

## Free Will in a Natural Order of the World

Ansgar Beckermann

1.

It often happens that philosophical problems arise through noticing that our thoughts about the world cannot be quite right; and in most of these cases this is so because we have discovered that two (or more) statements we used to regard as true cannot both (or all) be true if taken together. The problem of free will is a case in point. On the one hand, we are absolutely sure that there are at least some cases where we make decisions, and that in making them we are free and hence responsible for these decisions. We cannot imagine what it would be like to live in a community in which there is no such thing as responsibility. On the other hand, the results arrived at in the natural sciences seem to show that freedom as we intuitively understand it does not exist. Freedom appears to be impossible in a world where everything runs its ordinary course and no irregularities happen. But why is that so? Why does our natural way of looking at the world fail to fit the scientific way of looking at it?

Let's try to take a first step towards giving an answer to this question by looking at a simple example. I am lying in bed; the alarm clock starts ringing. I really ought to get up, for in an hour from now a meeting of the faculty board will be opened. But it's been a late night, and it would nice to lie in. Suppose I decide to stay in bed. Under what conditions can this be said to be a *free decision* for which I can be held *responsible*? In my view, basically the following three conditions need to be satisfied:

### Condition 1

There must be a choice between different alternatives; I must be able to act this way or that way, I must be able to decide this way or that way. (*Could have done or chosen otherwise condition*)

### Condition 2

The choice that is made must depend on *me*. (*Authorship condition*)

### Condition 3

My choice must not be subject to any kind of *constraint*. My choice must itself be free. (*Control condition*)

The first part of the free will problem lies in the fact that each of these conditions seems to be compatible with *neither* determinism *nor* indeterminism.<sup>1</sup> The first half of this claim becomes clear immediately if determinism is understood to amount to the thesis that all events have a sufficient cause in other events. For if this is true how can the three conditions just mentioned be fulfilled?

1. How is it possible for me to decide *differently* if my decision is determined by other events?
2. If a decision has been caused by another event, how could it be due to *me*? Perhaps one might reply that it nonetheless originates in myself if I was the initiator of that other event. But determinism says that the other event too had a cause etc. At some point the causal chain will then lead back to causes belonging to a time before my birth and consequently certainly not due to myself.
3. How can my choice have been *free* if, according to determinism, it was caused by other events?

Incompatibility with indeterminism arises if the latter is understood as meaning that the decision taken by me has not been caused by other events but is purely accidental. If the decision taken is a matter of pure chance, then it seems

---

<sup>1</sup> A classical formulation of this dilemma and its seemingly obvious solution by way of assuming agent causation can be found in Chisholm (1964).

quite clear that it does not originate in myself either, for otherwise it would not be accidental.

Roderick Chisholm has argued that with regard to free action this dilemma can be dissolved only by a bold assumption. We must assume that it is neither the case that every event involved in a free action is caused by some other event nor that the action is something that is not caused at all. Instead we have to suppose that at least one of the events involved in the action is caused – not by another event, but by the agent himself. This assumption, however, is based on an extremely problematic idea. After all, if this so-called agent causation is to be understood as an *alternative* to natural event causation, a person will have to be regarded as a being which stands outside the normal context of nature and at the same time as capable of intervening in that context from the outside. What is even worse, it seems to me that in everyday life most people, at least implicitly, endorse this highly problematic assumption. For this reason it is not surprising that scientists in particular are unhappy about the ordinary conception of free will.

In his paper “Explaining Voluntary Action: The Role of Mental Content” Wolfgang Prinz goes so far as to speak of three “unreasonable metaphysical demands” connected with the idea of free will. In his eyes, the first of these demands consists in assuming that there is an insurmountable gulf between the mental and the physical, and that the mental leads a *Cartesian* kind of *life of its own* beyond the physical world. The second demand rests on the first one and consists in supposing that the mental is capable, not only of leading an extra-physical kind of life of its own, but also of *causally intervening* in the physical realm. “When a person decides to switch on the radio, he or she will in finally stand up and activate the corresponding switch. We understand this action as a direct causal consequence of the intention – just like we see the movement of a billiard ball as the direct causal consequence of its being struck by the cue”

(160). Finally, the third metaphysical demand consists in the assumption of a “principled local indeterminism”:

The idea of free will encourages us to accept local pockets of indeterminism in an otherwise deterministically conceived worldview. Naturally, we have grown accustomed to being presented with such pockets here and there from another field, namely, from quantum mechanics and chaos theory. However, unlike these cases, this indeterminism does not just concern an absence of determination or determinableness, but something completely different and more radical: nothing less than the replacement of usual causal determination through another, causally inexplicable form of determination. This is based on the assumption of a subject who is conceived as autonomous, who is personally free, that is, non-determined. This explains why the rather quaint attempts to relate free will to the uncertainty principle of quantum mechanics or the indeterminacy of chaotic systems are doomed to failure. They are based on the misunderstanding that free will is nothing other than the absence of determination or determinableness. In truth, the unreasonable demand goes much further: The idea of free will requires us to see each subject as an independent, autonomous source of action determination. (161)

If one looks at the exact wording of this passage, it becomes clear that the problematic assumption of a “local indeterminism” is not Prinz’s primary concern. He seems to feel that the basic demand lies in the idea that subjects might count as self-sufficient, autonomous sources of action determination. He too is alarmed by the notion that subjects stand outside the natural order of things and are capable of intervening in this order from an outside position. As regards this judgment, there are many philosophers who share his view. Analytic philosophy in particular has always had a basic tendency that is strongly characterized by naturalism. At any rate, in logical empiricism as well as in authors like Wittgenstein and Ryle their anti-Cartesianism sticks out a mile. Thus, as far as this question is concerned, a great many philosophers don’t quarrel with scientists. On the contrary, regarding this point they would unreservedly opt for the scientific camp.

However, scientists like Prinz, Roth and Singer also seem to believe that the idea of free will is inseparably tied to a Cartesian or quasi-Cartesian notion of a

person. And this is anything but self-evident. To be sure, at first glance it seems that this conclusion naturally follows from the previous considerations. For these had shown that it at any rate looks as if free will were incompatible with determinism in the usual sense as well as with indeterminacy in the sense of being accidental. But to show that this is *not* the last word is a problem which, in the eyes of many philosophers, is by no means impossible to solve.

2.

The question, thus, is: Can there be such a thing as freedom of the will only if persons are conceived as non-natural beings that are capable of intervening in the order of nature? Or does the concept of free will make sense even if human beings are conceived as belonging to our natural world – as biological beings, differing from other kinds of biological being only in respect of their peculiar cognitive abilities? And, of course: Can there be such a thing as free will if in nature everything that happens is above board in the sense that all natural events either have sufficient *natural* causes or do not have sufficient causes at all?

The only way to answer these questions will consist in having another look at our three conditions and allowing for the question whether there might be different ways of reading them – ways that are compatible with the assumption that human beings too are part of a natural world where nothing really irregular happens.

As regards the could-have-done-or-chosen-otherwise condition incompatibilists argue as follows: In a determined world, the only things that can happen at any given time are those that actually do happen. Thus, in a determined world everyone can do only what he actually does do; he will never be able to do anything else. Obviously, this argument is based on the following analysis of the word “can”. A can do X in situation S, if it is nomologically possible that A does X in situation S.

One way of responding to this argument consists in admitting that the incompatibilist is right and making the possibility of freedom depend on the fact that in nature at least some events do not have sufficient causes. That is the path taken by Robert Kane, for instance. I for my part, however, have the impression that there is a possible reply open to the determinist, and that is a reply which is based on considerations by G. E. Moore that in my view have often been misunderstood.

Moore is right in pointing out that the word “can” has meanings different from the one used by the incompatibilist. If, e.g., we say of a person that he or she can do X in the sense that he or she has *the ability to do X*, we use the word “can” in a different sense. And it seems to me that Moore is equally right in adding that this is a sense of the word “can” in which one may say of a person that he or she *can do* something even if determinism is true. At this point, however, Moore is inconsiderate enough to attempt elucidating this sense of “can” by means of the so-called conditional analysis. This analysis, however, has been the object of too many counter-arguments to appear plausible anymore. But that doesn’t alter the fact that Moore had the right intuition, i.e. the intuition that a person may have the ability to do X even if there is a sufficient cause for him to do something different from X.

Concerning the things that I actually don’t do there is a remarkable difference. Some of those things I could do; some of them I couldn’t do. I can now get up from my chair and walk into the garden; but I cannot perform a standing high-jump of two metres, nor can I multiply two numbers of ten digits each in my head. The fact that presently I have the ability to get up from my chair depends on certain preconditions. I should not have this ability, if someone had tied me to the chair or if I had been paralysed from the waist down. Evidently, however, it is irrelevant to the *having* of this ability whether I decide to get up or decide to remain seated. Even if I decide to remain seated, I still have the ability to get up. After all, even if there is a sufficient cause for my decision to remain seated, that

would not affect my ability. In this sense, a person may have the ability to act differently from the way he actually does act even if his doing what he does is determined. And in the same sense a person may have the ability to decide differently from the way he does even if his decision is a deterministically fixed one.

The import of these considerations becomes even easier to see if one takes the following point into account. If you deny that a certain being – a human being, an animal or a machine – may be said to have the ability to do X on the grounds that it is determined that he or it does something different from X, then you will by the same token have to claim that in a deterministic world no being may be said to have an ability unless he or it exercises this ability. Accordingly, it would be false to say that in a deterministic world a motor car presently sitting in its garage can do 150 miles, or that a human being sitting on a chair can get up. That, however, would be absurd. For if that were right, the mere fact that some motor cars can do 150 miles even if they actually are not used to go at that speed would allow us to conclude that determinism is false.

3.

Let us turn to the second condition – the authorship condition. According to naturalism, even actions, decisions and considerations are natural events or processes that have natural causes if they have any causes at all. But naturalists of course do not deny that some actions are *my* actions, some decisions *my* decisions and some considerations *my* considerations. How, it may be asked however, can, e.g., a decision be *my* decision if it is nothing but a natural process? How can I be the “author” of a decision if it is not caused by me, but by other natural events? The first part of the answer to these questions lies in pointing out that the word “author” may be very misleading here if it is understood in terms of agent causation. It is not the case that a cat chases a mouse – i.e. that it is *the*

*cat* which is doing the chasing – if the cat is the cause of this behaviour, nor is it the case that a monkey reflects on how to get a banana, if it is the author of this reflection in the sense that it brings about this reflection in a causal kind of way.

One should rather say that matters are roughly as follows. In the case of animals – and even in the case of certain robots – it is possible to distinguish between what an animal does and what happens to it. In this way we distinguish a case where a dog chases a rabbit, for example, from a case where it is forced away from its favourite tree by pulling its leash. Two points are central to classifying certain movements of certain beings as their actions. First of all, these beings must have their own resources of energy and, second, they must be autonomous in the sense that their movements are determined by internal control mechanisms which are such that they (a) do not (in the manner of simple reflexes) always respond in the same way to the same kind of stimulus and (b) are not remote-controlled. In general, if the actions of animals are not simple reflex actions, this always amounts to two things: (a) they can act in more than one way, and (b) the choice of the action which is actually performed is a matter of the animal’s *internal* control mechanism. Especially because, and to the extent that, the actions of animals are not mere reflex actions a decision will have to be made prior to every action. After all, there must be some way of determining which one among the possible actions will be performed under the circumstances given. In this case, that a decision has been made does not mean more than that this or that action has been initiated. If such a decision rests on the relevant internal control mechanisms, one may say that the animal itself has made the decision. If, however, someone intervenes from outside, e.g. by way of radio signals or other kinds of manipulative means, and by doing so brings about a decision, then this is an externally induced decision that was not taken by the creature itself. Thus we arrive at a way of looking at things according to which it is quite possible to say of beings belonging to the natural order that they themselves have performed a given action or taken a certain decision.

4.

The crucial question, however, has not been answered yet – the question whether a decision, thus understood, can be a free one. For now we are again confronted by our (alleged) initial dilemma: either the decision – which, as we now presuppose, is a natural process – is causally determined by other natural events, and in that case it cannot be free; or it is accidental, and in that case it may possibly be free. But can somebody be held responsible for something that has happened purely accidentally?

In his very illuminating book *The Significance of Free Will*, Robert Kane has attempted to show that the second horn of the dilemma is something one may at any rate be able to cope with. He begins, however, by giving another description of the problems arising from this horn:

Suppose [our decisions were dependent on] quantum jumps or other quantum uncertainties in the brain. How would the occurrence of these events enhance an agent's freedom, since they would be chance events, occurring unpredictably and not under anyone's control, including the agent's own control? Images of this sort suggest that indeterminism would not enhance, but would rather undermine, the rationality, control and responsibility normally associated with free choices and actions. These images have in turn led critics of libertarian theories to charges that undetermined actions would be "arbitrary", "random", "irrational", or "inexplicable". (106)

But ultimately Kane is not overly impressed by these arguments. His chief claim is that a decision is free if, and only if, it rests on a certain kind of non-determined neural process. I shall try to clarify this claim as briefly as seems called for. Time and again it happens that people find themselves in situations where they have to make decisions. These decisions may be rather trivial ones like, e.g., the decision whether to spend one's holidays in the mountains or at the seaside. But such decisions also may be extremely serious ones like the decision whether to stop one's car to assist a victim of a traffic accident or to drive on to avoid missing an important business meeting. Such decisions are arrived at

through processes of reasoning and deliberation, and this is so even if we are not completely aware of these processes. Kane too belongs to those who assume that such processes of reasoning and deliberation are natural processes, processes probably realised by neural processes. Thus the question is, Under what conditions will neural processes of this kind lead to free decisions? In this respect, Kane is a staunch opponent of compatibilism; in his opinion, a decision can be free only if it is not completely determined. (I shall soon return to his reasons for this view.) But if processes of reasoning and deliberation are realised by neural processes, how can they possibly fail to be determined?

At this point, Kane begins by pointing out that in nature in general as well as in our brains chaotic processes take place, i.e. processes in the course of which minute differences in their initial conditions may lead to significantly different results. Such processes may be influenced by quantum events – they take a certain course if a radium atom decays within a certain interval, and they take a completely different course if the atom does not decay within that interval. Now, Kane's argument rests on the assumption that processes leading to free decisions actually are chaotic neural processes sensitive to quantum events, i.e. *macroscopically non-determined* neural processes. If I have to choose between two actions, A and B, and if there are good reasons for either action, a process of that kind will be set in motion. And according to whether the quantum event takes this course or that course, this process will lead either to the decision to perform action A or to the decision to perform action B.

What is remarkable about this construction is, first of all, the fact that Kane makes a deliberate attempt to offer an analysis of free decisions that is compatible with the assumption that human beings are, just like all other creatures, part of the natural order of our world. For him, it is no solution to accept extra-natural persons that intervene in the course of this world from outside – and that is why he does not like to be called a "libertarian". Kane is an out-and-out naturalist. But – and this of course is a large BUT –, how on earth does Kane sup-

pose to be able to fend off the objection that in his construction, too, free decisions are “arbitrary”, “capricious”, “random”, “irrational” and “inexplicable”?

At this point in particular Kane’s considerations are truly remarkable, on the one hand, but extremely cunning, on the other. Kane makes the in my view plausible assumption that a decision is neither arbitrary nor random nor irrational if it exhibits what he calls “plural rationality” and is subject to the actor’s “plural voluntary control”. This has the following three implications:

- (a) No matter what the actor decides, he must have reasons for his decisions.
- (b) The decision taken must be a voluntary one. That is, if the actor chooses a certain action, he must want to choose this action; and he must choose this option because he wants to choose it.
- (c) The decision must be subject to his control, that is, he would have to be able to take a different decision if he wanted to decide differently.

How can all these conditions be satisfied if a decision rests on a non-determined neural process? Well, condition (a) is satisfied *ex hypothesi*, as the process does not get started unless the actor has reasons for both A and B. For us to understand how the second condition can possibly be satisfied, we shall have to know what Kane means by saying that a person wills to take a certain action or decision. His definition runs as follows:

An agent *wills* to do something at time *t* just in case the agent has reasons or motives at *t* for doing it that the agent wants to act on more than he or she wants to act on any other reasons (for doing otherwise). (30)

This definition, however, seems to vitiate all Kane’s previous efforts. For if, say, the reasons for A are stronger than the reasons for B, then our actor will want to do A. So if the decision process leads to decision B, the actor will evidently do something he does not want to do. Thus there seems to be at least one possible decision which necessarily falls foul of condition (b).

At this point, however, the cunning already alluded to makes itself felt. According to Kane, what reasons are the stronger ones is not determined *prior to*

the decision; rather, this will be settled by the decision itself. If the decision turns out to be in favour of A, then by the same token the reasons for A will become the stronger ones. The same applies the other way round: if the decision turns out to be in favour of B, then by the same token the reasons for B will automatically be stronger than the reasons for A. But if this is so, then condition (b) will be necessarily satisfied. If someone opts for A, he also wants to opt for A; for in this case the reasons for A are the stronger ones. And if he opts for B, he also wants to opt for B; for through this very decision the reasons for B become stronger than the reasons for A. By the same token, condition (c) is satisfied as a matter of course. If the actor wanted to achieve something different, he would make a different decision. After all, only if he made a different decision would he want to achieve something different.

In this context, I do not want to give a fuller assessment of Kane’s considerations. But just for the record I wish to say that if Kane’s cunning proves successful, he will have shown that even in a uniformly natural world free decisions are possible. To be sure, this is only true of a world where there are chaotic neural processes sensitive to quantum events which for this very reason are macroscopically indeterminate. No matter how we may feel about this assumption, as far as I can see it at any rate seems to be the case that until now the sciences have *not* shown that there are no processes of this kind.

5.

But isn’t there perhaps a reading of condition 3 which is even compatible with determinism? As regards this question, I myself favour a solution that starts from a question about the kind of situation in which we really say that a decision has been made under coercion or compulsion, a solution that does not from the very outset assume that causation itself generally amounts to a kind of coercion or compulsion.

The example of a drug addict is the paradigmatic case of a human being whose decisions are subject to compulsion. In a sense, a drug addict can do what he wants to do. In his actions he is free; he is able to take drugs whenever he wants to take drugs (this, at any rate, is what we shall assume). He is not subject to any external kind of force. Internally, however, he is controlled by a form of compulsion. It is in his decisions that he is not free. His will leads a life of its own, as it were. Even if he wants to decide differently, his desire to take drugs will prevail. A drug addict is, so to speak, at the mercy of this type of desire. What is wrong with him? In what way does he differ from a human being who is able to make free decisions?

What in my opinion may help us at this point are certain considerations put forward by John Locke in chapter 21 (“Of Power”) of the second book of his *Essay concerning Human Understanding*. Locke’s first answer to the question what determines a man’s will is that the will is naturally determined by “the most pressing uneasiness” (§ 40). This, however, is not the full story. For, as Locke says, human beings are not simply *driven* by what they feel to be the most pressing uneasiness; in most cases they have the capacity to *pause* before acting and to *reflect on* what they ought to do in this situation, what would from a moral point of view be the right thing to do or what would best promote their well-considered self-interest.

There being in us a great many uneasinesses always solliciting, and ready to determine the *will*, it is natural, as I have said, that the greatest, and most pressing should determine the *will* to the next action; and so it does for the most part, but not always. For the mind having in most cases, as is evident in Experience, a power to *suspend* the execution and satisfaction of any of its desires, and so all, one after another, is at liberty to consider the objects of them; examine them on all sides, and weigh them with others. In this lies the liberty Man has; [...] we have a power to *suspend* the prosecution of this or that desire, as every one daily may Experiment in himself. This seems to me the source of all liberty; in this seems to consist that, which is (as I think improperly) call’d *Free will*. For during this *suspension* of any desire, before the *will* be determined to action, and the action (which follows that determination) done, we have opportunity to examine, view, and judge, of the good or evil

of what we are going to do; and when, upon due *Examination*, we have judg’d, we have done our duty, all that we can, or ought to do, in pursuit of our happiness; and ’tis not a fault, but a perfection of our nature to desire, will, and act according to the last result of a fair *Examination*.

According to Locke, then, free will rests on being able to pause before acting and to consider what ought to be done in the situation concerned, and what reasons favour one alternative rather than another. Thus one might say that a decision is free if it has come about in such a way that it could have been influenced by the actor’s deliberations, his weighing up of various reasons. In more recent times, this point has been expressed by Fischer and Ravizza (1998) as follows: a decision is free if it rests on a process which is accessible to reasons.

As a matter of fact, this definition fits the case of our drug addict perfectly. For what he complains about is that, even though he has grasped that this addiction will ruin his health, he cannot help choosing drugs. What our drug addict lacks is the ability to choose what, according to his own considerations, appears right. He may have the ability to reflect and to grasp that what he does will harm himself and may possibly be immoral. But that remains without influence on his decisions. These decisions are determined by circumstances that cannot be influenced by considerations of that type. Consequently, my thesis is the following: Our decisions are free if, and only if, they rest on processes that can be influenced by rational arguments and considerations.

But is that really possible if decision processes too are natural processes? Can there be natural processes that respond to arguments and rational considerations? To this question I want to reply by mentioning the following point. Let’s have another look at the case mentioned near the beginning of this paper. On a certain morning I am lying in bed, pondering the question whether I should get up and attend the board meeting of my faculty or may lie in for a little while. I am just on the brink of deciding in favour of lying in, but at that very moment the telephone rings. A colleague is calling, and in a state of agitation she says: “Really, you absolutely must come. There will be an important vote today, and your vote

may be the decisive one.” There can be no doubt that this call *may* have an effect on my decision. Why else would my colleague ring me up? It is obvious that my decision may be influenced by my colleague’s words. And that means that my decision can evidently be influenced by the reasons she brings forward. Thus, there are only two alternatives: *either* it is the case that not all decisions rest on natural processes *or* there are natural processes that can be influenced by considerations and arguments. Faced by this choice, I don’t hesitate for a moment to regard the second alternative as the more plausible one.

6.

In the previous section I have tried to sketch a solution of the free will problem which is couched in such a way that the point of the question whether or not a certain decision is free is not *whether* it was caused but only *how* it was caused. The decision is free if it arises from processes that are amenable to reasons and arguments. Are there any arguments against this conception, i.e. arguments meant to show that this solution does not do justice to our three above-mentioned conditions, after all?

Surely the best-known argument of this type is the consequence argument devised by Peter van Inwagen. The essential point of the argument is this: if determinism is true, every single decision of mine logically follows from prior events and the valid laws of nature. These prior events in turn logically follow from ulterior events and the valid laws of nature, and so on. Thus, if determinism is true, all my decisions logically follow from events preceding my birth together with the valid laws of nature. But I have no power over events belonging to a time before my birth, nor over the valid laws of nature. Ergo, I have no power over my decisions. Consequently, these decisions are not subject to my control.

Evidently, van Inwagen’s starting point is the following principle:

- (C) I am able to control an event *E* only if I am also able to control those events (or at least a decisive part of those events) that are responsible for *E*’s coming about.

What comes to the fore in this principle is a certain notion of *ultimate authorship* which, in the eyes of many incompatibilists, seems to constitute the crucial feature of freedom. What decisions I take depends on my desires and preferences and, in the last analysis, on my character – that is, on the sort of human being I am. That is not something that van Inwagen would want to deny. But he would, presumably, add that my decisions can only be free if my desires and preferences originate in myself rather than in circumstances that I can exert no influence on. For similar reasons Robert Kane rejects deterministic solutions of the free will problem. Kane’s argument starts from what he calls the problem of “covert non-constraining control”.

If our freedom is limited, that is, if we are subject to coercion or compulsion, we are usually able to notice this. If I am tied to a chair or if someone holds a gun to my head, I know full well that I am no longer free in my actions and decisions. And as regards most cases of inner constraints, things are not really different. An addict, a phobic or a person with a disposition towards compulsive behaviour will notice that there is something which escapes his control. His will is not *his* will. He feels guided by an external force, and he can neither act nor choose the way he would like to. But over and above these cases of a felt or perceived lack of freedom, there are other kinds of cases where we are not aware of our lack of freedom. Suppose I am under hypnosis, and upon being given the order to crawl under the table, I obey and may later even invent reasons why I have performed this action. In this sort of case I do not have the impression of lacking freedom. I do not even notice that someone has employed subtle means of manipulation to deprive me of my freedom.

In the case of constraining control, controlled agents are knowingly forced to do something against their wills. [...] In such cases [of nonconstraining control] the controllers do not get

their way by constraining or coercing others against their wills, but rather by manipulating the wills of others so that the others (willingly) do what the controllers desire. The controlled agents consequently do not feel frustrated or thwarted. They act in accordance with their own wants, desires or intentions. [...] In the most interesting cases, such control is a “covert” nonconstraining control [...] in which the controlled agents are unaware of being manipulated or perhaps even unaware of the existence of their controllers. (64-5)

Huxley’s *Brave New World* and Skinner’s *Walden Two* are examples that people tend to mention in this sort of context. Or they point out in a general way that there are various possibilities of mesmerising or constraining brain-washing people. But still the question remains, What does covert non-constraining control have to do with determinism?

Now, many people seem to feel that if our decisions were completely dependent on natural causes, this would be a case of manipulation *by nature*, just as the inhabitants of *Walden Two* are manipulated by the leaders of their community. But as the idea of manipulation by nature is at least a little odd, Kane proceeds more carefully in this context. Nevertheless, he too holds the view that complete causal determination would deprive us of a certain capacity the same way we should be deprived by covert non-constraining control. The capacity he means is the capacity to be *the ultimate creators (or originators) and sustainers of our own ends and purposes*.

I must confess that this is a phrase I find rather irritating. What kind of image are we supposed to form of someone’s being the ultimate creator and sustainer of his own ends and purposes? After all, it isn’t as if human beings were born as creatures without any desires and intentions who would then have to pick and choose from a vast supply of such desires and intentions: “I should like to have this desire and that intention, and could I perhaps have that purpose over there?” This idea is completely preposterous, for a creature without desires and intentions would have no motivation to acquire goals and intentions, nor would he or she have any criteria for taking his pick.

Galen Strawson has developed a related argument by means of which he wishes to show that ultimate authorship is inherently impossible:

1. To be responsible for our choices, we must be responsible for the psychological states that go into our choices.
2. To be responsible for these psychological states, we must choose them.
3. To choose our psychological states, we must use some principles for choosing them and we must be responsible for having those principles.
4. To be responsible for our principles of choice, we must consciously choose our principles by following some higher level principles of choice. And so on.
5. Therefore, to be responsible for our choices, we must complete an infinite regress of choices of principles of choice. (Double 2002, 518)

For us to be responsible for our decisions we shall have to be responsible for those desires that form the basis of our decisions, and that means that we ourselves shall have to choose those desires. But we can choose something only if we are provided with principles in accordance with which we make our choices. It is obvious, however, that in that case we shall have to be responsible for those principles too; that is, we ourselves shall have to pick those principles. To be able to do so we shall again need principles for which we are responsible, and which we ourselves shall hence have to choose. And so on. For us to be responsible for our decisions we shall therefore have to be able to bring an infinite regress of choices of decision principles to completion. That, however, is impossible.

What becomes manifest at this point is the following: If freedom presupposes that we ourselves choose the desires that our decisions rest on, there will be only two options. Either this sort of choice depends on decision principles which, in their turn, would have to be chosen, and so on and so forth. Or a first choice is made by a being that has no prior kind of desires or decision principles and whose choice can therefore only be one made for no reason whatsoever. It

stands to reason that neither of these alternatives is acceptable. In the former case we end up with an infinite regress. In the latter case the question arises why we should count as responsible for actions and decisions that ultimately rest on a blind choice. All this seems to show that the idea of *ultimate authorship* in respect of desires and preferences really is an incoherent one.

7.

If we review the considerations mentioned so far, what comes to light is a certain basic pattern informing the free-will debate – a pattern which has quite frequently been described in the recent literature. On the one hand, incompatibilists see a close connection between freedom and *origination*. According to this view, actions and decisions are free only if they rest on motives and preferences originating not from circumstances beyond my control, but ultimately created by myself. Compatibilists, on the other hand, emphasize the connection between freedom and *voluntariness*.<sup>2</sup> According to compatibilism, what is free are those actions and decisions that are performed or taken because I want to perform or take them, without being subject to inner or outer constraints. In my view, these fundamental intuitions have a lot to do with the starting point of our reflections. For freedom in the sense of origination is possible only if we really stand outside the framework of nature and are capable of external interventions. Freedom in the sense of voluntariness, however, is possible even if we are an integral part of an out-and-out natural world.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, if we want to answer the question whether freedom of the will can exist only if persons are conceived as extra-natural creatures, it is of the greatest importance that the idea of origination really is not a coherent idea at all. Of

---

<sup>2</sup> Cf. e.g. Honderich 2002.

<sup>3</sup> This of course is at odds with Kane's views on these matters. But in my view, according to Kane's account our motives and preferences ultimately do not originate from us but from the quantum events on which the neural processes depend which lead to the decisions we take.

course, on some occasions it is possible for us to detach ourselves from certain circumstances directly influencing our lives. We are quite able to forgo another glass of red wine, even if our hostess urges us to have one. We are also able to refrain from lying in, even if we are tired and should like to sleep a little longer. The following point, however, seems to be self-evident: in those cases where we do manage to detach ourselves in this way from our direct desires and needs, this only happens because we have *further desires* and *the ability* to reflect on our direct desires and curb them in relevant cases. What are these further desires due to, and what does this ability rest on? I think that neither of these desires nor of this ability to reflect and forgo the satisfaction of direct needs can it be claimed that ultimately they exclusively originate from ourselves. After all, it is much more plausible to assume that both are to some extent products of our biological make-up and to a perhaps even larger extent products of our upbringing. But that is by no means a reason to complain. We may be glad to have higher-order desires, and we may also be glad to be able to reflect and exercise self-control, even if we ourselves are not the ultimate originators of those desires and this ability.<sup>4</sup> As I have pointed out before, it does not really make sense to assume that we ourselves are the ultimate originators of all our desires.

Thus, as biological beings forming an integral part of the natural world we cannot help being born with a considerable number of natural desires – desires for food, shelter, affection, etc. And it seems utterly nonsensical to me to claim that by endowing us with those desires nature manages to manipulate us or to deprive us of our freedom. Actually, nature provides us with an additional specific capacity which is central to our freedom – the capacity to become aware of our desires and to reflect on them. This capacity, however, needs to be developed. Instruction and training may help us to refrain from complying only with the most appealing short-term desires. We learn that it may make sense to postpone short-term goals for the sake of achieving certain longer-term goals. And

---

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Pereboom, 481ff.

we also learn that there are moral standards by which our actions and decisions will be judged. If everything goes well, a decision-making mechanism will develop in us which takes account of all these aspects in an appropriate way – a decision-making mechanism that is amenable both to prudential considerations and moral arguments. We are free if this mechanism is sufficiently well developed and if our decisions really rest on this mechanism. On the other hand, we lack freedom in the case of decisions which depend on desires that cannot be “tamed” by this mechanism.

### References

- Chisholm, Roderick: “Human Freedom and the Self” (*The Lindley Lecture*, 1964), reprinted in Gary Watson (ed.), *Free Will*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982, 24-35.
- Double, Richard: “Metaethics, Metaphilosophy, and Free Will Subjectivism”. In: Kane (2002), 506-528.
- Fischer, John Martin and Mark Ravizza: *Responsibility and Control*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998
- Honderich, Ted: “Determinism as True, Compatibilism and Incompatibilism as False, and the Real Problem”. In: Kane (2002), 461-476.
- Kane, Robert: *The Significance of Free Will*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- Kane, Robert (ed.): *Oxford Handbook of Free Will*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2002.
- Locke, John: *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, ed. by Peter H. Niddich, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975.
- Moore, George Edward: *Ethics*, München: C.H. Beck 1975.
- Pereboom, Derk: „Living Without Free Will: The Case for Hard Incompatibilism“. In: Kane (2002), 477-488.
- Prinz, Wolfgang: “Explaining Voluntary Action: The Role of Mental Content”, in M. Carrer & P. Machamer (eds.) *Mindscapes. Philosophy, Science, and the Mind*. Konstanz: Universitätsverlag/ Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh University Press 1997, 153-175.
- Strawson, Galen: *Freedom and Belief*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 1986.
- Strawson, Galen: “Free Will”. In: E. Craig (ed.) *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. London: Routledge 1998.
- Van Inwagen, Peter: *An Essay on Free Will*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983.