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Reasons to Doubt The Control Hypothesis

In order to assess the question whether Bruno acts freely, we have been working with the Control Hypothesis: the view that to act freely is to be in a position to act otherwise.

As I noted earlier, however, it is not clear that the Control Hypothesis is correct. The best way to see this is to consider a slight variation of the Susan's story, which is adapted from a famous example due to Princeton philosopher Harry Frankfurt.

As before, we will assume that Susan is on her way to board a train to Alaska. As before, we will assume that Susan has a powerful enemy, who is committed to keeping her in New York by any means necessary. And, as before, we will assume that Susan ends up staying in New York.

This time, however, we will assume that the enemy never interferes. He doesn't have to. Susan changes her mind at the last minute, and heads home on her own volition. So the enemy doesn't arrange for the trains to be cancelled. He would have certainly interfered had Susan gotten any closer. But, as a matter of fact, he did nothing at all.

In this scenario, Susan acts freely when she fails to leave New York, since she heads home on her own volition, with no outside interference of any kind. But the Control Hypothesis entails, incorrectly, that Susan does not act freely. For Susan was not in a position to leave New York by deciding differently: had she decided differently, the enemy would have interfered, and her efforts would have been thwarted.

Following Frankfurt, we can even imagine a scenario in which Susan not only fails to be in a position to *act* differently, she is also not in a position to *decide* differently.

Suppose that the enemy interferes not by cancelling trains, but by meddling with her decision-making. He is able to keep track of Susan's deliberations. As long as Susan makes no decision to leave New York, the enemy does nothing. But should Susan ever come close to such a decision, the enemy is ready to interfere by administering a drug that will cause Susan to decide to stay in New York.

Now suppose that, as it happens, Susan considers whether to leave New York, and decides to stay. Then she will have acted freely in staying, even though she won't have been in a position to make a different decision, since the enemy would have interfered. But the Control Hypothesis entails, incorrectly, that Susan does not act freely, since she was not in a position to decide differently.

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[The idea here is that if I happen to choose freely the choice that I would anyhow be constrained t...](#)

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