Could I have taken the other road?

Libertarianism versus Determinism

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1. Introduction

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,

> *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. *Free*, in this sense, we should note, has a precise meaning. We are interested in whether our actions are determined. If they are, then, in each instance, they could not have been done differently. Hence, we are not "free" to have acted otherwise. If an action is not determined, then it could have been done differently, and so we are, at least some of the time, free to select from a range of possible actions. While we are clarifying the terminology, we should also say 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.

The two central theories about the will are determinism and libertarianism. According to determinism, we do not a have free wills. The central principle that underwrites this theory is *the principle of universal causality*. According to this principle, every event, including every human action, is brought about by an earlier event or events in accordance with the laws of nature. The causes of our actions will, in some cases, trace back to our environment, or they might be genetic or biological, and they might be recent or distant. But one way or another, they 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 about the relevant laws of nature, 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. (*History of Civilization in England*, vol. 1, 1872, pp. 18 – 19)

According to libertarianism, meanwhile, we do have free wills.[1] According to this theory, some of the time, although probably not always, we act freely. That is to say, 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, the narrator, at that moment in time, could not have taken the other one. Some feature of the narrator—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.

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[1] 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.

2. The starting points

Obviously, the reason 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. (1941, p. 388)[2]

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. 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. For example, imagine how you would feel if, on visiting your dentist for relief of a toothache, he were to conclude

[2] Wood, L. (1941). "The Free-Will Controversy." *Philosophy*, 16: 386-397.

> his oral examination with the remark, "I certainly can see that you are in great pain because of your toothache, but I'm afraid that I can't help you, for there is no cause of this toothache." Perhaps, he calls his partner over to confirm his judgment. "Sure enough," she or he says, "this is one of those interesting noncausal cases. 'Sorry, there's nothing we can do for you. Even medicine and pain relievers won't help these noncausal types." (1987, p. 399)[3]

Not only has every event (or state of affairs) that each of us—scientists included—has encountered had a cause, but it seems that we can only experience and understand the world through the lens of universal causality.

We will return to the first point shortly, but let's consider the second for a moment. It's not just that some of the time we expect an event to have a causal explanation—for example, when I have a toothache 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 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. (1987, p. 401)

This is, perhaps, a more sophisticated point than the libertarian's argument that 'I feel free; therefore, I am free,' but again, just because we can only understand the world by accepting the principle of universal causality, that doesn't make this 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.

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[3] Pojman, L. (1987). "Freedom and Determinism: A Contemporary Discussion." Zygon, 22: 397-417.

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 everyone 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*.

But yet, we believe, or hope, that our minds are exempt from the principle. Given this hope, one place to turn for support is Descartes's theory of dualism. Recall that, according to Descartes, the mind is immaterial. It has no location, takes up no space, and contains no energy or mass. It, in some way, Descartes though, interacts with the brain, but it is separate from the brain. Being an immaterial substance, nothing can push or pull or otherwise cause the mind to do anything, which makes this theory fit nicely with libertarianism. That strength, however, is also a problem. How an immaterial mind could interact with a physical brain is left unexplained and appears to be unexplainable. Plus, as we discussed in the chapter on the mind, a wide variety of evidence—drinking alcohol, Phineas Gage's accident with a tamping rod, neuroimaging, degenerative brain diseases—tells us that the mind is not separate from the brain.

Rejecting dualism and the idea that the mind is immaterial means that we must accept monism: everything in the universe is composed of matter. Under the umbrella of monism, we have functionalism or reductionism (or some variant of one of them). The differences between these two theories are stark, but with respect to the current issue, they aren't that important. The mind is either, as functionalism holds, a sort of

program that "runs on" the brain, or, as reductionism proposes, the mind just is the activity of the brain. Either way, we have a material object, the brain, which, it has been said, is the most complex object in the universe. But it is still a biological object and its basic processes are not that mysterious.

As we said in the chapter on the mind, the electrical signals carried by neurons are caused by stimuli such as light, sound, or pressure on the skin, as well as by other neurons. One neuron excites another by releasing a neurotransmitter such as glutamate, dopamine, or serotonin into the small space between the two neurons. The neurotransmitter migrates to the second neuron and binds to receptors molecules in that cell's membrane. The binding of the neurotransmitter opens channels that allow positively charged ions—for instance, positively charged sodium ions—to flow into the neuron. If enough positive charge enters, then the neuron will generate an action potential, which allows it, by the same mechanism, to excite other neurons. All of those are causal processes that obey the laws of physics. Of course, sometimes the mind doesn't work as it "should," by which we mean it is not operating in a healthy or normal way. But even in those circumstances, there is—or we almost unanimously believe that there is—a biochemical explanation for the breakdown in performance. After all, the billions of dollars spent on, for instance, the search for a cure for Alzheimer's disease is based on the extremely well-founded belief that all aspects of brain function are causal processes.

3. The causes of our actions

Discussions of determinism naturally include the brain, but the case for determinism can be made just as easily by only invoking beliefs, desires, and other mental states. 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 there 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 spend Thanksgiving with my sister in Virginia or with 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 for Thanksgiving, I will be able to see each next, 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 one of them, and so I travel to her home for Thanksgiving.

So, although, in this case, 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 speak 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.[4] 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

[4] 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.

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 simple 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 beliefs changing without a reason for them doing 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.

4. Libertarianism and actions

While the determinist has no trouble describing how action are caused, the same task is much more difficult for the libertarian. 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 or states of affairs (including other mental states). It has to be possible that the action could have, at that same moment in time, been done differently. Second, although the action cannot be determined, it also should not be random or arbitrary. So, when, for instance, Sarah 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. Let's, for

the purpose of evaluating the processes that might produce free actions, say that an action *is not* random when it is done for a reason; and so an action *is* random when it *is not* done for any particular reason.

4.1 uncaused events

So then, how does libertarianism describe the process that produces free actions? One possibility is that the process that produces an action begins with an uncaused event. Recall the example about my decision to visit one of my sisters for Thanksgiving. Let's say that I decided to visit the sister who lives in North Carolina. This version of libertarianism, then, 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. Libertarianism does not deny that I have beliefs about when I last saw each sister, when, if not for Thanksgiving, I will be able to see each next, how much time and effort it will take to get to each of their homes, how much I want to spend a few days with each one and her family, how important travel time and costs are to me, and so forth. According to this account, however, none of these 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 Virginia for Thanksgiving. 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 is 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 for Thanksgiving (where I know no one

and they don't celebrate Thanksgiving at the end of November). Hence, we have to conclude, that according to this version of libertarianism, my decision would be random.

4.2 caused by the agent

So far, I 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.

In the account that we will examine here, the action is caused by the agent him- or herself, and so is called *agent causation*. An early version of this idea was defended by Aristotle (384 – 322 B.C.E) who wrote,

> All things that are in movement are moved by something. And this will happen in one of two ways. Either [1] it is not through itself that the mover moves the thing, but rather it is through something else the mover moves it, or [2] it is through itself, and this latter mover will act either [2a] first after the last movement or [2b] through several intermediates—for example, the stick moves the stone, which is moved by the hand, which is moved by the human being, who is no longer moved by anything else.
>
> We say of course that both things cause movement, both the last and the first mover [i.e., the human and the stick], but

> more so the first. For it moves the last, but the last does not move the first, and without the first the last will not move anything, whereas the first will do so without the last—for example, the stick will not move anything if it is not moved by the human.
>
> If, then, everything that is in movement must be moved by something, and either [1] by something moved by something else or [2] not, and if it is moved by something else, there must be some first mover that is not moved by anything else, whereas if the first mover is of the latter sort, there is no necessity for the other sort (since it is impossible for a series of movers that are moved by something else to go on without limit, since of unlimited series there is no first member)—if, then, everything that is in movement is moved by something, and the first mover is moved, but not by anything else, it must be moved by itself. (*Physics*, VIII, 4 – 5, 256, trans. by C. D. C. Reeve)

This won't do as a complete analysis today, but it is still a compelling picture. The stone moves, and that movement is caused by the stick. The human moves his or her hand, which moves the stick, but there is nothing, at least nothing that we can observe, that moves the human. What it means to be "moved by itself" is a little unclear, but the idea that the movement begins with the human is easy to grasp.

Today, we can be more specific about what causes the hand to move, and Roderick Chisholm adds to Aristotle's account this way:

> 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. ("Human Freedom and the Self," 1964, p. 8)

Adding these details, however, creates more problems than it solves. Although we don't know everything about how the brain functions, we know a lot, and we know that there is no little agent in there somewhere pulling levers and, 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 Aristotle's and Chisholm's accounts 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. Since nothing forces the agent to initiate *brain activity A* instead of *brain activity B*, either one could happen. So, the criterion that the action not be determined is satisfied.

At the same time, as you might have foreseen, the second criterion, that the action not be random, is the problem. First, we might wonder if there is really a difference between this account and the previous one, which invoked uncaused basic mental events. Chisholm, anticipating this objection, says,

> The only answer, I think, can be this: that the difference between the man's causing A [i.e., the decision to move the stone with the stick], on the one hand, and 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 concerns that we discussed for the uncaused basic mental event apply 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 not to do so), 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 not moving the stone with the stick. 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.

4.3 Dennett's solution

A proposal offered by Daniel Dennett—who, if he really ever was a libertarian, is no longer—is different than our first two accounts in some interesting ways. Let's begin with Dennett's example,

> Jones, who is finishing her dissertation on Aristotle and the practical syllogism, must decide within a week whether to accept the assistant professorship at the University of Chicago, or the assistant professorship at Swarthmore. She considers the difference in salaries, the probable quality of the students, the quality of her colleagues, the teaching load, the location of the schools, and so forth. Let us suppose that considerations *A*, *B*, *C*, *D*, *E*, and *F* occur to her and that those are the only considerations that occur to her, and that on the basis of those, she decides to accept the job at Swarthmore. She does this *knowing* of course that she could devote more time and energy to this deliberation, could cast about for other relevant considerations, could perhaps dismiss some of *A*–*F* as being relatively unimportant and so forth, but being no more meticulous, no more obsessive, than the rest of

> us about such matters, she settles for the considerations that have occurred to her and makes her decision.
>
> Let us suppose though, that after sealing her fate with a phone call, consideration *G* occurs to her, and she says to herself: "If only *G* had occurred to me before, I would certainly have chosen the University of Chicago instead, but *G* didn't occur to me." ("On Giving Libertarians What They Say They Want," 1981/2017, p. 315)

The picture here is immediately more compelling than either of the other two that we have examined and is likely to strike us as a plausible account of human action. At the same time, it's not exactly clear that Jones is free in the way that the libertarian wants.

Before getting to that worry, however, let's consider some of the other details of this account. The key for Dennett is that the considerations to which Jones (or anyone else) has access will vary. Some, Dennett suggests, "are determined to be generated" and so will definitely be accessible to the person when he or she must select an action. Other considerations, however, will be "non-deterministically generated" (p. 315). In other words, some considerations, like *G* in Dennett's example, will arbitrarily remain hidden, while others will arbitrarily bubble up at the right time. (To clarify, the idea is that *A*, *B*, *C*, *D*, *E*, *F* and *G* are all mental states—beliefs, thoughts, preferences, or whatever—that Jones has, but *G* is one that she doesn't "think of" or remember at the relevant moment. The others are ones of which she is aware—that is, she is thinking about them—before she acts.)

So, how does this account fare with respect to our two criteria? If we just take the considerations to which the person has access—considerations *A*, *B*, *C*, *D*, *E*, and *F* that Jones has in mind before taking the job at Swarthmore—then Jones's action is determined. This part of the

process, as Dennett acknowledges, is the standard deterministic account that we discussed in section 3. He writes,

> Jones's action is caused by her mental states and she does not choose her mental states. Whatever beliefs she has about "the difference in salaries, the probable quality of the students, the quality of her colleagues, the teaching load, the location of the schools, and so forth" are not up to her, but are based on the information, accurate or not, that has been presented to her. And, however much she values a higher salary or living in Chicago or outside of Philadelphia are qualities that she happens to have and are no more under her control than how tall she is or the color of her eyes.

So, Jones's action is not random. She has reasons for taking the Swarthmore job, namely, considerations *A*, *B*, *C*, *D*, *E*, and *F*. (And those are reasons for taking the Swarthmore job, not reasons for taking the Chicago job. If, at the right time, she had those reasons *plus* reason *G*, then she would have taken the job at the University of Chicago.) So, her action is sensitive to her reasons in the way that they were not in the two other libertarian accounts that we examined.

Jones's action is also, at least in a way, undetermined. Let's say that, of considerations *A*, *B*, *C*, *D*, *E*, and *F*, the first four—*A*, *B*, *C*, *D*—were determined. At that moment in time, Jones could not have failed to have those considerations in mind. Considerations *E* and *F*, on the other hand, were not determined. It just so happened that they randomly joined the other considerations to which she had access. Consideration *G*, meanwhile, as we know, randomly remained hidden until after Jones accepted the job at Swarthmore. The result, then, is that at the first moment when Jones had both job offers, which one she would accept was undetermined. And even if we knew everything about Jones, we wouldn't know which job she

would take. Depending on which of considerations *E*, *F* and *G* happened to occur to her, she could end up taking either job.

So, to summarize, as we said above, given considerations *A*, *B*, *C*, *D*, *E*, and *F*, her action was not random. Of course, whether she has

(1) *A*, *B*, *C*, *D*, *E*, and *F*,

(2) *A*, *B*, C, *D*, *E*, *F* and *G*,

or even just

(3) *A*, *B*, *C*, and *D*

is random (although more on this shortly). But nonetheless, whichever set of considerations Jones has, that set will constitute the reasons for her action. So, although the point might be debated further, let's say that the action is not random, even though set of considerations is partially so.

Have we found a satisfactory account of free actions? Maybe. Once cause for concern is that, as Dennett later acknowledges, the process by which some considerations are made accessible to the person is probably not truly random. Rather, it's just extremely complex and, perhaps, a little bit senseless. As Dennett jokingly suggests, maybe a consideration that occurs to me is determined by "the locations of the planets or what I had for breakfast" (p. 320). Thus, the full set of considerations to which a person has access will appear random, although it is generated by a fully deterministic process. This undermines the central feature of Dennett's account, but we can still maintain the idea that, because the set of considerations *seems* random, the person's action will be unpredictable, even if it isn't exactly undetermined.

Setting aside whether that process is random or just unpredictable, the remaining concern is whether Jones taking the job at Swarthmore is free in the sense that the libertarian wants. I think that it probably isn't, but at the same time, I can't quite put my finger on why. The libertarian doesn't, or at least shouldn't, want Jones's action to spontaneously happen despite

the considerations that she has in mind. And similarly, given one set of considerations, the libertarian shouldn't want it to be the case that Jones can take either job, which would mean that the considerations don't bare on her action. That Jones's action was unpredictable (or at least unpredictable before she ended up with the set of considerations that would cause her to take the job at Swarthmore) might be all that a libertarian should want.

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. In brief, *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 do nothing. If nothing is preventing me from jumping into the pool to save the child, then, it seems, I deserve to be blamed for doing nothing. 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 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 for libertarianism:

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.

C (P4). Hence, determinism is false.

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

C. Therefore, libertarianism is true.

The argument is valid, and so if P1 – P3 are true, then the first conclusion, *determinism is false* has to be true, and if P1 – P5 are 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.[5] 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."

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. That may save moral responsibility, but if we can be morally responsible whether or not determinism is true, then being moral responsibility won't make libertarianism true.

[5] As we will see in the next chapter, A.J. Ayer, who defends a version of determinism, rejects P1 and accepts P3.

6. Punishment

On April 18, 2008, Helen Golay and Olga Rutterschmidt, both of whom were in their 70s, were convicted of murdering two homeless men. They killed Paul Vados in 1999 and Kenneth McDavid in 2005. In both cases, they made the killing look like a hit and run accident, and afterward, they collected the money from the multiple life insurance policies that they had taken out on the 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, we might wonder, what exactly justifies those punishments? The government has to be able to justify the punishments that it imposes, and so how might it do so? To answer these questions, 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 seems to also 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.

This theory maintains that 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, of course, 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, somewhat weaker, although still important, justifications for punishment are satisfying the victims' desire for punishment (and 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 might 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 that 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, the goal of satisfying victims' desire for punishment, or the goal of 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 murder is wrong won't also cause people to refrain from committing such an offense. Or, on the other hand, that other beliefs—say, the belief that I won't get caught—will cause people to kill others for the insurance money.)

The moral, then, is that, while determinism being true would force us to give up one justification for punishment. It is perfectly consistent 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.