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The First Argument

The First Argument

Suppose that Bruno's assassination attempt was well-documented in the local press. It is known that the would-be assassin fired a single shot. The bullet missed Grandfather---but only barely: it burnt a scar on his left cheek.

Bruno has seen that scar in photographs on countless occasions. He can remember it clearly. "A hideous scar on a hideous face," he thinks, as he takes his position at the belfry and loads a single bullet into his rifle.

He prepares to take aim, and remembers one of the old newspaper articles about the shooting. He has read it so many times that he can recite it from memory: "The assassination attempt occurred at noon. The church bells were tolling. A single shot was fired. The bullet missed, but only barely, burning a scar on the victim's left cheek." Bruno's train of thought is interrupted when the church bells start tolling. Noon has arrived. Bruno caresses the trigger. Grandfather stands still for a moment, as a breeze ruffles some nearby leaves. Bruno prepares his shot...

On this version of the story, we know exactly how Bruno will act: he will take a single shot and miss---but only barely, burning a scar on Grandfather's left cheek. This means that *what we know* about the rest of the story is incompatible with Bruno's killing Grandfather. It is tempting to conclude from this that Bruno was not in a position to do otherwise, and use this conclusion to argue---via the Control Hypothesis---that he did not act freely. It seems to me, however, that that would be a mistake.

Let me begin with an analogy. You meet your friend Susan for breakfast in New York. She tells you that she decided to leave on a train-trip to Alaska last night, and set off to the train station. Susan is yet to get to the end of her story, but you know already that her attempt to get to Alaska by train was unsuccessful.

How do you know this?

Because here she is in New York the next morning, telling you her story. And you know that it takes several days to get to Alaska by train. So *what you know* about the actual situation is incompatible with her making a train-trip to Alaska.

Notice, however, nothing so far entails that Susan did not act freely when she failed to leave town. Although Susan's story could go on to reveal that she remained in New York against her will---perhaps she was prevented from getting on the train by an anxious friend---it could also reveal that she acted freely: perhaps she changed her mind as she headed for the tracks.

The key feature of the case is that even before Susan is able to get to the end of her story, you have information about the story's future: you know that Susan will somehow fail to make a train-trip to Alaska. But what is relevant to free will, according to the Control Hypothesis, is whether Susan was in a position to go to Alaska by deciding differently, regardless whether you---who are with her in New York the next day---happen to know that things won't actually turn out that way.

Now return to the case of Bruno and his Grandfather. We---who live in the present day---have information about Grandfather's future: we know that he will in fact live long enough to have children, and therefore that Bruno's assassination attempt will fail. But, according to the Control Hypothesis, this is irrelevant to the question of whether Bruno acted freely. What matters is whether Bruno was in a position to kill Grandfather, regardless of whether we---who live in the present day---happen to know that things won't actually turn out that way.

Time Travel and Free Will

the weaker way,
then there is no tension
between having a
deterministic system
of laws--
that is, a system of laws that
allow
us to calculate what the
future is
like on the basis of the past--
-
and free will.



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Problem 1

2/2 points (ungraded)

Suppose that Susan interrupts her story to take a phone call. She's told you that went to the train station and bought her ticket, but she has not yet revealed whether she set foot on the train. Should you accept the following conditional?

If Susan set foot on the train, she managed to make the trip to Alaska.

No



✓ Answer: No

Explanation

You should not accept the conditional. You know that your friend is in New York the next morning, because she is right there with you. So if she did set foot on the train, she must have gotten off at some point.

You later learn that Susan did not in fact set foot on the train. Would this be enough to justify you in accepting the following conditional?

Had Susan set foot on the train, she would have made the trip to Alaska.

No



✓ Answer: No

Explanation

It is not clear that you would be justified in accepting the conditional, just by learning that she set foot on the train. It is compatible with the story so far that no trains left New York because of a storm. In that scenario, it is not the case that she would have made the trip to Alaska if she had set foot on the train.

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Problem 2

1/1 point (ungraded)

Here is the story of Death in Damascus:

One day a traveling merchant met Death in the souks of Damascus. Death appeared surprised, but she quickly recovered her characteristic cool and intoned with cadaverous solemnity, "Prepare yourself; I am coming for you tomorrow."

The merchant was terrified, and fled that very night to Aleppo.

The next day, the merchant woke up and—horror of horrors!—found Death at her bedside. Her voice quaking, she managed to squeak, "I thought you were looking for me in Damascus!"

"No, I was merely shopping in Damascus," said Death. "That's why I was surprised to see you: it is written that our final meeting is in Aleppo."

Could the merchant have stayed in Damascus, and avoided her date with Death?

The answer is not fully specified by the story so far, but here's a way of interpreting the story so that, yes, the merchant could have avoided her date with Death; it's just that she wasn't going to, and Death knew this.

The basic idea is to think of the merchant as analogous to your friend Susan, who was thinking about taking a train trip to Alaska, and of Death as analogous to you. Death knows that she will meet the merchant on the appointed date the way that you know that your friend will fail to make the trip to Alaska: she has information about the future. But it doesn't follow that the merchant had to meet Death in Aleppo; just as it doesn't follow that Susan had to stay in New York.

Let us suppose that if the merchant had decided to stay in Damascus, she would have succeeded in staying. Does the Control Hypothesis entail that she acted freely in traveling to Aleppo?



✔ Answer: Yes

Explanation

Yes. When we interpret the story in such a way that the merchant could have decided to stay in Damascus (and succeeded), the Control Hypothesis entails that she acted freely in traveling to Aleppo.

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No free will for the merchant

discussion posted 6 days ago by [Jorge24](#)

According to the fictional world where the story occurs -- otherwise Dumbo or Superman couldn't fly -- the merchant is not free in his choice: Death tells him "it was written" and it looks like he was right. No chance to remain in Damascus.

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2 responses



PeterTheFat

a day ago



I do not agree. "it is written that our final meeting is in Aleppo." This specifies the location, but not the time.



In the first paragraph upon meeting the merchant Death says, "Prepare yourself; I am coming for you tomorrow."

posted about 12 hours ago by **Ninguem**

denisos

about 14 hours ago



This is a scenario that is very common in Irish literature. A tragic fate is foretold (Irish literature is very depressing !) and we all know it will come to pass. We don't know how. Sometimes the protagonists accept it, sometimes they try to avoid it, but it always happens. It is "preordained".

If you look at it from the narrow perspective, you always can identify something that the protagonist did that maybe, if they hadn't, they could have avoided the fate (it seems) - for example, why did he go on that trip? But from the broad perspective and the context, you know that there was no way to avoid it. So if going on that trip was necessary for the tragedy to happen, then in some sense, it was pre-ordained (by the laws of tragedy rather than the laws of time-travel) that they would go on that trip. So, did they act freely in doing so?

In other theatre, also tragedies, we see protagonists who seem determined to bring about their own downfall, who take actions that seem foolhardy or downright wrong - but yet again, there is something in the theory of tragedy that says they are not really acting freely in their choices. Sometimes this may be interpreted as a mental trait, but other times it seems like a force that is stronger than the protagonist almost "forces" them to act in this way. Again, the question of free-will is difficult to assess.

In other words, a lot of tragic literature and drama is to some extent about free-will - I presume, often intentionally so.

And in this case, even science doesn't reassure - indeed, it is quite difficult to find scientific experts who truly believe in free-will, except in the sense that they might believe in God - with free-will being some super-natural trait that is outside the

physical world. Which is not to say that all scientists believe we don't have free-will either, just that there is currently no scientific explanation of how we could possibly have free will given what we know about how brains work.

So these lectures are providing a very interesting "third perspective" on the question, focused on logical consistency. Even if all the perspectives are somehow intermixed. It's interesting to ponder - in part because whatever we conclude is shocking if we really think about it :D

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