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Indeterminism in Kane's Event-Causal Libertarianism

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In this paper, I examine the plausibility of event-causal libertarianism, a prominent view on free will which regards indeterminism in the causal history of a decision as necessary for an agent's moral responsibility for a subsequent action. Specifically, I investigate how Robert Kane's event-causal libertarian account fares in light of Derk Pereboom's powerful "disappearing agent" objection, in addition to criticisms of my own. Kane concludes that Pereboom's objection is ineffective against his account. I argue against Kane's conclusion by highlighting a dilemma which results from Kane's response to the disappearing agent objection; either way Kane's position is interpreted, his account is unsuccessful.

I

A brief explanation of Kane's account is appropriate. An event-causal libertarian, Kane holds the view that free and responsible actions are caused indeterministically by antecedent mental states (an agent's reasons, desires, etc.). According to Kane (2012), paradigmatic free and responsible actions are the results of torn decisions¹ – "those in which an agent has reasons for two or more options and feels torn as to which of the sets of reasons is strongest" (p. 2). What makes the actions resulting from torn decisions free and responsible, according to Kane, is not merely that they are undetermined. It is also that agents have "plural voluntary control" with respect to them – that is, "they are able to bring about whichever of the options or choices they will to bring about, when they will to do so, on purpose, rather than accidentally or inadvertently or by mistake, without being coerced or compelled in doing so or willing to do so or otherwise controlled in doing so or willing to do so by other agents or mechanisms" (p. 6).

Kane acknowledges that it is difficult to see how an agent might have plural voluntary control over a particular action if the action is undetermined (as in an event-causal situation). Indeed, indeterminism would seem to prevent the agent's possession of plural voluntary control by rendering the outcome of her decision "random". To show that an agent who faces an undetermined decision can still have plural voluntary control with respect to that decision, Kane (2012) makes four claims: first, that the results of torn decisions are the results of goal-directed processes in the brain which he calls "efforts of will" or "volitional streams" (p. 6); second, that indeterminism "functions as a hindrance or obstacle to the attainment of [each effort of will]" (p. 6); third, that there is more than one active effort of will when an agent is facing a torn decisions (i.e., the agent is making at least two different efforts to do different things); and fourth, the agent must have a certain kind of control over each of these efforts of

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Crucially, "it is owing to this [teleological guidance] control that the choice that results from either of the [efforts of will] can be said to be brought about by the agent. And it is owing to the fact that either [effort of will] might succeed in attaining its goal, which would thereby be brought about by the agent's goal-directed cognitive process, that the agent exercises plural voluntary control over the decision itself" (Kane, 2012, p. 7). Acting with plural voluntary control, event-causal agents in Kane's account are morally responsible for their actions.

II

Derk Pereboom (2012) has concluded that event-causal agents in Kane's account are not morally responsible for their actions; his reasons constitute the disappearing agent objection. This objection involves an agent facing an undetermined decision. At some point before an agent takes action, the agent's causal contribution to the decision (her desires and reasons) are accounted for, and she will exert no additional influence after this point. But, crucially, whether or not the decision will occur is unresolved. Pereboom concludes that, given this state of affairs, no causal factor involving the agent determines whether or not the decision occurs, and he therefore asserts that event-causal agents are not morally responsible. The success of this objection would imperil both Kane's position and event-causal libertarianism more generally.

In essence, Pereboom's argument is the following: In an event-causal decision,

- (i) Prior causal factors allow that an agent's decision could either occur or not occur
- (ii) The agent plays no further causal role in determining whether the decision does or does not occur.
- (iii) Therefore, the decision is not settled by any causal factor involving the agent, and the agent cannot be considered morally responsible for her action.

If Pereboom's argument is sound, then Kane's event-causal libertarian account is undermined.

III

Kane refutes Pereboom's conclusion, commenting that Pereboom's argument is invalid against his own account. It is true, Kane argues, that antecedent causal factors allow that an agent's decision could either occur or not occur, and also that the agent plays no further causal role in determining whether the decision does or does not occur. But, Kane (2012) says, the question of the decision's occurrence² is resolved by a causal factor involving the agent. Namely,

whether the decision occurs “is settled at the moment of choice by the successful completion of the agent’s effort to bring about that choice” (p. 7). Even though antecedent events and states – including an agent’s full causal contribution to a decision – leave open whether a certain decision will or will not occur, the agent is responsible because the resolution of her decision amounts to an effort of will succeeding in expression. The successful expression of an agent’s efforts of will is a causal factor involving the agent, and so Pereboom’s conclusion is incorrect. According to Kane, the disappearing agent objection is unsuccessful against his own event-causal account.

IV

Kane’s response to Pereboom’s disappearing agent objection is ineffective. Kane maintains that the successful completion of an agent’s effort of will is a causal factor involving the agent, but, interestingly, it is still the case that there is a time before the decision is resolved at which point the agent plays no further causal role in resolving the decision. As a result, it follows that an agent-involving causal factor can exert causal influence without the agent playing a causal role. This is a curious result. A further consequence of Kane’s rebuttal to the disappearing agent objection is that an agent can be responsible for an action without playing a causal role in its final resolution. These implications are troublesome, though I anticipate that Kane would offer a convincing response to this initial line of criticism. I therefore proceed on the assumption that an agent can be fairly considered to be morally responsible for an action as long as an agent-involving causal factor resolves her decision to act. If it is reasonable to believe that the occurrence of an agent’s torn decision can be resolved by an agent-involving causal factor, then Pereboom’s objection is ineffective.

In the event-causal situation, it is uncontroversial to conclude that there exists some time prior to a decision’s resolution, $t1$, at which all agent-involving causal factors (reasons, desires, etc., and efforts of will) are accounted for – a point after which the agent exerts no more causal influence – but the decision’s occurrence is still undetermined. At $t1$, there is more than one physically possible outcome for the agent’s decision at a temporally subsequent time, $t2$.

So, what occurs after $t1$ so that the agent does or does not make a decision at $t2$? That is, what settles whether the decision is to occur? We might understand Kane to mean that the occurrence of indeterminate decisions is settled by an agent overcoming the obstacle of indeterminism by making an effort of will (Kane et al., 2007, 178). But, this explanation is implausible in light of the disappearing agent objection.³

Instead, another understanding of torn decision resolution is more appropriate. In his response to the disappearing agent objection, Kane (2012) says that the decision’s occurrence is settled at the moment of choice by the successful completion of the agent’s effort to bring about that choice (p. 7). It is not immediately clear how this explanation might secure the agent’s moral responsibility. Carefully examining Kane’s claim shows that an agent’s decision’s occurrence cannot be settled by the successful completion of her effort of will, and this is because the settling of whether or not the decision occurs *is* the successful completion of an agent her effort of will.

Kane’s explanation is that the success of an agent’s effort of will is realized (made to be, causally brought about) by the agent’s effort of will succeeding, which is equivalent to the odd claim that something, D, is caused by D itself. This kind of notion may be true, but only in a trivial and insufficiently explanatory sense; D may causally entail that D, but to explain that the determination of whether a decision will occur is settled by the determination of whether a decision will occur is unhelpful. We do not inquire how D becomes D; the question is how not-D becomes D. That is, how an indeterminate state of affairs with two possibilities (decision or non-decision, presumably) turns into an agent’s resolved decision.

V

Kane's explanation of the causal resolution of event-causal decisions is insufficient, and the question remains of how an agent-involving causal factor might resolve whether or not an agent's decision is to occur. To resolve this issue, a cogent understanding of indeterminism's causal role in Kane's account is essential. We know that indeterminism plays a causal role in the occurrence of decisions in Kane's account (Kane et al., 2007, p.32). I argue that Kane's explanation of indeterminacy is unclear, and this ambiguity places his account in the midst of a dilemma, both horns of which are detrimental.

There are two possible explanations of indeterminacy on Kane's account: indeterminism functions either as an independent hindrance to each effort of will or as a kind of neural coin-toss to determine whether a decision will occur.⁴ Whichever explanation of indeterminism is accepted, Kane's account cannot be described in a way that secures responsibility for event-causal agents. This presents a dilemma: his account is either incoherent or open to objection, and on either end of this dilemma Kane's event-causal libertarianism is unsuccessful.

Neural Coin-toss Indeterminacy

A plausible understanding of indeterminacy in Kane's account is the following: indeterminacy is separate from agent-involving causal factors, and it becomes active after efforts of will (and all other agent-involving causal factors) are in place to determine whether an effort of will is to succeed in expression. This understanding of indeterminism, however, merely randomizes the whether or not event-causal decisions will occur, and it is therefore unhelpful event-causal libertarians. Constituting the first horn of Kane's dilemma, this neural coin-toss understanding of indeterminacy renders Kane's account vulnerable to the disappearing agent objection.

If we interpret indeterminism as a neural coin-toss, no agent-involving causal factor settles whether an agent's decision will occur. A revision of the disappearing agent objection could take the following form:

- (i) The full causal contribution of antecedent agent-involving causal factors (reasons, desires, and efforts of will) allow that a decision could either occur or not occur

- (ii) Indeterminism functions as a "neural coin-toss" which becomes active after the agent's causal contribution to the decision is exhausted to determine whether or not the decision occurs.

- (iii) The agent has no control over this neural coin-toss, and so this indeterminacy is not an agent-involving causal factor.

- (iv) The decision of whether the decision occurs is not settled by any causal factor involving the agent, so the agent cannot be considered morally responsible for her action.

Nothing about the agent causally determines the result of her decision, and therefore the agent is not morally responsible.⁵

Kane seems to have recognized that embracing neural coin-toss indeterminacy leaves his event-causal account open to objection, and he has consistently rejected this understanding of indeterminism (2007, 2012). Though it offers a clear explanation of how the occurrence

of event-causal decisions is settled, neural coin-toss leaves Kane's agents without moral responsibility.

Indeterministic Noise

The first aspect of Kane's dilemma leaves event-causal agents without moral responsibility. The second entails that his account is incoherent. Rejecting a neural coin-toss understanding of indeterminacy, Kane has recently described the causal role of indeterminacy as "indeterministic noise which is providing an obstacle to [an agent's] overcoming temptation" (2007, p. 28). The referenced 'overcoming temptation' likely denotes an agent's effort of will. Describing the relation of an agent's effort of will to indeterminism, Kane asserts that "one must think of the effort and the indeterminism as fused; the effort is indeterminate and the indeterminism is a property of the effort, not something separate that occurs after or before the effort" (2007, p. 32). He continues to explain that "chance was causally involved" in the decision's resolution, but "one cannot separate the indeterminism and the effort of will, so that first the effort occurs followed by chance or luck (or vice versa)" (2007, p. 32, p. 173).

It appears that we should understand indeterminacy as a hindrance to the success of each effort of will independently. That is, an effort of will is an agent's attempt to perform a certain action, but the effort of will is indeterministic in the sense that whether or not it will succeed in action is undetermined; there is a certain probability that each effort will succeed "despite the probability or chance of failure" (2007, p. 32).

This interpretation of indeterminism brings about an issue for an account which holds that more than one effort of will can (and must) be active at *t1*. Kane presents a situation wherein two efforts have independent probabilities for success in action, and, consequently, *both* efforts of will could succeed.⁶ This is impossible because torn decisions often include an agent who is deciding between mutually exclusive options (*either* a businesswoman can decide to help an assault victim *or* she can make it to an important business meeting).

Hence, we find the second horn of Kane's dilemma: Kane's account is incoherent because it provides for the simultaneous expression of mutually exclusive actions. If we understand indeterminism as an independent hindrance to each effort of will's expression, then Kane's alteration secures an agent's responsibility either way a decision results at the cost of the his account's coherence.

VI

Some explanation which clears up how the undetermined state of affairs at *t1* can be causally transformed into an agent's performing a certain action at *t2* must be offered. Kane's own explanation is insufficient, and this leaves us with the question of how the occurrence of an agent's is settled, as Kane claims, by a causal factor involving the agent. A clear understanding of indeterminism in Kane's account is essential to answering this question, but Kane's ambiguous explanation of the causal role of indeterminism entails a dilemma.

Indeterminism in Kane's event-causal libertarianism can be understood as causally functioning in one of two ways: either indeterminism settles the occurrence of the agent's decision as a neural coin-toss, or indeterminism functions in each effort of will independently as "indeterministic noise". Consequently, his account either depicts agents whose decisions are resolved by chance, or it allows an agent to simultaneously perform mutually exclusive actions. The former leaves event-causal agents without moral responsibility, while the latter renders his account incoherent.

Endnotes

1. Throughout this paper the phrases “the decision’s occurrence”, “whether or not decision will occur”, and “the occurrence of the agent’s decision” are treated as equivalent. Specific phrasing is merely stylistic.
2. This explanation is ineffective because, as discussed, the causal effect of the agent’s efforts of will is accounted for at time t1; the agent exerts no more causal influence after t1, which means the agent makes no new efforts after t1. So, an agent’s ‘making an effort’ cannot resolve the decision’s occurrence because whether or not it will occur is unresolved even after her efforts of will are in place at time t1.
3. A question remains: once it has been determined that a decision will occur, which effort of will is to succeed? For now, I assume that an agent can be responsible for an action as long as the action is the result of a successful effort of will, even if the agent does not cause the occurrence of the specific action she takes.
4. A key assumption for this objection is that, to be morally responsible, a causal factor involving the agent must be determine an agent makes a decision. This is a mostly uncontroversial assumption, and it is one with which Kane would likely agree. In his definition of plural voluntary control, Kane specifies that morally responsible agents “are able to bring about whichever of the options or choices they will to bring about, when they will to do so, on purpose, rather than accidentally or inadvertently or by mistake” (Kane 6).
5. It is also the case that both efforts of will could fail, resulting in an agent’s inaction. This could also bring about some odd situations, particularly when inaction is physically impossible. This issue brings about further questions concerning whether or not an agent an agent must be able to settle her own decision’s occurrence.
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