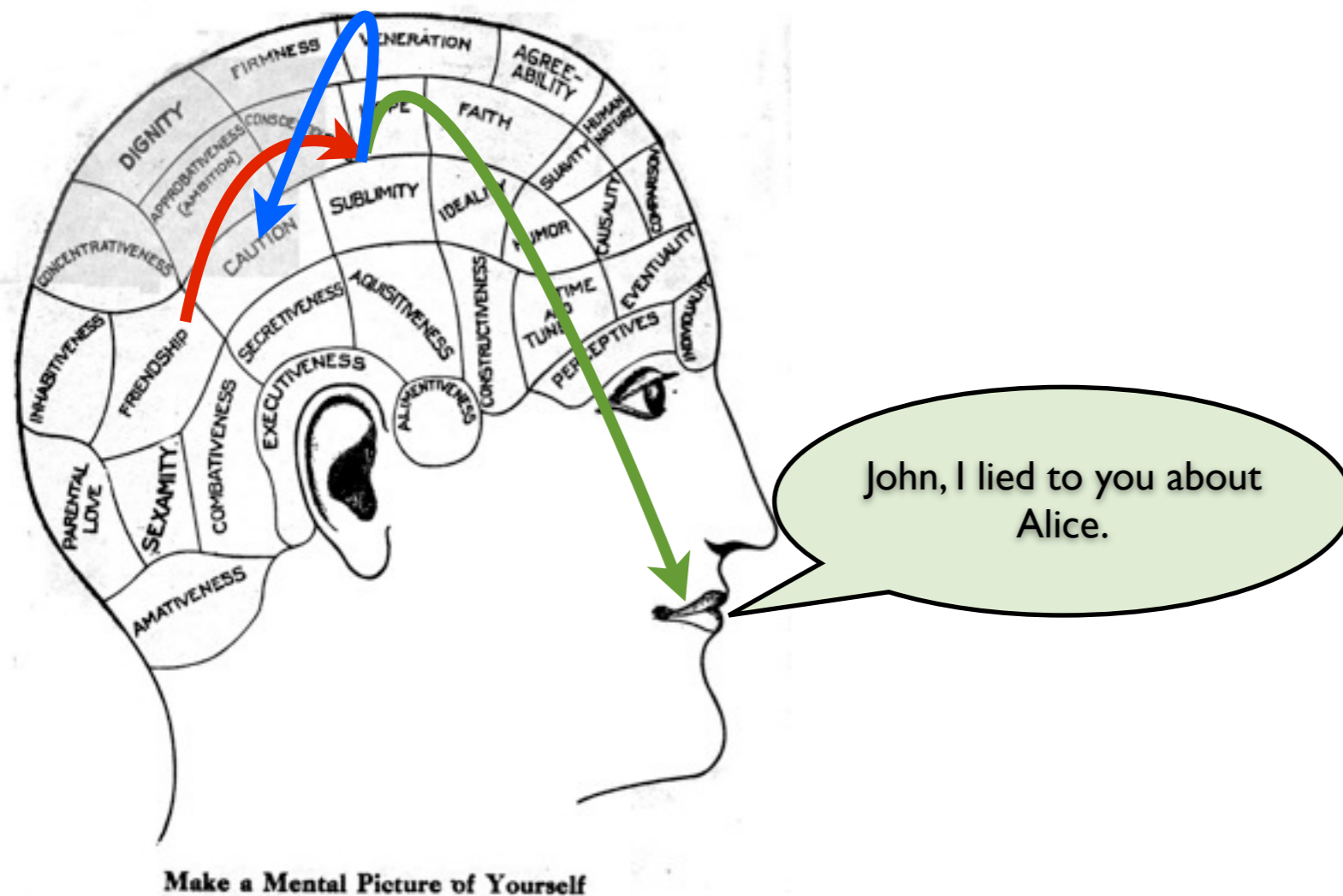
Each contemplated action will, of course, have antecedents in Jane's cerebral cortex, for it is in that part of Jane (or of her body) that control over her vocal apparatus resides. Let us make a fanciful assumption about these antecedents, since it will make no real difference to our argument what they 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



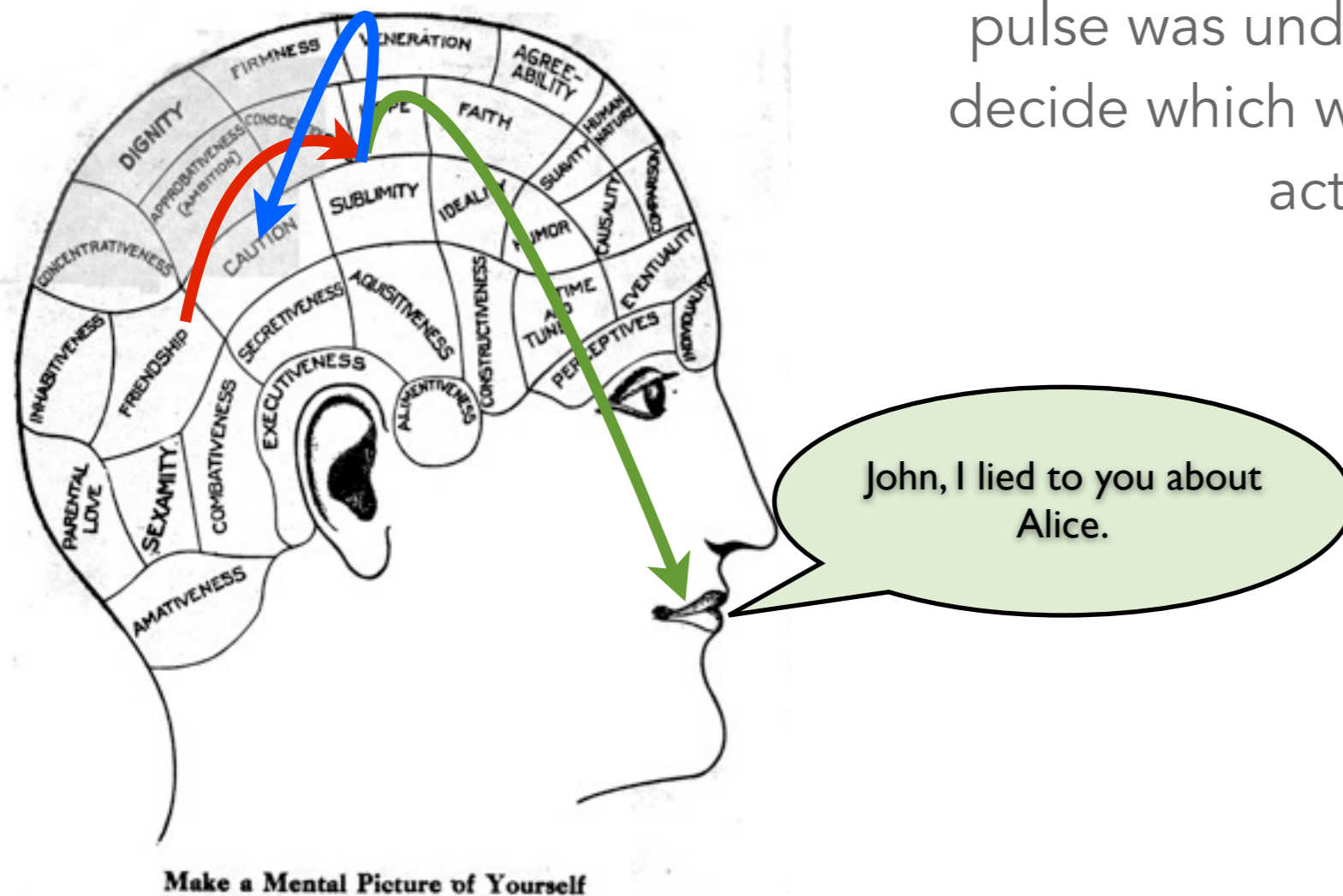
Make a Mental Picture of Yourself

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 puzzling.

We now have two arguments on the table.

One seems to show that free will is incompatible with determinism. The second seems to show that free will requires determinism.

If both arguments are correct, then the very idea of free will is incoherent. The idea of a free action is something like the idea of a round square: it is impossible.

If you believe that free will is real, you should think about which of these arguments you reject, and why.