

Introduction

A central assumption in the free will debate is that determinism equals causation. Whether the world is deterministic or not is therefore often treated as an empirical question, left to science to decide. Classical physics seems to support determinism, while quantum physics suggests that there are at least some indeterministic or chancy cases. Neither modal option seems appealing.

We propose an alternative form of libertarianism based on a metaphysics of powers. This includes a theory of causation which could not be said to have any deterministic implications.

Our long-term aim is to develop a position called Dispositional Libertarianism. On this view, we manifest our free will when we exercise our causal powers. While we take free will to be a power of the agent, we take freedom to be the manifestation of this power through agency. But much more will have to be said.

Free will and determinism

We find Kane's (1996) libertarian principles plausible and intuitive:

- *I could have acted otherwise. (Alternative Possibilities)*
- *I am the ultimate author of my own ends or purposes. (Ultimate Authorship)*

Both principles are challenged by determinism:

- *Every state or event is causally necessitated by preceding states or events. (Watson 1982: 2)*
- *Any event is determined just in case there are conditions whose joint occurrence is sufficient for the occurrence of that event. (Kane 1996: 8)*

Given such causal determinism, libertarians are left to argue that our acts are either uncaused (chancy, random etc.), and therefore not determined, or they are entirely self-determined. We think neither option is good, or even necessary, for libertarianism.

Contrary to the above definitions, we argue that causation is not conceptually linked to determinism.

A problem of modality

Instead of linking determinism to causation and indeterminism to chance, we suggest to treat the problem of free will as fundamentally a problem of modality, or modal dualism:

- *If my decisions are necessary, they couldn't have been otherwise, and I seem to have no genuine choice. (not AP)*
- *If my decisions are merely contingent, I seem to have no control over them, so I have no genuine choice. (not UA)*

In *Getting Causes from Powers* (OUP 2011) we argue that causal powers bring with them a third irreducible modality of *tendency* which is between necessity and pure contingency. Tendency is the modality of causation and powers, but also of agency and intentionality. When we act, we exercise our causal powers.

Causal dispositionalism

On causal dispositionalism causation happens when powers are exercised or manifest themselves. A vase breaks or a match lights.

Others have suggested a powers based account of causation but a common mistake is to assume that this would give us necessary connections. Causes do not necessitate their effects: they tend towards them but in an irreducibly dispositional way. Tendencies come in degrees but even the strongest tendency is not necessity.

Various conditional analyses have been proposed of disposition ascriptions, ultimately treating them as something non-dispositional. Such attempts cannot succeed, we claim, because of the *sui generis* nature of dispositionality (M&A 2011: 190-3).

Less than necessity, more than probability

Some indeterminists allow for a concept of causation that is short of necessity, namely probabilistic causation. Instead of saying that smoking necessitates cancer, we could say that it raises the probability. The problem with this is that the relation between the cause and effect becomes statistical or merely chancy.

With the dispositional modality we can keep the question of determinism or indeterminism separated from causation.

While allowing that there are some probabilistic dispositions, this is not the typical case. That half of all smokers die from it is a statistical fact, but it is not a case of probabilistic causation. For any two smokers there is the possibility that one dies from smoking while the other doesn't.

This is explained without statistics or probability. There might be a difference in their diet, lifestyles or biological dispositions. Contrast this with cases of genuine chance as some believe coin tosses and dice rolls to be.

Interference

All tendencies can be counteracted by other tendencies. This means that all causal processes, as well as actions, are vulnerable to prevention and interference.

Subtractive interference is when something that tends towards an outcome is removed. We can quit smoking to counteract cancer.

Additive interference is when something is added that tends away from the outcome. Bird's antidote is an example of additive interference. Adding drugs to counteract symptoms is another.

Because of the possibility of additive interference, no cause or set of causes is sufficient for an effect. Something further could always be added that tends away from the effect.

As a result, no state or event is determined in the way described by Kane or Watson above. Determinism is false on dispositionalism.

Free will and dispositionalism

The falsity of causal determinism does not give us free will. But dispositionalism gives us a different starting point.

Since every physical or mental causal process can be interfered with or counteracted, one could always have acted otherwise also given the same initial conditions. AP is therefore true, and some might even say trivially true.

Any constraint on our freedom would itself be a tendency which is vulnerable to interference. Oppression and use of physical or political force are cases of additive interference. Once these constraints are removed or counteracted, we are free to exercise our powers.

Our freedom is temporarily restricted by additive interference more often than our will. Subtractive interference would be a more severe threat to freedom, since a loss of power is a loss of the ability to act.

To be a threat to free will itself, we must lose some of our most central powers or capacities. E.g. lobotomy affects my mental powers permanently and perhaps also my ability to make rational choices.

Which powers?

How is one free? *We argue that one is free insofar as one exercises a particular subset of one's real causal powers.* The concern is with psychological powers – the **causal will powers** – not that these can be entirely separated from physical powers. Hence, one must have a power to deliberate and make choices.

To do so one must be able to form preferences, strategies to obtain those preferences, and intentions to act. Arguably, one must also be capable of perceiving and imagining: imagining some future non-actual state that is desired. This may require a power to represent. We would need a full theory of mind to list all the requisite causal will powers.

What counts is that an action attempts to realise my desires. It matters little, except in special cases discussed below, if those desires have causal antecedents. Suppose dehydration gives me an urge to drink. I can still choose freely to drink even though my biology was in part responsible for the desire I am satisfying.

Two words of warning:

Automaticity: We don't want too sophisticated a theory of mind. Many freely exercised powers are automatized, e.g. I freely make many movements when driving a car without even thinking of them.

Causal realism: as Groff (*Ontology Revisited*) argues, genuine agency requires realism about our causal powers. If our actions were only contingently conjoined with outcomes, or our desires with our actions, we would have no good reason to be interested in them and no responsibility.

Whose powers?

There is usually no doubt over who is exercising a causal power. But there can sometimes be. A problem case would be one where a desire is somehow implanted into a person who then acts upon it and believes they do so freely.

Brainwashing cases and subliminal advertising presumably work by implanting thoughts into people's heads. The subliminal advertiser does not physically compel their victim to eat a chocolate bar: they instead implant the desire to do so in order that they act upon it.

Is this really a free action? On the present account, this comes down to the question of whether the desire really was yours.

Suppose through brainwashing a sleeper agent is created who, when he hears the codeword, shoots Don Giuseppe dead. Did he do so freely? Was he acting on his desire?

It seems the theory would have to say it was his free action to do the killing. But we can also argue that it was not his desire but that of his brainwasher that was being exercised.

The initial thesis was that

T⁵: *We are free when we exercise our causal will powers.*

What makes powers *ours*? What if a brainwasher gives me a desire, e.g. to assassinate Don Giuseppe, which I then act upon? Was I free in doing so? Arguably not, because it was not really my desire.

What makes something my desire, rather than the brainwasher's? *Webber's answer:* your true dispositions are the ones that are integrated with the rest of your character.

T⁴: *We are free when we exercise the causal will powers that are integrated with the rest of our character.*

This is inadequate. One might choose freely to act out of character, e.g. overcoming shyness. This might be the ultimate expression of freedom (a theme explored in existentialism).

Another answer: your real dispositions are the ones you have acquired in the right way, e.g. learning to play the violin. A brainwasher

planting a disposition directly in your mind does not count as the right way of acquiring a disposition.

T³: *We are free when we exercise the causal will powers that have been acquired in the right way.*

Problem: what counts as the right way? The brainwasher forces you to acquire a disposition while the advertiser manipulates you to have one. But there are some dispositions that we are forced to have yet still feel free when we exercise them, e.g. I can be reluctantly thrown in a swimming pool aged 3 & learn to swim from doing so.

The difference here is that the power to swim is an enabling power in one's rational self-interest, whereas the power to assassinate someone is not, neither is the desire to drink more alcohol. And this means that a rational agent should have wanted the power to swim and not the others.

T²: *We are free when we exercise the causal will powers that are in our rational self-interest.*

Problem: automatically rules out that someone could freely act irrationally, e.g. someone may smoke and drink and do so by free choice. But we are almost there.

T¹ *We are free when we exercise the causal will powers that we want to have.*

Problem: when asked, the brainwashed assassin says they are happy with wanting to kill someone. One can accept and be happy with desires even when they have been brainwashed into you

T: *We are free when we exercise our causal will powers that are regulated by higher-order powers of self-reflection.*

A wanton acts on their desires without self-reflection, without thinking about morality or rational self-interest of those desires. With self-reflection, I could choose freely to act out of character, e.g. to conquer my shyness.

Possible objection: the brainwasher could give me even the higher-order, self-reflective powers, which are not then mine.

But those higher-order reflective powers are ones that any rational agent would want as they are constitutive of freedom. Hence, the brainwasher could only be giving me something that enables my freedom and something that I should have already. In such a case, they would merely be overdetermining my freedom.

E.g. if the brainwasher gives you a desire to kill children, they undermine that desire if they also give you a higher-order power to reflect morally and self-consciously on that desire.

T therefore stands.

A new argument against compatibilism

We take it that (causal) determinism is false. One might think that even if it were true, it wouldn't affect free will. Free will is about the exercise of powers and there's no reason why that should be affected just because one has been caused to have those powers. Compatibilism looks a possible option.

However, the following argument suggests that the causal dispositionalist, who takes the dispositional modality seriously, has a good reason to reject compatibilism.

i. If causal determinism is true, all events are necessitated.
ii. If all events are necessitated, there are no powers (by the thesis of dispositional modality: thesis D of GCFP: p. 177)

iii. Free will consists in the exercise of our causal powers

Therefore, if causal determinism is true, there is no free will.

In other words, free will is incompatible with causal determinism.

That is to say, compatibilism is false.