

FREE WILL VS. DETERMINISM

the case
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free will

free will
and
determinism

against
compatibilist
free will

against
incompatibilist
free will

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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; they are under our control.

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Do you believe that people have free will?

Yes

No

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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; they are under our control.

Can we come up with a more informative **definition** of free will? What is it for an action to be up to us, or to be under our control?

Any definition we give will be (for reasons which will become clear) controversial. But notice that that does not mean that we can't know anything about which actions (if any) are free. To use an example we've discussed before, it is notoriously difficult to define words like "table" and "chair." But we surely know that some things are tables, and some things are chairs.

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Any definition we give will be (for reasons which will become clear) controversial. But notice that that does not mean that we can't know anything about which actions (if any) are free. To use an example we've discussed before, it is notoriously difficult to define words like "table" and "chair." But we surely know that some things are tables, and some things are chairs.

Further — and again, despite the fact that we cannot define "table" or "chair" — we know some things about what it would take to be a table or chair. I suggest that it is reasonable to suppose the same about free action.

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

But before doing that it is worth asking why there is any reason to accept the common view that we do have free will. Are there any arguments in **favor** of the reality of free will?

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But before doing that it is worth asking why there is any reason to accept the common view that we do have free will. Are there any arguments in favor of the reality of free will?

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.

This suggests the following simple argument:

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This suggests the following simple argument:

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?

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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.

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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.

This might suggest the following general rule:

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.

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This might suggest the following general rule:

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.

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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THE ARGUMENT FROM SEEMING

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C. I should believe that I have free will.

What we are going to see over the next three classes is that premise (3) of this argument can be called into question.

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

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

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 only one continuation of the state of things at a given moment is consistent with the laws of nature."

Consider a timeline of the history of the universe.

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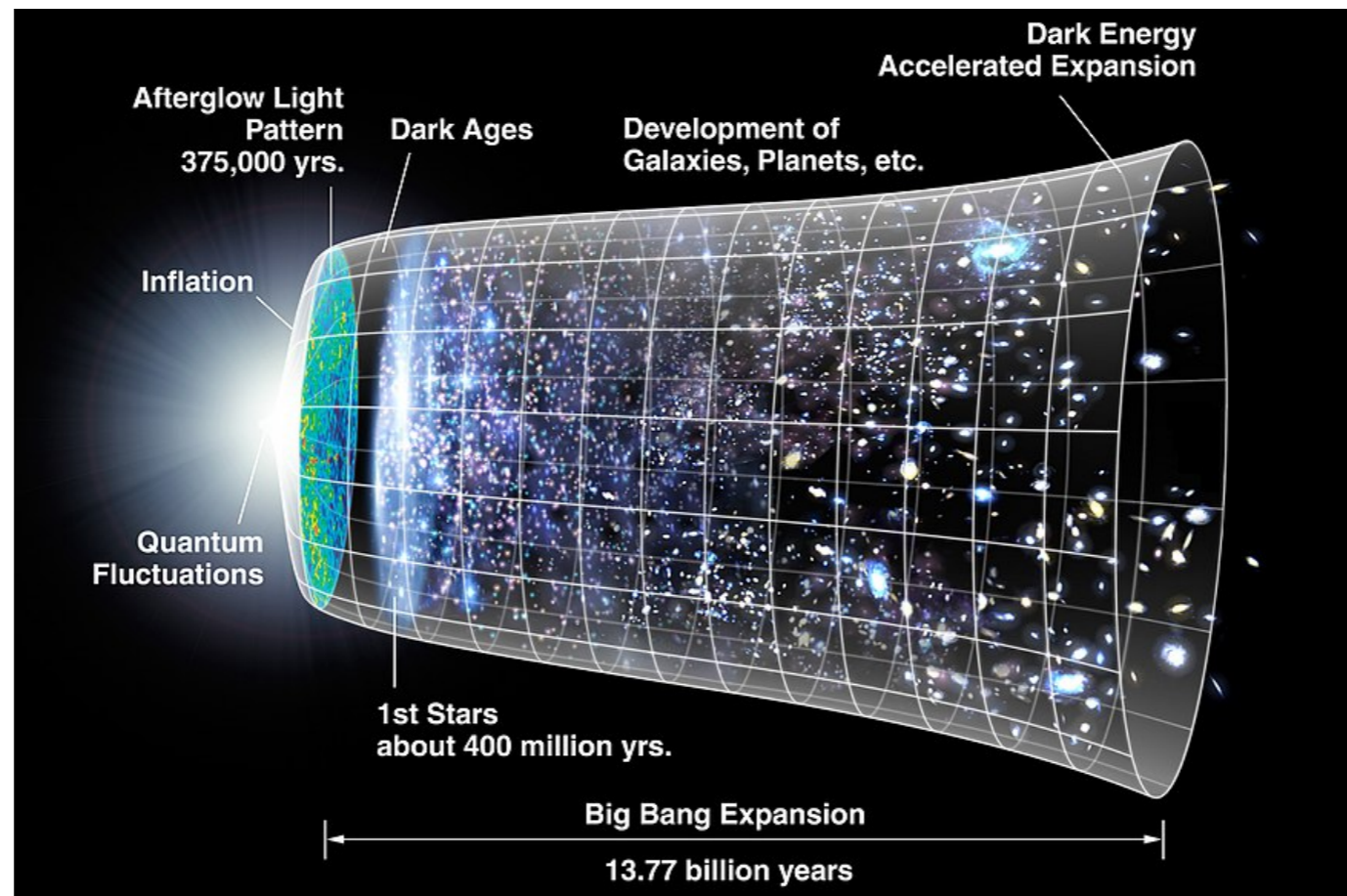
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"Determinism is the thesis that only one continuation of the state of things at a given moment is consistent with the laws of nature."

Consider a timeline of the history of the universe.



What determinism says is that, given a full specification of the state of the universe at one time, the laws of nature tell you exactly what will happen at every later time.

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Why are we talking about determinism? The answer is that it is a good way to raise a question about the conditions under which free will is possible.

We are all familiar with the idea that some facts about ourselves are determined by factors outside of our control. Obvious examples include things like hair color and height, which are determined by our genetic inheritance. But we often also explain personality traits, and likes and dislikes, in terms of both our genetic inheritance and the way in which we were raised. Others might be explained in terms of various features of our environment.

So we can raise this question:

Suppose that **everything** about me — my likes and dislikes, my choices and decisions — is ultimately determined by factors outside of my control. Is that compatible with me having free will?

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Suppose that **everything** about me — my likes and dislikes, my choices and decisions — is ultimately determined by factors outside of my control. Is that compatible with me having free will?

yes

no

Then free will is compatible with determinism, since that would be just one way in which stuff about me could be determined by factors outside of my control.

This called a **compatibilist** view of free will.

Then free will is incompatible with determinism, since if determinism were true everything about me would be ultimately determined by factors outside of my control.

This called an **incompatibilist** view of free will.

THE MASTER ARGUMENT AGAINST THE REALITY OF FREE WILL

1. Free will is incompatible with determinism.
 2. If free will is incompatible with determinism,
then there is no free will.
-
- C. There is no free will.

We are **not** assuming that determinism is true. Rather, we are using the thesis of determinism to bring out a difference between two views of free will. On one of these views — the compatibilist one — you can have free will even if everything about you is ultimately determined by factors outside of your control.

On the other view — incompatibilism — free will requires that your free choices not be ultimately determined by factors outside of your control.

The master argument is an attempt to show that neither view of free will makes sense, and so that free will is impossible.

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What determinism says is that, given a full specification of the state of the universe at one time, the laws of nature tell you exactly what will happen at every later time.

Sometimes people use 'determinism' as a name for the thesis that there is no free will, so that determinism rules out free will by definition. That is not how we are using the term. Determinism is a thesis about the laws of the nature. It is then an open question whether we could have free will in a world with deterministic laws.

Let's focus in on that question:

Is free will
compatible with
determinism?

The **incompatibilist** says 'No.' The **compatibilist** says 'Yes.'

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Is free will
compatible with
determinism?

The **incompatibilist** says 'No.' The **compatibilist** says 'Yes.'

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

Freedom of the
will is real, and
compatible
with
determinism.

Freedom of the
will is real, and
incompatible
with
determinism.

There is no
free will.

Just by thinking about it, we can see that exactly one of these must be true. If free will is real, one of the left two boxes must be true; and if free will is not real, the rightmost box is true.

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Freedom of the will is real, and incompatible with determinism.

There is no free will.

Just by thinking about it, we can see that exactly one of these must be true. If free will is real, one of the left two boxes must be true; and if free will is not real, the rightmost box is true.

Our first main argument against the reality of free will capitalizes on this fact. The **master argument against free will** tries to show that both of the left two boxes are false.

THE MASTER ARGUMENT AGAINST THE REALITY OF FREE WILL

- 1. Free will is incompatible with determinism.
- 2. If free will is incompatible with determinism, then there is no free will.
-
- C. There is no free will.

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THE MASTER ARGUMENT AGAINST THE REALITY OF FREE WILL

1. Free will is incompatible with determinism.
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If the first premise is true, the leftmost box is false. If the second premise is true, the middle box is false. It then follows that, as the conclusion says, there is no free will.

THE MASTER ARGUMENT AGAINST THE REALITY OF FREE WILL

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If the first premise is true, the leftmost box is false. If the second premise is true, the middle box is false. It then follows that, as the conclusion says, there is no free will.

We are **not** assuming that determinism is true. Rather, we are using the thesis of determinism to bring out a difference between two views of free will. On one of these views — the compatibilist one — you can have free will even if everything about you is ultimately determined by factors outside of your control.

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Now, so far we have been given no reason to think that either premise is true. We're now going to look at two arguments — one for the first premise, and one for the second premise.

Let's start with the first premise, which tries to rule out compatibilist views of free will.

Compatibilist views of free will can be hard for some to get their minds around. How **could** I have free will if everything about me is, ultimately, determined by factors outside of my control?

It may help to sketch one story of compatibilist theory of free will. Suppose that Maria stays in for the night. What does it take for Maria's act of staying in for the night to be free?

First, you might think, she must **choose** or **decide** to stay in.

But that's not quite enough. Suppose that, unbeknownst to her, Maria's door is locked from the outside. Then it looks like her staying in is not free, since the other option — going out — was not really open to her.

Even if she had chosen to go out, she couldn't have.

Let's suppose that Maria stays in for the night. What does it take for Maria's act of staying in for the night to be free?

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Even if she had chosen to go out, she couldn't have.

So maybe we should require, in addition to Maria choosing to stay in, that it be true that if she **had** chosen to do otherwise, she **would have** done otherwise.

This kind of claim — about what would have happened if something had been different — is called a 'counterfactual.' So we might call this the counterfactual theory of free will:

The counterfactual theory of free will

A's φ ing is free if and only if (i) A chose to φ and (ii) if A had chosen not to φ , A would not have φ 'd.

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The counterfactual theory of free will

A's φ ing is free if and only if (i) A chose to φ and (ii) if A had chosen not to φ , A would not have φ 'd.

Let's suppose that this theory of free will is true. Would this make free will compatible with determinism?

It seems that it would. Suppose that Maria's choice to stay in is, ultimately, fully determined by factors outside of her control. It is still true that she chose to stay in.

And it might also be true that, if she had chosen to go out, she would have succeeded in doing so. Of course, it was determined by factors outside of her control that she did choose to stay in. But the world could have been such that Maria was determined to choose to go out; and if the world had been that way, she would have gone out.

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The counterfactual theory of free will

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And it might also be true that, if she had chosen to go out, she would have succeeded in doing so. Of course, it was determined by factors outside of her control that did choose to stay in. But the world could have been such that Maria was determined to choose to go out; and if the world had been that way, she would have gone out.

On this kind of view, the key questions are: did I choose to do this? And: if I had chosen to do otherwise, would I have been able to? If the answer to both questions is "yes," your act is free. Whether or not your choices are ultimately explainable by your genetic inheritance, your upbringing, or other factors outside of your control just doesn't enter into it.

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Now that we have a grip on determinism, let's look at the central argument against it.

This is the **consequence argument**.

One way to present this argument starts with two very plausible premises.

No one has any choice about the state of the world in the distant past.

No one has any choice about what the laws of nature are.



No one has any choice about the fact that things were thus-and-so 10 million years ago.

Now remember that, if determinism is true, the state of the world 10 million years ago is consistent with only one possible future.

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No one has any choice about the state of the world in the distant past.



No one has any choice about the fact that things were thus-and-so 10 million years ago.

Now remember that, if determinism is true, the state of the world 10 million years ago is consistent with only one possible future.

Let's pick some arbitrary action that I will perform today, which seems like a free action — for example, the action of driving home at 4:45.

No one has any choice about what the laws of nature are.

Then what we know is that — if determinism is true — then the laws of the nature imply that if things were thus and so ten million years ago, Jeff Speaks will drive home today at 4:45.

After all, if determinism is true, then the laws of nature, plus the state of the universe 10 million years ago, implies **everything** about the future of the universe.

If determinism is true, then the laws of nature say that if things were thus-and-so 10 million years ago, then Jeff Speaks will drive home today at 4:45.

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No one has any choice about what the laws of nature are.

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If determinism is true, then the laws of nature say that if things were thus-and-so 10 million years ago, then Jeff Speaks will drive home today at 4:45.

If determinism is true, no one has any choice about the fact that if things were thus-and-so 10 million years ago, then Jeff Speaks will drive home today at 4:45.

But here's a plausible principle:

If someone has no choice about A, and no choice about the connection between A and B, then that person has no choice about B.

As van Inwagen says in the reading: "How could I have a choice about anything that is an inevitable consequence of something I have no choice about?"

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No one has any choice about the state of the world in the distant past.

No one has any choice about what the laws of nature are.

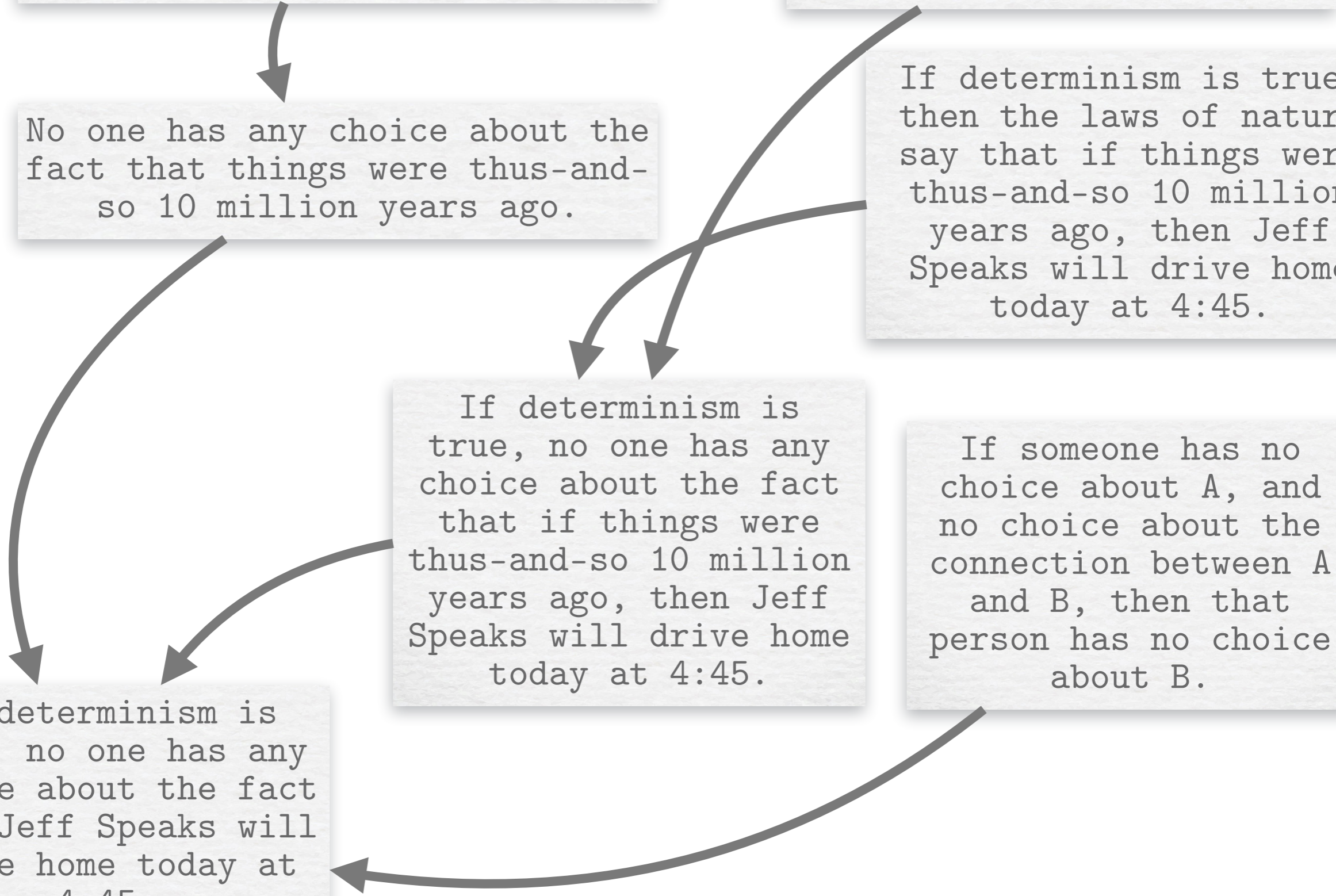
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If determinism is true, no one has any choice about the fact that if things were thus-and-so 10 million years ago, then Jeff Speaks will drive home today at 4:45.

If someone has no choice about A, and no choice about the connection between A and B, then that person has no choice about B.

If determinism is true, no one has any choice about the fact that Jeff Speaks will drive home today at 4:45.



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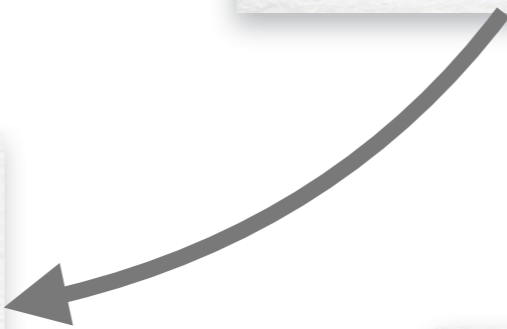
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If determinism is true, no one has any choice about the fact that Jeff Speaks will drive home today at 4:45.

If determinism is true, Jeff Speaks' act of driving home today at 4:45 is not free.

What goes for Jeff Speaks' act of driving home today at 4:45 goes for all other actions.

If determinism is true, there are no free actions.



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THE CONSEQUENCE ARGUMENT

1. No one has any choice about the state of the world in the distant past.
2. No one has any choice about the fact that things were thus-and-so 10 million years ago. (1)
3. No one has any choice about what the laws of nature are.
4. If determinism is true, then the laws of nature say that if things were thus-and-so 10 million years ago, then Jeff Speaks will drive home today at 4:45.
5. If determinism is true, no one has any choice about the fact that if things were thus-and-so 10 million years ago, then Jeff Speaks will drive home today at 4:45. (3,4)
6. If someone has no choice about A, and no choice about the connection between A and B, then that person has no choice about B.
7. If determinism is true, no one has any choice about the fact that Jeff Speaks will drive home today at 4:45. (2,5,6)
8. If determinism is true, Jeff Speaks' act of driving home today at 4:45 is not free. (7)
9. What goes for Jeff Speaks' act of driving home today at 4:45 goes for all other actions.

C. If determinism is true, there are no free actions. (8,9)

THE CONSEQUENCE ARGUMENT

1. No one has any choice about the state of the world in the distant past.
2. No one has any choice about the fact that things were thus-and-so 10 million years ago. (1)
3. No one has any choice about what the laws of nature are.
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7. If determinism is true, no one has any choice about the fact that Jeff Speaks will drive home today at 4:45. (2,5,6)
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9. What goes for Jeff Speaks' act of driving home today at 4:45 goes for all other actions.

C. If determinism is true, there are no free actions. (8,9)

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The conclusion of the consequence argument says that if determinism is true, there are no free actions. So the truth of determinism is **incompatible** with the existence of free actions.

This conclusion is reached on the basis of just three key assumptions:

No one has any choice about the state of the world in the distant past.

No one has any choice about what the laws of nature are.

If someone has no choice about A, and no choice about the connection between A and B, then that person has no choice about B.

I want now to look at one way in which a compatibilist might respond to this argument, and this is to focus on the last of these assumptions.

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I want now to look at one way in which a compatibilist might respond to this argument, and this is to focus on the last of these assumptions.

This is called ‘the no choice principle.’ It is not hard to come up with examples which make this principle seem plausible.

For example: suppose that you have no choice about what your last name is. And suppose that I have decided to give grades in this class based on last names (A-M get an “A”, N-Z get a “C”), and that you have no choice about my decision to do this. Could you have a choice about your grade?

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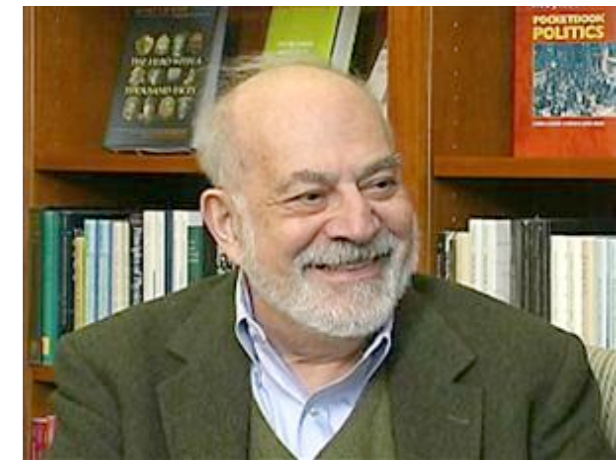
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If someone has no choice about A, and no choice about the connection between A and B, then that person has no choice about B.

So the No Choice Principle has much to be said for it. But it has also been challenged. The most important challenges are due to the contemporary philosopher Harry Frankfurt.



Here's a more recent version (due to John Martin Fischer) of the kind of example Frankfurt used to challenge the no choice principle.

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If someone has no choice about A, and no choice about the connection between A and B, then that person has no choice about B.

“Imagine, if you will, that Black is a quite nifty (and even generally nice) neurosurgeon. But in performing an operation on Jones to remove a brain tumor, Black inserts a mechanism into Jones’s brain which enables Black to monitor and control Jones’s activities. Jones, meanwhile, knows nothing of this. Black exercises this control through a sophisticated computer which he has programmed so that, among other things, it monitors Jones’s voting behavior. If Jones were to show any inclination to vote for Bush, then the computer, through the mechanism in Jones’s brain, intervenes to ensure that he actually decides to vote for Clinton and does so vote. But if Jones decides on his own to vote for Clinton, the computer does nothing but continue to monitor - without affecting the goings-on - in Jones’s head.”

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Suppose now that Jones decides “on his own” to vote for Clinton. In this case the mechanism which Black has inserted in Jones’ brain never kicks on and forces Black to do anything.

In this situation, is Black’s act of voting for Clinton free?

You might think: yes. After all, Black decided to do this, and nothing forced him to do so.

But now consider the following points:

Jones had no choice about the fact that Black inserted the mechanism into his brain.

Jones had no choice about the fact that if Black inserted the mechanism in his brain, he would vote for Clinton. So Jones had no choice about the connection between the insertion of the mechanism and his vote.

Despite these facts, it seems that Jones had a choice about whether to vote for Clinton.

If someone has no choice about A, and no choice about the connection between A and B, then that person has no choice about B.

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More generally, Frankfurt cases look like an example of an action in which the agent was determined to do something by factors outside of his control, and was nonetheless free. So it looks like an argument for a compatibilist view of free will.

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We've now completed the defense of the first premise of our master argument:

THE MASTER ARGUMENT AGAINST THE REALITY OF FREE WILL

1. Free will is incompatible with determinism. (by the consequence argument)
2. If free will is incompatible with determinism, then there is no free will.

C. There is no free will.

If you find the consequence argument plausible, then it is natural to reject premise (2) of the master argument. What's so bad about saying that free will is real, and incompatible with determinism?

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But, as we'll now see, this premise can also be given a plausible defense.

One way to introduce this defense is with the following quote from David Hume:

“It is commonly allowed 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 removed from necessity. Our way of thinking in this particular is, therefore, absolutely inconsistent.”

Hume's basic thought is that there is a big difference between **free** actions and actions which are **random** or **chance**.

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Here's a thought experiment:

The Randomizer

Scientists have created a small device called a Randomizer. Pushing a button on the Randomizer starts an indeterministic process which results in a 0 or a 1. Alex's brain is hooked up to a Randomizer. When he is deciding whether to do something, this pushes the button on the Randomizer. If the Randomizer generates a 1, this makes him do the action. If the Randomizer generates a 0, this makes him not do the action.

Now ask yourself: is Alex's choice free? It seems very clear that it is not. It is undetermined by facts prior to the relevant run of the Randomizer, but it is random. It is not up to Alex what he does; and free actions have to be up to the person doing the action.

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Now ask yourself: is Alex's choice free? It seems very clear that it is not. It is undetermined by facts prior to the relevant run of the Randomizer, but it is random. It is not up to Alex what he does; and free actions have to be up to the person doing the action.

This suggests:

No random acts
are free.

But now consider the idea that free will requires the falsity of determinism. If this is true, then it must be that free actions (or their immediate causes) are undetermined:

If free will is incompatible with determinism, then, if there are free actions, those actions are undetermined by anything prior to the action.

After all, if free actions **could** be determined by the prior state of the world, then free will would be compatible with determinism. But we are assuming that it isn't.

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No random acts
are free.

If free will is incompatible
with determinism, then, if
there are free actions, those
actions are undetermined by
anything prior to the action.

But consider what an undetermined act would be. It would be an action which is such that the entire history of the universe up to that point is consistent with the act either happening or not happening. So if the act happens, nothing **makes** it happen. In particular, nothing that the person who does the action, or anyone else, does makes the action happen.

So it is not up to anyone whether the action happens. But this suggests:

If an action
is
undetermined,
then it is
random.

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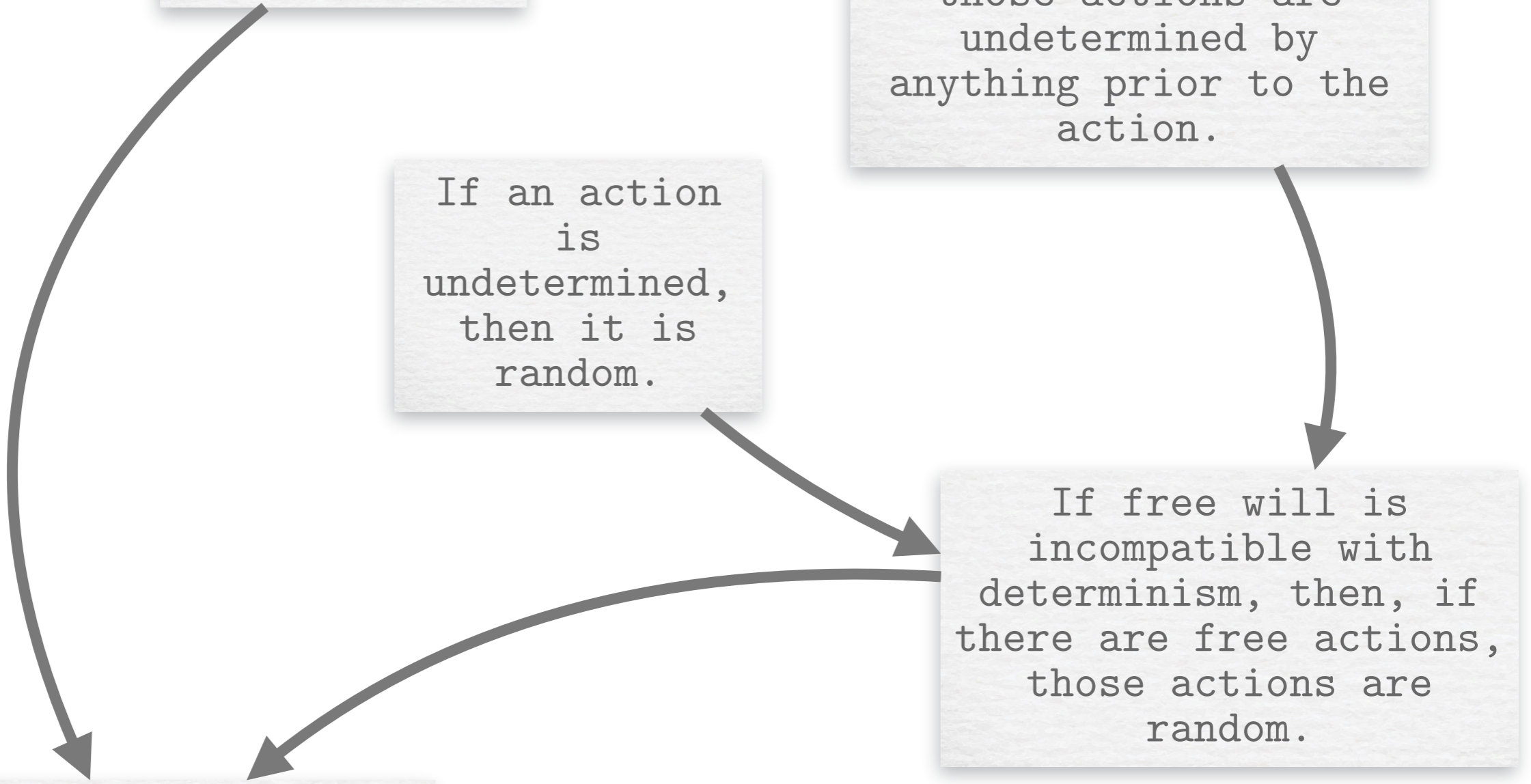
No random acts
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If free will is
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If an action
is
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If free will is
incompatible with
determinism, then, if
there are free actions,
those actions are
random.

If free will is
incompatible with
determinism, then there
are no free actions.



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THE NO-RANDOMNESS ARGUMENT

1. If free will is incompatible with determinism, then, if there are free actions, those actions are undetermined by anything prior to the action.
 2. If an action is undetermined, then it is random.
 3. If free will is incompatible with determinism, then, if there are free actions, those actions are random. (1,2)
 4. No random acts are free.
-
- C. If free will is incompatible with determinism, then there are no free actions.

The conclusion of this argument is premise (2) of the master argument against the reality of free will.

How should the defender of free will reply to this argument?

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1. If free will is incompatible with determinism, then, if there are free actions, those actions are undetermined by anything prior to the action.

One idea is to focus on the first premise. Maybe the action itself wouldn't have to be undetermined; maybe it would be enough for the decision preceding the action to be undetermined.

But, arguably, this would not help very much. For then it looks like the decision will (by the above reasoning) be random. But then the decision cannot be under the control of the agent; and then it looks like it cannot be up to the agent whether she performs the action.

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2. If an action is
undetermined,
then it is
random.

One might instead call into question the second premise.

There are two main arguments in favor of this premise.

The first is related to the “Randomizer” example we have already discussed. The idea is that if some action of mine is undetermined, it is just **as if** I had a Randomizer implanted in in my brain. What could the relevant difference be between the Randomizer and some non-deterministic process in my brain?

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2. If an action is undetermined, then it is random.

The second is based on a different thought experiment.

The roll-back

You have the power to roll back history to an earlier moment and then re-start it. Veronica has just decided that she wants to major in Philosophy rather than Accounting, and this decision was undetermined. So you roll back history to a moment just before her decision; this time, Veronica chooses Accounting. You do this 800 times. In 412 of the trials, she chooses Philosophy; in the other 388, she chooses Accounting.

If we consider trial #801, it will seem to us random which one Veronica chooses. But there is no real difference between the 801st trial and the first one. So all undetermined actions are random.

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THE NO-RANDOMNESS ARGUMENT

1. If free will is incompatible with determinism, then, if there are free actions, those actions are undetermined by anything prior to the action.
 2. If an action is undetermined, then it is random.
 3. If free will is incompatible with determinism, then, if there are free actions, those actions are random. (1,2)
 4. No random acts are free.
-
- C. If free will is incompatible with determinism, then there are no free actions.

One way to state the conclusion of the no-randomness argument is that free will **requires** determinism.

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One way to state the conclusion of the no-randomness argument is that free will **requires** determinism.

But this is very bad news for free will if you found the consequence argument convincing. For that argument seems to show that free will is **incompatible** with determinism.

And if free will both requires determinism and is incompatible with it, then the very idea of free will seems to be contradictory. If this is right, then the idea of a free action is like the idea of a married bachelor. Being a married bachelor both requires being married and is incompatible with it; so it is impossible for there to be a married bachelor. Our argument so far suggests that freedom of the will is similarly impossible.

The problem is that our idea of free action seems to require that those actions be both undetermined and under our control. The master argument is based on the idea that no action could have both of these features.

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The problem is that our idea of free action seems to require that those actions be both undetermined and under our control. The master argument is based on the idea that no action could have both of these features.

THE MASTER ARGUMENT AGAINST THE REALITY OF FREE WILL

1. Free will is incompatible with determinism. (by the consequence argument)
 2. If free will is incompatible with determinism, then there is no free will. (by the no-randomness argument)
-
- C. There is no free will.

But: it really does seem like we have free will! If you agree with that, then it seems that this is not a belief which we should give up easily.

Then the question to ask yourself is whether you think that the consequence argument or the no-randomness argument is more likely to have a flaw — and what that flaw might be.