

Could I have taken the other road?

Libertarianism versus Determinism

Gregory Johnson

Robert Frost's "The Road Not Taken" begins,

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood

After a bit of pondering, the narrator finishes the account this way:

Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

The intervening lines complicate the interpretation of the poem a bit, but we can all relate to the situation described here. Two options—important or not so important—present themselves to us, we deliberate, select one of them, and then act. That we could have chosen the other option seems obvious. But could we really have done so?

The free will debate seeks to answer this question. *Will*, in the sense that it is used here, is the part of us that directs our deliberate actions. And *free* means that, when give two or more options, either one can be selected. (A broader sense of *free*—for example, the one that we use when stating that we are not in prison or tied to a chair—is not the issue here.) If our

actions are not free, then either (1) they are determined by prior events, which means that, in each instance, they could not have been done differently, or (2) they are random, which means that, although they are not determined, they also aren't guided by our wills. (While we are clarifying the terminology, we can also note that, usually—although not always—*an action is caused* and *an action is determined* have the same meaning, and, when they do, they the result is the same: the action could not have been done differently.)

Returning to the question 'Could we really have chosen the other option?', on initial reflection, it surely seems to you that you could have. As we will see, however, matters are not that simple. The response that probably seems unbelievable, that we can't, actually turns out to be the stronger position. Let's see how we get there.

1. Determinism and libertarianism

The two central theories about the will are *determinism* and *libertarianism*. According to determinism, we do not have free wills. The central idea that underwrites this theory is *the principle of universal causality*. This principle states that every event, including every human action, is caused by an earlier event or events in accordance with the laws of physics. These earlier events can include brain states or brain activity and mental states or mental activity, and so the immediate causes of our actions will normally be neurobiological or psychological. But those neurobiological and psychological events will themselves have been caused by the events that surround us as we go through life or, perhaps, by genetic or other biological factors. One way or another, however, these various events determine our actions. As a consequence, if we had a complete knowledge about a person and his or her environment, as well as a complete knowledge of the relevant laws of physics, genetics, biology, and psychology, then, according to determinism, we would know with

certainty which actions this person would take. As Henry Thomas Buckle put it in the 19th century,

If, for example, I am intimately acquainted with the character of any person, I can frequently tell how he will act under some given circumstances. Should I fail in this prediction, I must ascribe my error not to the arbitrary and capricious freedom of his will, nor to any supernatural pre-arrangement, for of neither of these things have we the slightest proof; but I must be content to suppose either that I had been misinformed as to some of the circumstances in which he was placed, or else that I had not sufficiently studied the ordinary operations of his mind. If, however, I were capable of correct reasoning, and if, at the same time, I had a complete knowledge both of his disposition and of all the events by which he was surrounded, I should be able to foresee the line of conduct which, in consequence of those events, he would adopt.¹

Of course, we never have this kind of complete knowledge of another person, and we don't have a complete enough understanding of how the human mind works. (Although if you have known someone really well for many decades, you might notice that it is often possible to predict his or her behavior). But not being able to predict another person's behavior perfectly doesn't detract from Buckle's claim that, in principle, these predictions can be accurately made because every action is caused by a person's "disposition" and the "events by which he was surrounded."

On the other side of the debate, libertarianism is the theory that we do have free will.² This theory maintains that some of the time—although not always—we act freely. It can still be that sometimes, or maybe even often, our actions are determined by our biology, or our habits, or our environment (or any of the other factors to which determinism appeals).

But *some of the time* our actions are not determined. In those cases, at a certain moment in time, and with all prior conditions remaining the same, a person can do either action *A* or action *B*.

The narrator in Frost's poem chose one of the two roads. According to determinism, this person, at that moment in time, could not have taken the other road. Some aspect of his mind—an intention, a desire, an urge—caused him to select the road that he did. Hence, given that he had that intention, desire, or urge, and not a different one, his action could not have been different. Of course, if the narrator returns to that fork, he may very well take the other road, but at this later time he will, in a variety of ways, be a different person. In contrast, libertarianism maintains that the narrator could have, at that moment in time, taken the other road. Hence, although the narrator has certain beliefs, desires, and urges, they don't cause or determine one specific action.

2. The evidence

Obviously, the reason why most people believe that they have a free will is because, often, when we are faced with two or more options, we feel as though we can do either one. We consider, choose, and act, but as we do, it seems to be within our power to have acted differently. This, as compelling as it might seem at first glance, is not a very strong argument for libertarianism. As Ledger Wood explains, it just amounts to this:

P1. I feel myself free.

C. Therefore, I am free.³

But we can feel lots of things that don't mesh with reality. I may feel that I am an NBA-level basketball player, but that feeling, obviously, doesn't make me an NBA-level basketball player. What I need is other, independent evidence to corroborate my feeling.

Looking for evidence to support my feeling that my actions are free, however, quickly takes us to determinism. We can't know for sure if the principle of universal causality holds everywhere in the universe, but all of the evidence points to it being true. Right now, I am seated at a desk in my office. When I look around this room, I am certain that every object was placed—that is, *caused to be*—in its present location. Similarly, when I look out the window, I am confident that every tree, building, car, and so forth got to where it is by way of a causal process, and those causal processes all obeyed the laws of physics. Nothing appeared uncaused, and everything is exactly where it should be according to the laws of physics.

As Louis Pojman aptly puts it, “We cannot easily imagine an uncaused event taking place in ordinary life” (p. 399). He, then, illustrates this point as follows.

In Melbourne, Australia, weather forecasts for a twenty-four-hour period are exceedingly reliable. The predictions based on the available atmospheric data and the known meteorological laws are almost always correct. However, on Star Island, off the coast of Portsmouth, New Hampshire, the official forecasts for a twenty-four-hour period are more often wrong than right. Suppose someone came along and said, “There is an easy explanation for the success of the Australian forecasts and the lack of success of the Star Island forecasts. In Melbourne the weather is caused by preceding conditions, but on Star Island, more often than not, the weather has no cause. It's cut off from what happened before.” Most of us would explain the failure of the meteorologists differently, believing that the weather on Star Island is just as much the outcome of preceding conditions as the weather in Melbourne. The forecasts are less reliable on Star Island because of the greater complexities of the factors which have to be taken into

account and the greater difficulty of observing them, but not because sufficient causal factors do not exist.⁴

Pojman's point is that we experience and understand the world through the lens of universal causality. And it's not just that some of the time we expect an event to have a causal explanation—for example, when it rains, unexpectedly snows, or when I see a car parked across the street. *All* of the time, we expect events to have causes. As Pojman says a little later when discussing Immanuel Kant's explanation of why we believe principle of the universal causality,

Our mental construction demands that we read all experience in the light of universal causation. . . . [W]e cannot understand experience except by means of causal explanation. (p. 401)

This is, perhaps, a more sophisticated point than the libertarian's argument that 'I feel free; therefore, I am free,' but only being able to understand the world by accepting the principle of universal causality doesn't make the principle true. Moreover, our belief that every event has a cause conflicts with our belief that we have free wills. Both cannot be true, yet almost all of us readily accept both.

Moving beyond this stalemate brings us back to the observation that every event or state of affairs that each of us—scientists included—has encountered has had a cause. We haven't observed every event in the universe, but collectively, we've observed quite a number of individual events. And every single one, or at least every one reported by a reliable source, has had a cause. Thus, from observing *this event has a cause, this event has a cause, this event has a cause, this event has a cause*, and so on, trillions and trillions of times, we conclude that *therefore, every event has a cause*. We cannot be certain that this conclusion is true, but it's as close to certain as can be. No less certain, it seems, than the conclusion that *the sun will rise tomorrow*.

3. Libertarianism and actions

Since it seems to us that we do, often, have the ability to choose any one of multiple options, we might think that an analysis of how we choose our actions would demonstrate the strengths of libertarianism position. It is surprisingly difficult, however, to give an account of choosing actions that is consistent with this theory. To begin, let's consider what the libertarian does not want in a description of an alleged free action. First, the decision to perform the action cannot be determined by prior events, including other mental states. It has to be possible that the action could have been done differently, and so the selection of the action can't have a cause that determines what it will be. Second, although the action cannot be determined by prior events, it also should not be random or arbitrary. When a person has the option to do action *A* or action *B*, whichever one she does can't be decided by a coin flip or some similar random procedure inside her head.

3.1 *uncaused events*

So then, how does the libertarian describe the process that produces free actions? One possibility is that the process that produces an action begins with an uncaused event. Let's say that I am considering two options for the Thanksgiving holiday: (1) I can visit my sister in North Carolina and spend Thanksgiving with her family or (2) I can go to London with some friends. And let's also say that, in the end, I visit my sister in North Carolina. This version of libertarianism would maintain that my decision to go to my sister's home in North Carolina was uncaused. It is what some libertarians call a *basic mental action*.

This explanation satisfies our first criterion: the decision, being uncaused, was not determined by any earlier events. Libertarians don't deny that I have many beliefs about my two options: what the trip will be like if I go to North Carolina and what it will be like if I go to London; how

much I want to make each trip; how important travel time and costs are to me; and so forth. According to this account, however, none of these beliefs and other mental states cause—or force or push or tip—my decision. After all, the decision was uncaused.

At the same time, this account fails to satisfy our second criterion. If the decision just happens, if it's spontaneous, then we can't point to any reason why I am going to North Carolina instead of London. Of course, in this case it might seem that, even if I am randomly assigned one of these two options, either will still appear to make sense. But if the decision really is spontaneous—and unmoored from my beliefs, desires, and other mental states—then, apparently, I could arrive at any decision. According to this account, I could just as well end up deciding to travel to Winnipeg or Santiago. Hence, we have to conclude, that according to this version of libertarianism, my decision would be random.

3.2 *caused by the agent*

So far, we have used *caused* and *determined* interchangeably. *Caused* in this sense means *caused while following the laws of physics* (or any other laws of nature that we might want to invoke). If one billiard ball hits another and sends the second one into the corner pocket, it's clear that, given the laws of physics, the second billiard ball's location in the corner pocket was caused and it was determined. In other words, as soon as the pool cue hit the first billiard ball, the final location of the second one was set.

Libertarians, however, sometimes invoke *non-deterministically caused events*. If an action is caused, but caused non-deterministically, then (unlike in the billiard ball example) it could have, with the same cause, turned out differently.

The philosopher Roderick Chisholm has defended such an account. Using an example of Aristotle's about a man moving a stone with a stick, Chisholm explains,

We may say that the hand was moved by the man, but we may also say that the motion of the hand was caused by the motion of certain muscles; and we may say that the motion of the muscles was caused by certain events that took place within the brain. But some event, and presumably one of those that took place within the brain, was caused by the agent and not by any other events.⁵

The precise event that Chisholm is unsure about, however—the one that was “caused by the agent” somewhere in the brain—is the one that needs an explanation. Although we don't know everything about how the brain functions, we know a lot, and we know that there is no little person in there somewhere pulling levers and turning dials: at one moment, pressing these neurons into service, and at another moment, pressing other neurons into service. Pondering how we can make sense of an agent—or what we might call *the self*—causing events in the brain can get muddled quickly. Instead, let's turn to our two criteria.

The agent in Chisholm's account causes activity in the brain, but nothing causes the agent to act one way or another. Hence, although the activity in the brain is caused (by the agent), it is not determined. Let's say that it is *brain activity A* that causes the man to move his hand so that stick moves the stone, while *brain activity B* would cause the man to drop the stick and pick up a beer. Since nothing forces the agent to initiate *brain activity A* instead of *brain activity B*, either one could happen. Hence, the criterion that the action not be determined is satisfied.

At the same time, as you might have foreseen, this account won't be able to satisfy the second criterion: that the action not be random. Before directly addressing that issue, we might wonder if there is really a

difference between this account and the previous one that invoked uncaused basic mental events. Chisholm, anticipating this objection, says,

The only answer, I think, can be this: that the difference between (1) the man's causing A [i.e., the decision to move the stone with the stick], on the one hand, and (2) the event A [i.e., this decision] just happening, on the other, lies in the fact that, in the first case but not the second, the Event A *was* caused and was caused by the man. There was a brain event A; the agent did, in fact, cause the brain event; but there was nothing that he did to cause it. (1964, p. 10)

In one sense, there is, as Chisholm says, a difference here. But, whether it's the case that nothing caused the decision or it's the case that nothing caused the agent to decide, our concern is why one decision was made instead of another.

Consequently, the same problem that we discussed for the uncaused basic mental event applies here as well. If nothing causes the agent to initiate *brain event A* instead of *brain event B* (or, if we want to put it in terms of mental states, if nothing causes the agent to initiate the decision to move the stone with the stick versus the decision to pick up a beer), then the agent does not have any reason for doing one or the other. Putting the same point in a different way, let's assume that there are reasons for doing both actions: moving the stone with the stick and dropping the stick and picking up a beer. If, however, these reasons have no influence or impact on whichever chain of events the agent sets in motion, then whatever the agent does has to be random.

4. Determinism and actions

You might realize at this point that there is an inherent tension in the libertarian position. On the one hand, this theory holds that some of our

actions are not caused by earlier events (including mental states). But on the other hand, if the decision to do an action is not caused, then it's spontaneous and random, which is not how anyone—libertarians or non-libertarians—wants to explain our actions.

Determinism fares much better here. Consider this example.

I have a class to teach at 10:00 am. I have the belief that the class starts at 10:00 am, I have the desire to be present for it, and I have the desire to be on time. Those mental states cause my action: getting into my car at 9:30 am and driving to campus.

We can say that I *chose* to go to campus or *decided* to go to campus, but, given that I had those mental states and not other ones (and given that there were no other extenuating circumstances), it doesn't seem that I could have acted differently. If I had the belief that my class began at 10:00 am and the desire to be there, but, yet, I stayed home or went somewhere else, we wouldn't say that I was acting freely. We would say that I was acting oddly or, perhaps, psychotically. Hence, counterintuitively perhaps, for our actions to make sense and be meaningful, we need them to be determined by our mental states.

We might also consider a case where we are very aware of two competing options and we have reasons for doing both.

Let's say that I have the option to visit my sister in Virginia or my sister in North Carolina. I would like to do both, but that's not possible. So, what causes my action? I have beliefs about when I last saw each sister, when, if not on this trip, I will be able to see each one, how much time and effort it will take to get to each of their homes, and so forth. I also know how much I want to spend a few days with each one and her family and how important travel time and costs are to me.

Let's say that, ultimately all of these beliefs and desires weigh in favor of going to Virginia, and so I travel there.

In this case, although beliefs have to be carefully considered and desires have to be weighed, my mental states still cause my action. When we first encounter it, determinism seems cold and impersonal, but the world would be much colder and more impersonal if all of my beliefs and desires—or in other words, all of my reasons—weighed in favor of one action, but somehow I found myself doing the other one.

That said, to complete the picture for determinism, it must also be the case that we do not choose our mental states. If we can, then, although they cause our actions, being able to freely choose our mental states would mean that our actions would still be free. This may seem like an opening for libertarianism, but, in fact, it's generally agreed, by both determinists and libertarians, that we don't choose our beliefs, desires, and other mental states. Beliefs, for each of us, simply record what we take to be true. You can see this by trying a simple experiment. Assuming that you are inside, you can see the color of the nearest wall. In my case, I can see that it is light blue, and that perception causes my *belief that the wall is light blue*. Can I just choose to believe that the wall is some other color, say, dark green? I can utter the sentence, "I believe that the wall is dark green," but I can't actually have that belief because that's not the way that the world presents itself to me.

Of course, there are more complex cases, but they seem to follow the same rule. There are also instances when people change their beliefs, but those, as well, appear to follow the rule that beliefs must track the way that we think the world is.⁶ Take a belief that might seem to be one that you did choose: either (a) the belief that Jesus of Nazareth rose from the dead, or (b) the belief that Jesus of Nazareth did not rise from the dead. Whichever belief you hold, you didn't acquire it in the same way that you acquired your belief about the color of the wall. Nonetheless, it's just as

clear in this case that if you believe (*a*), then you can't just choose to believe (*b*), or vice versa. People do, occasionally, switch between (*a*) and (*b*), but when they do, it's because they've read or heard something relevant that causes the change. It's not because they just decided to switch beliefs. (Or if it ever were simply a switch without the person being exposed to new ideas or points of view, then, again, it would seem odd or, perhaps, a sign of psychosis. We don't actually want our beliefs to change without reasons for them to do so.)

In addition to beliefs, our actions are caused by our desires, emotions, character, habits, determination, and, perhaps, other types of mental states. These sorts of mental states don't represent information in the same way as beliefs do, but they do, in a variety of ways, push us toward one action or another. We can see that we do not choose our desires, emotions, character, and so on, with the same test that we used for beliefs. Let's just take desires. It certainly would be nice if we could choose to have the desire to lose weight, eat healthy meals, stop smoking, get excellent grades, weed the garden and so forth—and, most importantly, have those desires outweigh competing desires. But unfortunately, we have the desires that we have, apparently, because of some mixture of our experiences, upbringing, and genetics.

5. The argument from moral responsibility

What many people believe is the strongest argument for libertarianism doesn't try to explain how free actions are possible but rather focuses on moral responsibility. For our purposes, *being morally responsible* means that we can be praised or blamed for our actions. Libertarians maintain that we can only be praised or blamed when it is the case that we could have acted differently. For instance, let's say that I am standing by a pool, see a child who appears to be drowning, but I do nothing. If nothing is preventing me from jumping into the water to save the child, then, it seems, I deserve to

be blamed for not acting. On the other hand, if I am, for some reason, tied to a chair and cannot move, then I do not deserve to be blamed for failing to save the child. The difference between the two scenarios is not hard to grasp. In the second case, although I was present while the child was drowning, I simply couldn't save him, and so if he does drown, I shouldn't be blamed for the tragic outcome.

In the same way, if determinism is true, then, in every circumstance, we couldn't have acted differently, and so we, apparently, do not ever deserve praise or blame. The question, then, is do we, in fact, sometimes deserve praise or blame? According to libertarianism, yes. If that is correct, then we have a compelling argument that determinism is false:

P1. We can only be morally responsible in those situations when we could have acted differently.

P2. According to determinism, at any particular time, we could *not* have acted differently.

P3. We are morally responsible for at least some of our actions.

C1. Hence, determinism is false.

And, then, using that conclusion, we have an argument that libertarianism is true:

P4. Determinism is false.

P5. If determinism is false, then libertarianism is true.

C2. Therefore, libertarianism is true.

Both arguments are valid, and so if P1 – P3 are true, then the first conclusion, *determinism is false* has to be true, and if P5 is true, then the final conclusion, *libertarianism is true*, has to be true. The issue, however, is whether the premises are, in fact, true. Both determinists and libertarians accept P1 and P2, and so the question is whether premise 3 is true. It certainly seems as though we are morally responsible for at least some of our actions, and it's probably best to live our lives as though we are

morally responsible. But there isn't any evidence that we are, and there's no apparent way of generating such evidence. After all, there is no investigation that we can undertake that will demonstrate that we are creatures with "moral responsibilities."⁷

6. Punishment

It can be difficult to know what to make of the inclusion of moral responsibilities in this debate. The arguments that we examined in sections 2 – 4 favor determinism. The argument for moral responsibility appears to support libertarianism, but it really only shifts the question to whether or not we have moral responsibilities. A concern that is related to moral responsibilities is the relationship between libertarianism, determinism, and punishment. We will finish this chapter briefly exploring this topic.

In 1997, Helen Golay, who was 67 at the time, and Olga Rutterschmidt, who was 64, began taking out life insurance policies on a homeless man, Paul Vados. Two years later, Vados was found dead in an alley, the apparent victim of a hit-and-run accident, and Golay and Rutterschmidt collected the benefits from the life insurance policies. In 2002 and 2003, Golay and Rutterschmidt took out life insurance policies on another homeless man, Kenneth McDavid. He was hit by a Mercury Sable station wagon in 2005, and again, Golay and Rutterschmidt collected the money from the life insurance policies.

In 2008, Golay and Rutterschmidt's killing spree came to an end when they were convicted of murdering the two men. Both women were given life sentences without the possibility of parole.

This penalty is no surprise, and there are myriad other penalties for the various infractions that people commit every day. But what exactly justifies Golay's, Rutterschmidt's, and every else's punishments? The government has to be able to justify the punishments that it imposes, and

so how might it do so? To answer this question, we will look briefly at the two main theories of punishment: retributivism and deterrence.

6.1 theories of punishment

Retributivism is the idea that a punishment is justified because it gives the offender what he or she deserves; in other words, the punishment is retribution for the crime. *What someone deserves* might be a little vague, but the basic idea is that the offender has committed an offense and that alone justifies a proportional punishment. This could very well justify the punishment discussed above, although notice that we restrict how that retribution will be enacted. Golay and Rutterschmidt might have been given the death penalty, but that wouldn't have been done by hitting them with a car. In any case, life imprisonment without the possibility of being released also seems to qualify as what Golay and Rutterschmidt deserve.

Once it is sketched out, many people are sympathetic to retributivism, but if they are just asked what justifies punishment, more people will probably invoke something similar to the deterrence theory. According to this theory, punishments are justified because they deter or discourage future crime, either by the offender or by others who might commit similar crimes. We can also justify Golay and Rutterschmidt's punishment with this theory. Life imprisonment will prevent Golay and Rutterschmidt from committing any crimes in the future, and it will make other citizens who might be inclined to murder someone think twice about it.

Those are the two most prominent theories of punishment, but there are others. One is rehabilitation, which is a justification for punishment and also requires that the punishment be set up in such a way that the offender's behavior is reformed. (This, however, is not a justification that could be given for Golay and Rutterschmidt's punishment. They are not being locked up for the rest of their lives so that

they can be rehabilitated.) Other, less central, although still important, justifications for punishment are satisfying the victims' desire for punishment, preventing vigilante action, and, in cases of imprisonment, keeping the rest of the community safe from the offender.

6.2 determinism and punishment

A naïve view of determinism holds that, if this theory is true, it would make punishment impossible. That is clearly false. Determinism very well may be true, and punishment exists. Trying again, we might say that if determinism is true, then *justified* punishment is impossible. This is also false. If determinism is true, then we cannot use retributivism to justify punishments. If we could not have acted otherwise, then determinists and libertarians agree that we deserve neither praise nor blame for our actions. Taking this idea a step further, if determinism is true, then we not only don't deserve blame, we don't deserve punishment. But if determinism is true, we can justify punishment with the deterrence theory, as well as with the rehabilitation model, or the goals of satisfying victims' desire for punishment, preventing vigilante action, or keeping society safe.

But let's focus on deterrence. Locking up Golay and Rutterschmidt will determine what their prospects for committing crimes will be in the future. Moreover, just the belief that committing that kind of crime will bring about a severe punishment—and then seeing the state follow through on that threat—will *cause* many other individuals to refrain from murdering anyone. (Which is not to say that other beliefs, such as the belief that murder is wrong, won't also cause people to refrain from committing such an offense. On the other hand, some beliefs—say, the belief that I won't get caught—will sometimes cause people to kill others for the insurance money despite the intended deterrence.)

The moral, then, is that, if determinism is true, we have to give up one justification for punishment, retributivism. Determinism is perfectly

consistent, however, with deterrence, as well as the other justifications for punishment. So, if we decide that determinism is true, we are just as justified as we ever were in locking up Golay and Rutterschmidt.

¹ Pp. 18 – 19 in Buckle, H. T. (1872). *History of Civilization in England*, vol. 1.

² A possible point of confusion is the name *libertarianism*, which this theory shares with the political movement and party. Both have adopted the name because it is derived from the Latin word for free, but otherwise they have nothing in common and shouldn't be confused or conflated.

³ P. 388 in Wood, L. (1941). "The Free-Will Controversy." *Philosophy*, 16: 386-397.

⁴ Pp. 339 – 400 in Pojman, L. (1987). "Freedom and Determinism: A Contemporary Discussion." *Zygon*, 22: 397-417.

⁵ P. 8 in Chisholm, R. (1964). "Human Freedom and the Self."

⁶ There are also beliefs for which, because our information is incomplete, we only have a certain degree of confidence. For instance, I might have *the belief that I probably have a meeting next week*. That doesn't really change anything, though. If my confidence level that I have a meeting next week is around 70 percent, I can't choose to believe either that I definitely do have a meeting next week or I definitely don't have a meeting next week.

⁷ That said, as we will see in the next chapter, there is a version of determinism, *compatibilism*, that maintains that, even though determinism is true, we are morally responsible for some of our actions. Thus, some people hold that determinism is true, P₁ is false, and P₃ is true.