

THE LUCK AND *MIND* ARGUMENTS

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Locating the Luck and *Mind* Arguments

The Luck Argument begins with the intuitively compelling idea that there is an inverse relation between luck and control: the more an action is subject to luck, the less it is under our control, and the more an action is under our control, the less it is subject to luck. The luckier my putt is, the less impressive it is that I made it. And if my putt is *wholly* a matter of luck, then it seems that the putt was not something *I* did at all. Luck and control thus appear to exclude each other: an action cannot be both wholly a matter of luck and wholly under our control.

The Luck Argument then calls attention to the apparent connection between luck and indeterminism: if an event is undetermined, then nothing *made* it happen. And surely if *nothing* made the event happen, then the event's occurrence is a matter of luck. Undetermined events, thus, are lucky events.

From these observations, the Luck Argument draws the conclusion that free actions, which must be under an agent's control, cannot be undetermined events: it is impossible for the free exercise of the will to be undetermined. Admittedly such a conclusion is counterintuitive. When people consider the various threats to the existence of free will and moral responsibility, notions like determinism, genetics, and social engineering will immediately spring to mind. In this context the Luck Argument can seem puzzling: isn't indeterminism a refuge for free will and moral responsibility? Doesn't indeterminism provide the needed independence from the past and

environment, allowing the world to be a garden of forking pathways and we the captains who select among its many diverging paths?

The Luck Argument (Hume 1739; Hobart 1934; Nowell-Smith 1948; Ayer 1954; Smart 1961; Russell 1984; Strawson 1986; Waller 1988; Double 1991; Haji 1999, 2001, 2012, 2013; Mele 1999, 2006; van Inwagen 2000; Levy 2011; Schlosser 2014) defends a negative answer to these questions. According to proponents of the Luck Argument, indeterminism is actually incompatible with free will. To clarify, the worry is not that free will is incompatible with indeterminism strictly speaking. The truth of indeterminism merely requires that there be at least one event that might not have occurred, given the exact same past and laws of nature. It is hard to see how the mere truth of this thesis could threaten the existence of free will (after all, perhaps indeterminism is restricted to distant galaxies, having only the faintest of effects on us). Rather, philosophers have worried that events that are undetermined cannot be instances of exercises of free will—it is in this sense that philosophers have argued that free will is incompatible with indeterminism. All uses of ‘incompatibilism about free will and indeterminism’ should be interpreted in this latter, more restricted fashion.

Since control comes in degrees, it is hard to nail down the Luck Argument in full generality. One might, for example, maintain that indeterminism does not preclude the possibility of exercising any control over our actions, but instead diminishes our control so severely that we never *freely* perform any of these actions. Nonetheless, the core of this argument can be characterized by the following two claims:

(LA1) If an event is undetermined, then it is a matter of luck.

(LA2) If an event is a matter of luck, then it is not an exercise of free will.

(LA1) is silent about whether an undetermined event is wholly or partly a matter of luck, and (LA2) is silent about whether luck precludes the possibility of an agent exercising any control or merely the degree of control necessary for free will and moral responsibility (here I assume that free will consists in the kind of control necessary for moral responsibility). The Luck Argument is really a family of arguments. What unites them is that they employ (LA1) and (LA2) in order to show that indeterminism is incompatible with free will. What differentiates them is how they fill in and defend these two premises. For example, some define ‘luck’ as an absence of a certain kind of explanation, and then argue that undetermined events are a matter of luck because they lack the relevant kind of explanation. Others leave ‘luck’ undefined and argue that undetermined action is a matter of luck because we cannot ensure whether such actions occur.

The usual target of the Luck Argument is libertarianism, the view according to which we are free and morally responsible and yet freedom and responsibility are incompatible with determinism. Since libertarianism entails that indeterminism obtains, and since libertarians think that free will and moral responsibility entail that *some* free actions are undetermined, libertarians are committed to showing that indeterminism is compatible with free will and moral responsibility. According to the Luck Argument, this is a commitment they cannot make good on. But the actual target of the Luck Argument is broader than libertarianism: it raises problems for any theories that imply that free will is compatible with indeterminism, whether these theories be compatibilist or libertarian. While some compatibilists have argued that free will is not merely compatible with but requires determinism (Hume 1739), most contemporary compatibilists pride themselves on claiming that freedom and responsibility do not turn on whether the universe is deterministic or indeterministic (Fischer and Ravizza 1998; Watson 1999; Vargas 2013). Following Vargas (2013), we can refer to compatibilists who think that free

will is compatible with both determinism and indeterminism as “supercompatibilists.” Thus, libertarians and most compatibilists are committed to dismantling the Luck Argument.

But then who endorses this argument? There are two dialectical contexts in which the Luck Argument usually appears: debates about the possibility (or actuality) of free will and debates about how best to formulate libertarianism. Many free will nihilists (Strawson 1986; Double 1991; Levy 2011) endorse the Luck Argument and employ it as part of a comprehensive argument for the impossibility of free will and moral responsibility. Oversimplifying, the idea here is that free will is incompatible with both determinism and indeterminism, and hence impossible. With respect to formulating libertarianism, many agent-causal libertarians employ the Luck Argument for more limited purposes: namely to show that event-causal libertarianism is an untenable theory. According to event-causal libertarians (Kane 1996; Ekstrom 2000; Balaguer 2010; Franklin 2011b), the role of the agent in performing free actions is exhausted by the causal role of mental states and events (e.g. desires and beliefs) involving the agent. Agent-causal libertarians (Chisholm 1966; O’Connor 2000; Clarke 2003; Griffith 2010; Steward 2012) contend that while part of the role of the agent might consist in the causal role of states and events involving the agent, the agent plays a further causal role: namely the agent himself, conceived of as an enduring substance, must be causally involved. The dispute between agent-causal and event-causal libertarians is not about whether agents cause things, since both think they do. The dispute is about whether an agent’s causing a free action is reducible to states and events involving the agent causing the action. Event-causal libertarians insist that it is so reducible, while agent-causal libertarians demur. Agent-causal libertarians who endorse a *limited* role of the Luck Argument aim to show that events that are nondeterministically caused solely by other events are lucky and thus cannot be instances of free and morally responsible action

(Chisholm 1966; Griffith 2010). That is, they aim to show that exercises of free will require the agent to be an irreducible cause of an undetermined event. Finally, we even find some philosophers employing the Luck Argument within the event-causal libertarian's camp to help settle where in the action-sequence indeterminism should be located. For example, some argue that we can only avoid the worries raised by the Luck Argument if we locate indeterminism not at the moment of choice, but during the earlier deliberative process (Dennett 1978; Fischer 1995; Mele 1999; Ekstrom 2000).

We must sharply distinguish the Luck Argument from the problem of enhanced control—the problem of explaining how indeterminism is relevant to enhancing control (Watson 1999; Clarke 2003; Franklin 2011b). This problem, unlike the Luck Argument, is a distinctively libertarian problem. Libertarians contend that free will and moral responsibility are incompatible with determinism because agents in deterministic worlds cannot have the requisite kind or degree of control. They are, therefore, committed to the possibility of agents in indeterministic worlds having more or an enhanced degree of control with respect to agents in deterministic worlds. The problem is to explain how indeterminism is relevant to enhancing control. The Luck Argument, on the other hand, is a problem for *anyone* who thinks freedom and responsibility are compatible with indeterminism. Of course these issues are connected: if the Luck Argument is sound, the problem of enhanced control is insolvable. Nonetheless, dismantling the Luck Argument is *not* sufficient for solving the problem of enhanced control: there is nothing inconsistent in thinking that while indeterminism is irrelevant to enhancing control, it does not diminish it. There is some tendency in the literature to confuse these two issues. For example, Derk Pereboom's (2001, 2014) influential disappearing agent objection is often thought of as a version of the Luck Argument. According to Pereboom, agents who merely satisfy event-causal libertarianism lack

the power to settle which of two causally possible actions they perform. The idea is that while such agents have the power to φ and the power to ψ , they lack the power to *settle* whether they φ rather than ψ . Closer inspection, however, reveals that Pereboom's argument is not about the problem of luck but rather the problem of enhanced control. His contention is not that indeterminism precludes agents' possessing the power to settle, but that event-causal libertarians' appeal to indeterminism is insufficient to ground agents' possessing this power.

As the title of this entry suggests, the Luck Argument is not the only influential argument that aims to show that indeterminism is incompatible with free will. Under the heading of 'the *Mind* Argument' (so-called because these arguments so often appeared in the philosophy journal *Mind*), Peter van Inwagen (1983: 126-50) discusses three arguments all of which aim to show that indeterminism is incompatible with free will. The first argument is a version of the Luck Argument, as it seeks to connect indeterminism with luck or chance and luck or chance with the absence of control. The second argument seeks to show, through a sorities-type thought experiment, that putatively free undetermined actions are no different than mere happenings. The third argument, which has received widespread attention, employs a key ingredient from van Inwagen's influential Consequence Argument (namely Rule β), to show that no one can control the outcome of an indeterministic process.

We are faced with the question of how to conceive of the relationship between the Luck and *Mind* Arguments. Putting aside the second argument (though see Shabo (2011, 2013, 2014) for development of it), I propose that we treat 'the *Mind* Argument' as referring exclusively to the third argument van Inwagen discusses, and 'the Luck Argument' to the first. This maps on well to the literature, as most discussions of "the *Mind* Argument" are restricted to the third version (Finch and Warfield 1998; Clarke 2003; Franklin 2011a; Shabo 2013).

In what follows I first discuss three influential formulations of the Luck Argument and then turn to the *Mind* Argument, offering some brief worries about each argument.

The Ensurance Formulation

Recall that the varying formulations of the Luck Argument employ and/or defend (LA1) and (LA2). The Ensurance Formulation of the Luck Argument has been most clearly and forcefully defended by Ishtiyaque Haji (1999, 2001, 2012, 2013; cf. Schlosser 2014). The core idea beyond this formulation is that if an agent performs an undetermined action φ at t , then she could not have *ensured* or *guaranteed* that she φ -ed rather than ψ -ed at t . If my decision to walk to work was undetermined, then there is nothing about me, not my motivational state, beliefs, character, ability, or skill that ensures that I make this decision rather than, say, the decision to drive. Indeed, if the decision is undetermined, then there is nothing about the past and laws of nature that ensure that I make this decision rather than not. Thus, if my actions are undetermined, I cannot ensure them. And that seems to make them lucky.

I believe that something like this thought is behind most philosophers' suspicion that indeterminism is inimical to control. According to this formulation of the Luck Argument, indeterminism prevents agents from having the power to guarantee a particular outcome: agents try their best, but they cannot ensure what they will do. From this lack of ensurance, it is inferred that the action in question is a matter of luck, and thus we have (LA1) from above; and it seems that if an action is a matter of luck, then the action is not free and thus we have (LA2).

Opponents of the Luck Argument will want to raise worries about the notion of ensurance at the heart of this formulation. It is true that if my decision to walk to work is

undetermined, then there is nothing *prior* to my making this decision that guarantees that I will make it. But why is that problematic? Admittedly, if my deciding to walk left it open whether I would in fact walk to work, and this not because I might change my mind and decide to drive instead, but simply due to the presence of indeterminism, then one might worry that indeterminism robs me of an important kind of control: namely the control to make decisions which in turn ensure what later actions I perform. But Haji's argument is stronger than this. He is contending that even my decisions must be ensured if they are to be free. The question naturally arises: ensured by what? Presumably not earlier decisions, since that would simply launch an infinite regress of decisions. It seems plausible to think that exercising our agency must have a beginning, and thus to require that *all* free exercises of agency be ensured would require that our first free actions be ensured by features of the world over which we never had any control. But that seems like a rather odd requirement for free will: why should free will require that our actions be wholly determined by factors over which we never had any control? At this point the Ensurance Formulation may begin to appear unmotivated.

The Rollback Formulation

van Inwagen's (2000) well-known rollback thought experiment was originally introduced to show not that free will is incompatible with indeterminism, but that the agent-causal theory is irrelevant to solving the problem of free will—to explaining how free will is compatible with indeterminism. However, the thought experiment has taken on a life of its own, and in the hands of many is now used to develop the Rollback Formulation of the Luck Argument (e.g. Shabo 2013). We are asked to imagine that Alice is deliberating about whether to choose to tell the truth or to lie, that she is motivated and has the ability to do both, that she freely decides to tell the

truth, and that this decision was undetermined. Next we are asked to imagine that God has caused the world to “rollback” to precisely the state of the universe at the moment before Alice chose to tell the truth, let the world evolve from that point, and that we are in a position to observe this replay. Since Alice’s choice is undetermined, she might choose to lie or she might choose to tell the truth in the “replay.” Suppose that God does this a thousand times: a thousand times he causes the world to rollback to precisely the moment before Alice made her choice and then allows things to proceed. Furthermore, imagine that, after watching seven hundred twenty-six replays, in about half of the replays Alice has chosen to tell the truth and in the other half she has chosen to lie. After watching each of these replays, van Inwagen contends:

we shall be faced with the inescapable impression that what happens in the seven-hundred-and-twenty-seventh replay will be due simply to chance....[W]hat other conclusion can we accept about the seven-hundred-and-twenty-seventh replay (which is about to commence) than this: each of the two possible outcomes of this replay has an objective, ‘ground-floor’ probability of 0.5—and there’s nothing more to be said? And this, surely, means that, in the strictest sense imaginable, the outcome of the replay will be a matter of chance. (2000: 15)

van Inwagen goes on:

If [Alice] was faced with telling the truth and lying, and it was a mere matter of chance which of these things she did, how can we say that—and this is essential to the act’s being free—she was *able* to tell the truth and *able* to lie? How could anyone be able to determine the outcome of a process whose outcome is a matter of objective, ground-floor chance? (2000:16)

The rollback thought experiment is supposed to bring forcefully home to us the thought that undetermined actions are lucky and that no one is able intentionally to prevent or bring about a lucky event. But not all share the intuition that this thought experiment is supposed to elicit. To begin to see this, we might ask how we would react if God rolled back the universe a thousand times and Alice made the *same* decision every single time. For many *this* would suggest her decision is not free. After all, if Alice really is torn about what to do, then wouldn't we expect that, under the present conditions, it was possible for her to make either decision? And given that it was possible for her to decide otherwise, then wouldn't we expect the replays to vary from playback to playback? Perhaps the variability in the playbacks is not as problematic as van Inwagen suggests.

Explanatory Formulation

The Explanatory Formulation of the Luck Argument maintains that luck is introduced into the action-sequence due to the unavailability of a certain kind of explanation. It is because the feature(s) necessary for the availability of such an explanation is (are) missing that the agent is subject to luck, so we have (LA1) from above, and, of course, luck intuitively seems to entail that the action in question is not free, and so we also have (LA2).

At times it has been suggested that undetermined action is essentially irrational action, or, at the very least, cannot be given a rational explanation (Ayer 1954), but few today make that claim. Rather most proponents of the Explanatory Formulation contend that undetermined action cannot be *contrastively* explained (Russell 1984; Waller 1988; Mele 2006; Levy 2011; Schlosser 2014). A contrastive explanation is an explanation of why one thing rather than another occurred. In the case of Alice above, a contrastive explanation of her choice to tell the truth would seek to

explain why she chose to do this rather than lie. Many have thought that contrastive explanations are simply unavailable for undetermined events. Neil Levy nicely states this worry: “Now what brings it about that she φ s rather than Ψ s? Nothing about her, her reasons, desires, volitions, or tryings. She does not control *which* alternative she settles for. The indeterministic causal process settles that. Thus, she experiences a diminution of control....” (2011: 51).

There are two main lines of response to this formulation. The first concedes that undetermined actions cannot be contrastively explained but denies that this is relevant to the agent’s control. Some argue that whether an explanation is available for some action depends on certain pragmatic and epistemic conditions, whereas control exclusively depends on ontological conditions. Thus, we have little reason to think the absence of explanation entails the absence of control (Clarke 2003: 32; cf. Sorabji 1980; O’Connor 2000, 2009). The second line of response contends that we can give contrastive explanations of undetermined actions (Clarke 2003: 42-45; Franklin forthcoming). For example, and to oversimplify, I have appealed to Hitchcock’s (1999; 2012) influential work on explanation to argue that we can provide a contrastive explanation of Alice’s choice simply by citing her motivations that raised the likelihood of her so deciding (Franklin forthcoming). Suppose again that Alice chose to tell the truth and suppose that her belief that lying is wrong raised the probability of her choosing to tell the truth more than it raised the probability of her choosing to lie. The supposition here is not that Alice’s belief made the probability of her choosing to tell the truth *all things considered* more probable, but simply that the belief raised the probability of her choosing to tell the truth *more* than it raised the probability of her choosing to lie. In such a case, Hitchcock, with certain suitable qualifications, maintains that Alice’s belief explains why she choose to tell the truth rather than lie, even if it was all things considered more likely that she was going to choose to lie. Admittedly, we cannot

give a contrastive explanation of her decision such that the factors cited guarantee that she chose to tell the truth rather than lie. But, I submit, that is a virtue of the account, not a vice. The attraction of libertarianism is that it promises to accord us, free agents, a fundamental role in the production of free decisions and actions. If libertarianism is true, then our free choices are neither the inevitable consequence of the past and laws of nature nor a simple function of our current motivational economy. On libertarianism we are fundamental sources of reality. Part of our fundamentality as agents requires that our exercises of agency not be explicable *in certain senses* in terms of other features of reality. If our exercises of free agency were made inevitable by the past and laws of nature, if there were conditions prior to and independent of our choices that guarantee that we will make the choices we make, then we would not be fundamental sources of reality but merely derivative sources. The very absence of this kind of explanation, the very absence of prior motivations that guarantee that we make one decision rather than another, is a requirement for agential fundamentality.

The *Mind* Argument

The *Mind* Argument is a direct argument for the incompatibility of indeterminism with free will and moral responsibility. The Luck Argument uses a middleman to try to establish this conclusion. It first attempts to show that indeterminism entails the presence of luck and then that luck entails the absence of control. The *Mind* Argument drops the middleman and argues that free will and moral responsibility are directly incompatible: it claims that indeterminism *per se*, regardless of any putative connection to luck, entails the absence of the degree of control necessary for free will and moral responsibility.

There are two key assumptions in the *Mind* Argument. The first is that someone is free with respect to action φ only if he had a choice about φ . The second is that the following inference Rule β is valid:

$$\frac{Np \quad N(p \rightarrow q)}{Nq}$$

where ‘ Np ’ is to be read ‘ p and no one has or ever had a choice about whether p .’ With these assumptions in place, van Inwagen argues that “no one has any choice about that which is undetermined” (1983: 142). He defends this claim by asking us to imagine a device, the salient features of which are a red light, a green light, and a button. When one presses the button there is an objective probability of 1 that either the red light or green light will flash, but an objective probability of less than 1 that the red light will flash and an objective probability of less than 1 that the green light will flash. van Inwagen writes, “Now suppose that you must press the button on this mechanism. Have you any choice about which of the lights will flash? It seems obvious that you have no choice about this” (1983: 142). The conclusion van Inwagen draws from this example is that no one has any choice about which light will flash, given that the button is pressed. Suppose you press the button and the red light flashes. According to van Inwagen, it is clear, since the connection between the button and the particular light flashing is nondeterministic, that you had no choice about whether the red light flashed given that the button was pressed. With these pieces in place, van Inwagen has the ingredients for a powerful argument that indeterminism is incompatible with free will.

Return to the case of Alice who made the undetermined choice to tell the truth. Focusing our attention on event-causal libertarianism, let us assume that Alice’s choice to tell the truth—call it φ —was nondeterministically brought about by some mental state *DB* that favored it (for

example, the belief that it is right to tell the truth and the desire to do what is right). It follows from this assumption that it was possible, given the past and laws, that *DB* not have caused φ . Suppose that had *DB* not caused φ , then Alice would have chosen to lie—call this ψ —and, let us further assume, that this action would have been nondeterministically brought about by a different mental state *DB** that favored ψ (for example, the desire to hide some fact and the belief that it will remain hidden if she lies). Finally, assume that Alice had no choice about *DB* and *DB**. From our reflections on the simple device above, it follows that no one, let alone Alice, had a choice about whether φ follows *DB*, since φ followed nondeterministically from *DB* and no one has a choice about that which is undetermined. But then according to van Inwagen's inference Rule β , it follows that Alice had no choice about φ . If Alice had no choice about *DB* and she had no choice about φ 's following *DB*, then, according to rule β , she had no choice about φ itself. It follows from our assumption about free action that the Alice's choice was not free. All these remarks generalize to all agents and all undetermined actions. Therefore, it appears that undetermined action cannot be *free* action.

The most significant problem with this argument is that Rule β is invalid, as McKay and Johnson (1996) have shown and van Inwagen (2000) has conceded. Whether or not the argument can be reformulated with a new inference rule remains an open question (cf. Finch and Warfield 1998; Nelkin 2001). However, even assuming Rule β is valid, one might argue that van Inwagen's device example is importantly disanalogous to standard libertarian theories. Most libertarians contend that indeterminism is located at the moment of action: what is undetermined is what an agent does (or chooses to do). There is no further requirement that the connection between the agent's action and consequences of this action be nondeterministic. But in the device example above what is undetermined is not the agent's action of pressing the button, but

the result of the agent's action, namely which light flashes. Thus one might argue that at best van Inwagen's argument shows that if indeterminism is located *after* the moment of action, then control is diminished. But this conclusion alone does nothing to show that indeterminism located at the moment of choice or action diminishes control. Thus, it might seem that van Inwagen's argument has, at best, limited purchase on libertarians.

Conclusion

The Luck and *Mind* Arguments present an important challenge to anyone who thinks that free will and moral responsibility are compatible with indeterminism—that is, anyone who thinks that it is possible that an agent perform an undetermined action that is free and for which he is morally responsible. According to these arguments, undetermined action cannot be something over which agents exercise sufficient control either for the action to be free or the agent to be morally responsible for it. For free will nihilists, the Luck and *Mind* Arguments are a powerful plank in their overall case against the possibility of free will and moral responsibility. For libertarians, these arguments serve as a barometer against which they determine how best to formulate libertarianism so as to defang the Luck and *Mind* Arguments—for example either just how the agent must be involved in bringing about his free actions (fundamentally or reducibly) or proposals about where indeterminism should be located in the genesis of agential activity (in deliberation or choice or action or consequences of action?)

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Related Topics

Event-causal libertarianism; Agent-causal libertarianism; Non-causal libertarianism; Hard Incompatibilism and Skepticism; the Consequence Argument;

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Further Reading

R. Clarke, *Libertarian Accounts of Free Will* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003) chapters 5 and 9, provides an invaluable discussion and assessment of the Luck Argument for event-causal and agent-causal libertarianism. A.R. Mele, "Ultimately Responsibility and Dumb Luck," *Social Philosophy and Policy* 16 (1999): 274-293, and P. van Inwagen, "Free Will Remains a Mystery," *Philosophical Perspectives* 14 (2000): 1-19 contain two of the most influential formulations of the Luck Argument. C. E. Franklin, "Farewell to the Luck (and *Mind*) Argument," *Philosophical Studies* 156 (2011a): 199–230 offers a taxonomy and criticism of the various formulations of the Luck and *Mind* Arguments.

