

# Escaping the roll back argument

## implications for the metaphysics of action

### Short Abstract

Libertarians hold that free will requires indeterminism. However, if actions are undetermined, then it may be hard to see how they can be more than mere matters of chance or luck. But if what human agents do is just up to chance, then how can their actions be free? This is known as the luck problem. Perhaps the clearest formulation of this problem is the roll back argument (van Inwagen 2000): a thought experiment in which the universe is rolled back to just before an agent made a decision. Very recently, Franklin (2011) has proposed that the libertarian can circumvent the roll back argument if she combines her libertarianism with a metaphysical story about action known as causal theory of action (CTA). So-called event causal libertarians can argue that even though actions are undetermined events, they can still be free as long as the agent exhibits causal control over them. In the first part of my talk I argue that although his strategy is successful in avoiding the thrust of the rollback argument, it also effectively obscures the rationale of the libertarian requirement of indeterminism.. In the second part I propose a different strategy for avoiding the thrust of the roll back argument: libertarians should abandon the idea that undetermined actions come with objective probabilities. However, the idea that actions do have objective probabilities is deeply ingrained in current versions of CTA and therefore my proposed strategy is not open to the causal action theorist. Hence contrary to what Franklin believes, libertarians should look away from CTA, and endorse a different account of the metaphysics of action, if they want freedom instead of luck. In the third and final part of my talk I will argue that a metaphysics of powers is a prime candidate for providing such an alternative account. A closer look at the agentic power of acting intentionally might reveal how agents can act freely in our indeterministic world.

### Extended Abstract

Libertarianism is the position that free will is incompatible with determinism and requires the ability to do otherwise. *Prima facie* this seems reasonable: How can one have any freedom of action if everything one sets out to do is already determined beforehand? However, there also exists some tension between *indeterminism* and free will. If human actions are indeed undetermined, then how an agent acts on a certain occasion seems like a mere matter of chance or luck. Van Inwagen's so-called rollback argument (see below) is perhaps the clearest explication of this worry. Recently Franklin (2011) has claimed that the libertarian is able to circumvent the

rollback argument if she adopts the causal theory of action (CTA).<sup>1</sup> In my paper I argue that although his strategy is successful in avoiding the thrust of the rollback argument, it also effectively obscures the rationale of the libertarian requirement of indeterminism. Instead, I propose that libertarians need to abandon the idea that undetermined actions have objective probabilities if they want to escape the rollback argument. That actions do have objective probabilities is, however, deeply ingrained in current versions of CTA. Therefore, contrary to what Franklin believes, libertarians should look for an alternative metaphysics of action in order to escape the roll back argument. The prime candidate is a powers metaphysics, and a closer look at the agentic power of acting intentionally might reveal how agents can act freely in our indeterministic world.

Van Inwagen's (2000) rollback argument goes as follows: Alice is torn between telling the truth and lying. After some deliberation she decides to tell the truth. According to the libertarian this decision is free only if Alice's telling the truth at that time was not determined, i.e. if, given the exact same conditions, she could also have done otherwise, say, if she could have lied.<sup>2</sup> This means that if God were to rollback the scenario to the point just before Alice decided, and then let things develop, Alice could make a different decision and choose to lie (of course she could also decide to tell the truth again). Suppose that the scenario was run a thousand times, with the result that Alice lied 303 times and told the truth 697 times. What would we expect of the thousand-and-first run? Would it not be reasonable to suspect that Alice now has a probability of roughly 70% of telling the truth, and of 30% of telling a lie? But if that is right, then it seems that even Alice's original decision was just a matter of chance, and hence not a free action at all.

Van Inwagen himself is disheartened by his results. He expresses the hope and belief that something is wrong with it, but cannot pinpoint the error. Franklin (2011) argues that he can. According to him the rollback argument consists of two basic steps:

- (1) If human actions are undetermined, then they are a matter of chance.
- (2) If actions are matter of chance then they are not free.

Franklin thinks that (1) is correct, but he disagrees with (2). The rollback argument supposes that undetermined actions are not free, because the agent cannot control the outcome of her decision.

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<sup>1</sup> CTA, first proposed in Donald Davidson (1963), argues that what distinguishes an action from mere behaviour is its causal history. Actions are events that are caused by reasons (which are agent-involving mental states). In order to make room for alternative possibilities event causal libertarians argue that such causation is nondeterministic

<sup>2</sup> Suppose for the sake of argument that lying was Alice's only alternative possibility, because there were other conditions barring her from e.g. keeping her mouth shut, evading the question, merely insinuating or waiting a little and then telling the truth.

But on Franklin's view the agent's making a decision, whichever it is, *is* her exercising control. He argues that such *causal* control can be explained via CTA. According to CTA, if Alice tells the truth this is caused by her reasons for doing so, and conversely if she lies that is caused by her reasons to lie. Now chance determines which set of reasons becomes causally active. But whatever Alice ends up doing, it is always *her* reasons that do the causing. Therefore, according to Franklin, Alice is in full control and hence free.

Franklin might be right that freedom requires causal control. However, I argue that if causal control is *sufficient* for saving freedom from chance, then it is also enough to rescue freedom in case determinism is true. The libertarian believes that if it is determined that at a certain time *t* Alice will lie, then she cannot be free in doing so. But with the help of Franklin's strategy the compatibilist can argue that Alice is free as long as her lie was (deterministically) caused by her reasons for lying i.e., if she had causal control over her lie. It follows, or so I argue, that Franklin's strategy obscures the libertarian's need for indeterminism. (I will discuss alternative reasons that Franklin might invoke to insist on the requirement of indeterminism, and argue that none are convincing.)

While Franklin chooses to deny step (2) of the rollback argument, I argue that there is a way for the libertarian to criticize step (1). Let us return to the rollback argument. If we were to do 100 reruns and would get 68 truthful responses and 32 lies, then why would we think that we would arrive at a similar ratio if we were to do another 100 runs? Of course we would suspect this if there were an objective probability of 0.7 that Alice is truthful and a probability of 0.3 of her lying. If undetermined actions had such probabilities, it would be obvious that they are matters of luck, as per (1). But why would the libertarian believe that human actions come with such objective probabilities?

I will discuss several possibilities and argue that the main reason for accepting probabilities is accepting a libertarian variant of CTA. All current libertarian variants of CTA endorse the idea that actions have objective probabilities.<sup>3</sup> Actions are non-deterministically caused by reasons, and the stronger the reason the higher the probability of that reason becoming causally effective. But what if we abandon CTA? Would we still have reason to believe that actions have objective probabilities? I argue that this need not be the case.<sup>4</sup> Suppose that Alice indeed has stronger reasons for being truthful than for lying. It is quite possible to imagine that Alice would tell the

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<sup>3</sup> See Mele (2006), p. 7.

<sup>4</sup> Lowe (2008) seems to argue along this line when he writes: "the fact that Alice might have chosen otherwise than she actually did does not imply that there was a certain numerically precise objective probability of her choosing as she did in the one 'play' that actually happens." p. 191. However, it is unclear what is intended by the locution "numerically precise". Mere vagueness of objective probability would not help the libertarian.

truth a hundred reruns in a row, even though she *could* have lied every time. But if we do ten thousand reruns and we do not find Alice lying in any one of them, how can we still hold that it is possible for Alice to lie? Well we can because Alice, as a human being, has the ability or power to tell a lie. The fact that telling a lie is possible for Alice does not imply that among any given number of reruns there must be a rerun in which she does so. Reruns do not systematically move through every possibility, they just rerun the same scenario over and over again. What is possible for Alice is determined by her potentialities or powers and *they* ground the ability to do otherwise so coveted by libertarians.

Of course it is a difficult task to come up with an account of our power to act intentionally in an indeterministic world and especially an account that does not rely on objective probabilities. For are not all indeterministic powers we know of, such as radioactive decay, also chancy? Well not all of them, for we are in fact very familiar with a totally different indeterministic power: self-movement.<sup>5</sup> And if this power *is* of a truly different kind, then it would be question begging to think that they are matters of chance, as step (1) of van Inwagen's argument presupposes.

#### **References:**

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<sup>5</sup> That self-movement it indeterministic is, of course, controversial. But recently Helen Steward (2012) has put forward several convincing arguments for this thesis.