

Free Will and Mental Causation

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It is clear that the questions of how to understand free will and mental causation are deeply connected, for events of seemingly free choosing are mental events that appear capable of causing other mental and physical events (e.g., intentions to pet the cat, cat-pettings). It is thus surprising that the free will and mental causation debates have proceeded largely independently of each other.

Here we aim to make progress in exploring their connections. We show that the problems of free will and of mental causation are special cases of a more general problem, concerning whether and how mental events of a given type may be causally efficacious, given their apparent causal irrelevancy for effects of the type in question. We also identify parallels between certain of the standard responses to the two problems: we argue that hard determinism is parallel to eliminativist physicalism; and we use this parallel to identify an objection to hard determinism that is better than one common objection to this position.

We next argue that compatibilism is parallel to non-reductive physicalism; here our primary aim is to elucidate the deep structural similarity between the strategies underlying these accounts, which similarity supports compatibilism's viability as a principled intermediate position between hard determinism and libertarianism.