



Libertarianism

Libertarianism is a school of thought that says humans are free, not only from physical determinism, but from all the other diverse forms of **determinism** described in chapter 9.

Libertarians believe that strict determinism and freedom are incompatible. Freedom seems to require some form of **indeterminism** somewhere in the decision process.

Most libertarians in the past have been mind/body dualists who, following RENÉ DESCARTES, explained human freedom by a separate mind substance that somehow manages to act indeterministically in the physical world. Some, especially IMMANUEL KANT, believed that our freedom only exists in a transcendental or noumenal world, leaving the physical world to be completely deterministic. How this works remains a mystery.

Religious libertarians say that God has given man a gift of freedom. But at the same time they say that God has foreknowledge of everything that man will do. Another mystery.

In recent free will debates, these dualist explanations are called “agent-causal libertarianism.” The idea is that humans have some kind of metaphysical agency (an ability to act) that cannot be explained in terms of physical causes.

One alternative to dualism is “event-causal libertarianism,” in which at least some physical or brain events are uncaused or indeterministically caused. Note that eliminating strict determinism does not eliminate **causality**.

We can still have events that are caused by indeterministic prior events. And these indeterministic events have prior causes, but those prior causes are not sufficient to determine the events precisely. In modern physics, for example, events are only statistical or probabilistic. We can call this “soft” causality, meaning not **pre-determined** but still having a causal explanation.

Still another libertarian position is to say that human freedom is uncaused or simply **non-causal**. This would eliminate causality.



Some philosophers like CARL GINET think “reasons” or “intentions” are not causes and describe their explanations of libertarian freedom as “**non-causal**.”

But we do not have to avoid causes completely to provide freedom, just admit that some events are only probabilistically caused.

A conservative or “modest” event-causal libertarianism has been proposed by DANIEL DENNETT and ALFRED MELE. They and many other philosophers and scientists have proposed two-stage models of free will (discussed in Chapter 12) that keep indeterminism in the early stages of deliberation, limiting it to creating **alternative possibilities** for action.

Some strong event-causal libertarians believe that one’s actions are caused but not completely “determined” by events prior to a decision, including one’s character and values, reasons and motives, and one’s feelings and desires. In the view of the leading libertarian philosopher ROBERT KANE, reasons and motives are contributing causes, but indeterminism “centered” in the moment of choice can also contribute to actions done “of one’s own free will.”

Critics of Kane’s libertarianism attack his view as unintelligible. They argue that no coherent idea can be provided for such a late role for indeterminism. Kane’s response is that this is not the case. In the “torn” decisions of his Self-Forming Actions (SFAs), the agent has excellent reasons, and chooses for those reasons, for whichever action is selected.

Until recently I too was a critic of Kane, worried that any randomness in the moment of choice would make chance the direct and primary cause of our actions. But I have changed my mind, as we will see in Chapter 13.

Kane’s “torn” decisions are not completely random. They are those cases when previous deliberations in the two-stage model have not narrowed down options to a single choice. What remains are choices that are caused by the agent’s reasons and motives, consistent with character and values, etc., but not yet fully decided despite the agent’s best efforts to come to a decision.



When indeterminism makes one or more of the remaining options fail, Kane says that it is the effort of the agent that deserves to get the credit as the “cause” of the option that succeeds.

The first libertarian, EPICURUS, argued that as atoms moved through the void, there were occasions when they would “swerve” from their otherwise determined paths, thus initiating new causal chains.

The modern equivalent of the Epicurean swerve is quantum mechanical indeterminacy, again a property of atoms. We now know that atoms do not just occasionally swerve, they move unpredictably whenever they are in close contact with other atoms.

Everything in the material universe is made of atoms and subatomic particles in unstoppable perpetual motion. Deterministic paths are only the case for very large objects, where the statistical laws of atomic physics average to become nearly certain dynamical laws for billiard balls and planets.

Many determinists and compatibilists are now willing to admit that physics has shown there is real **indeterminism** in the universe. I believe that libertarians should agree with them, and accept their criticism that if nothing but chance was the direct cause of our actions, that would not be the freedom with responsibility that compatibilists are looking for.

Determinists and compatibilists might also agree that if **chance** is not a direct cause of our actions, it would do no harm. In which case, libertarians should be able to convince them that if chance provides real alternatives to be considered by the **adequately determined** will, it provides real **alternative possibilities** for thought and action. It provides freedom and creativity.

Libertarians can give the determinists, at least open-minded compatibilists agnostic about determinism, the kind of freedom they say they want, one that provides an **adequately determined** will and actions for which they can take **responsibility**.

This is the goal of the two-stage models of free will discussed in Chapters 12 and 13.

