Chapter 5: Freedom and Determinism

- At each time $t$ the world is perfectly determinate in all detail.
  - Let us grant this for the sake of argument. We might want to re-visit this perfectly reasonable assumption after our brush with quantum mechanics.
- That is, at each time $t$ the world is in a definite state.
  - Notice that this may be true, without the world being perfectly determinate at $t$.
- Why is the world in some given state at $t$?
- Answer: Because it is in some other state just before $t$.
- And so on, forward (and backward) in time.
- The past antecedent conditions of our present state cannot be changed, since one cannot change the past.

\[ \therefore \] “Things [now and in the future] could not be other than they are.” That is, the present state of the world cannot be other than it is. But a similar argument applies to any other state as well.
• [Comment: This arguments supposes that the basic laws of nature connecting states do so in a unique fashion. But what if a basic law says only that, given a state of the world at t₁, various later states follow only with a probability that is less than 1. In this case, the basic laws are indeterministic rather than deterministic. Chance is admitted, as opposed to necessity.]

Taylor says that this conclusion is “an exact statement of the metaphysical thesis of determinism.” (36)

This fits well with a classic discussion of the notion by William James in “The Dilemma of Determinism”. Let me insert a bit:

**Determinism** “professes that those parts of the universe already laid down absolutely appoint and decree what the other parts shall be. The future has no ambiguous possibilities hidden in its womb: the part we call the present is compatible with only one totality. Any other complement than the one fixed from eternity is impossible. The whole is in each and every part, and welds it with the rest into an absolute unity, and iron block, in which there
can be no equivocation or shadow of turning.” (569-70)

**Indeterminism** “says that the parts have a certain amount of loose play on one another, so that the laying down of one of them does not necessarily determine what the others shall be. It admits that possibilities may be in excess of actualities.... Of two alternative futures which we conceive, both may now be really possible; and the one become impossible only at the very moment when the other excludes it by becoming real itself.... [Indeterminism] says there is a certain ultimate pluralism in [the world]; and, so saying, it corroborates our ordinary unsophisticated view of things.” (570)

[NB: The denial or opposite of determinism is indeterminism. James is right about this.]

Indeterminism involves **chance**, “and chance [some say] is something a notion of which no sane mind can tolerate in the world.” (572)

But James argues that chance is a useful, negative concept. “All you mean by calling [something] chance is that this is not guaranteed, that it may also fall out otherwise.
For the system of other things has no positive hold on the chance-thing. Its origin is in a certain fashion negative: it escapes, and says, Hands off! coming, when it comes, as a free gift, or not at all.” (572-73)

Now back to Taylor... He thinks of determinism as a (conscious or unconscious) datum. We always act as if this thesis is true. We suppose that events or changes have causes, and we often seek to know the causes.

But in the rest of the section called “Determinism” Taylor says that “the principle of determinism” is the principle that all events have causes.

Since a (complete) cause is often taken to be a sufficient condition for its effect, there is a temptation to conflate these ideas. For instance, on page 37 Taylor remarks: “By the thesis of determinism, however, everything whatever is caused, and not one single thing could ever be other than exactly what it is.”

[Imagine that I rig up a box with a genuinely randomizing device with 100 equiprobable states. To this device I attach a revolver which
will fire iff the device goes into state 17 (which has probability .01). In front of the revolver, in honor of Erwin Schrödinger, we put a cat. Suppose that I turn on the device, that it goes into state 17, and that the cat is killed. Does not my turning on the device cause, or perhaps partially cause, the death of the cat, even though it was by no means a sufficient condition for that lamentable event?[1]

Since, as Taylor says, I am part of the world (37), his thesis of determinism applies to me and to my behavior. If determinism as characterized by Taylor is true, then it is supposed to follow that

1. I cannot in any circumstances or at any time act in any way other than the way I actually do, did, or will act.

2. Since one is held morally responsible only for actions that one has voluntary control over, for actions that could have been otherwise, ["Ought implies can."]], we cannot be held morally responsible for any of our actions (since none of our actions could have been otherwise).

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Taylor starts his investigation from the following two pieces of data. [Remember, that data are starting points and may eventually be given up in a more considered final view.]

1. I sometimes deliberate about what to do.
2. It is sometimes up to me what I do.

I can deliberate about my own future behavior as long as (1) I do not already know what I am going to do in the given situation and (2) what I do in the given situation is “up to me”.

An action is “up to me” if it is within my direct control, like moving my finger in one direction or another. I can (normally) move my finger to the left, says Taylor, and I can move it to the right. These actions are possible, but not merely in the sense of logically possible. It’s logically possible that I move my finger to the left, even when it’s in a cast so that (in the relevant sense) I can’t move it at all.

What this shows is that logical necessity (or possibility) is not the only kind of necessity (or possibility), and not the kind of modality that’s most important for discussions of determinism. There is at least one alternative sort of modality, one that Taylor calls causal necessity.
(or possibility). Others may call this nomic necessity. [Indeed, one might think of ‘can’ as systematically ambiguous, depending on the range of assumptions that one takes to be compossible in the given situation.]

To say that an action is “up to me” is to say that I am free to do it or to refrain from doing it. This, in turn, presupposes that there is no obstacle that prevents me from doing it and no constraint that forces me to do it.

If this is all there is to freedom, then freedom is compatible with determinism (= causally determined).

In Taylor’s view, philosophers are often led to make too much of this compatibility and to espouse a view that he calls (following James) soft determinism. Soft determinism involves the following three theses:

1. The thesis of determinism is true.... All human behavior is caused and determined.

2. Voluntary behavior is free to the extent that it is not externally constrained (forced, coerced) or impeded.
3. Such voluntary behavior is caused by certain states of the agent—volitions (or acts of will), choices, decisions, desires, and so on.

But now, argues Taylor, ask a soft determinist this question: in a given situation, could I have acted otherwise? Yes, they will say, if my volitions or desires, etc. had been otherwise.

Well, could my volitions or desires have been otherwise? By (1), determinism, they were caused. So they were determined by antecedent conditions to be what they were and could have been different only if those conditions had been different... And so on.

But, given determinism, none of these conditions could actually have been otherwise. So none of my actions (or the volitions, desires, decisions, etc. that were causally sufficient for them) could have been different (actually, rather than conditionally). So how can I be held responsible for them?

This argument is buttressed by the example of the “ingenious physiologist” who can implant volitions. The subject of these implantings fits the soft determinism definition of a free agent
yet is in reality a mere puppet of the physiologist.

Taylor believes he has shown, then, that both hard and soft determinism are views that have consequences that are very difficult to accept. The only alternative left seems to be what he calls simple indeterminism but he finds that unacceptable too. Simple indeterminism is the view that some of our actions (or some of the mental acts that lead to our actions, like our volitons or decisions) are uncaused.

But that is to say that they are a matter of chance (cf., James) or are random. Consider, urges Taylor, the picture one gets of one of my arms or legs just spontaneously (because uncaused) moving in some direction or other from time to time. Is this a picture of a free person? No, says Taylor. “[T]he conception that now emerges is not that of a free person, but of an erratic and jerking phantom, without any rhyme or reason at all.” (48)

So simple indeterminism also seems incompatible with our normal sense of self and with attributions of responsibility. Suppose, for instance, that certain movements of my arm are uncaused or chancey.
...[N]either I nor anyone else can tell what this arm will be doing next. It might seize a club and lay it on the head of the nearest bystander, no less to my astonishment than his. There will never be any point in asking why these motions occur, or in seeking any explanation for them, for under the conditions assumed there is no explanation. They just happen, from no causes at all. (48)

How, then, could I (or anyone) be held responsible for these actions over which I had no control (or, which were not “up to me”)?

[As far as I know, the argument that indeterminism or chance is incompatible with freedom and moral responsibility originated in Hume’s *Treatise*. Hobart argues along the same lines that moral responsibility requires “determination”.

At this point, Taylor briefly recapitulates the problems with the three views discussed so far. I’d like to highlight one remark of his: “But if determinism is true, then there are always conditions existing antecedently to everything I
do, sufficient for my doing just that, and such as to render it inevitable.” (49) Notice that, officially speaking, to say that some condition C is sufficient for (say) an action A is to assert the material conditional: $C \supset A$.

So we have the following argument, which is valid, since it is a simple application of the inference rule *modus ponens*: $C, C \supset A \therefore A$.

The premises seem warranted by the thesis of determinism, but the conclusion is just that A occurs or takes place, *not* that it is inevitable. To say that A is inevitable, a modal notion, is to say something like: $A$ or $\sim \diamond \sim A$. How is the introduction of a modal notion supposed to be justified? That is, the argument $C, C \supset A \therefore A$ is *not* valid.

The following *is* true: $[(C \& C \supset A) \supset A]$. That is, here is a conditional sentence that is a necessary truth, because it is a logical truth. But it does not follow from the truth of this sentence that A is “inevitable”.

There is one more possible view regarding determinism (Taylor thinks), **the theory of agency**.
“The only conception of action that accords with our data is one according to which people—and perhaps other things too—are sometimes, but of course not always, self-determining beings; that is, beings that are sometimes the causes of their own behavior.” (51)

This view presupposes a couple of remarkable metaphysical theses:

(i) I am a self or person—a self-moving being.
(ii) A substance (e.g. a self) can cause (originate, initiate) an event, without anything (else) causing it to do so.

[It also presupposes the denial of Laplacean determinism as defined by Earman, since Taylor says: “In the case of an action that is free, it must not only be such that it is caused by the agent who performs it, but such also that no antecedent conditions were sufficient for his performing just that action.” (51)]

According to Taylor,

• The theory of agency avoids the absurdities of simple indeterminism by conceding that human behavior is caused.
- The theory of agency avoids the difficulties of determinism by denying that every chain of causes and effects is infinite.

Nevertheless, Taylor wonders whether the theory of agency is, when fully considered, so odd that one might not wish to go back and question the data he began with. It is an odd view, and R. E. Hobart, I believe, got to the bottom of what is odd about it.

For the moment, however, consider the following problem. Consider some action A that I perform at some time t. I, my self, typically have existed for a long before and after the action A at t. So the existence of my self (or Self) is not sufficient for the occurrence of A, though it may be necessary.

What, then, completes the set of standing necessary conditions at (or just before) t so that A occurs at t? That triggering condition is, presumably, something dated, something that happens at a time—that is, a change or event. But it is exactly this event that is left out of the theory of agent causation even though typically a triggering event in a set of standing conditions is singled out as “the cause” of what
follows, as striking a match is considered the cause of its lighting.

One might think that this line of argument begs the question, since Taylor clearly affirms that prior to the action’s occurring (or being willed?) no sufficient antecedent conditions for the performance of just that action existed. But, then, why did that action occur at the particular time that it did, as opposed to any other time when my self existed?

A further thought. Let us recall Taylor’s working definitions of determinism and (simple) indeterminism:

**Determinism**: All events have causes.

**Simple indeterminism**: Either some of my actions are uncaused, or some of the immediate “inner” causes of my actions (my choices or volitions) are uncaused.

Let’s invent a third position:

**Irrelevant indeterminism**: Some events that are neither my actions nor the immediate “inner” causes of my actions are uncaused.

It would seem that these three views are mutually exclusive (at most one can be true) but also exhaustive of all possibilities (so at
least one must be true). So which kind of view is the theory of agency? Could any choice be a happy one by Taylor’s lights? Theories of the first two sorts have unpalatable consequences, according to his arguments, and a theory of third type is... irrelevant.

In fact, Taylor clearly thinks of the theory of agency as a kind of deterministic theory (52), but one that avoids the difficulties of determinism by denying that causal chains stretch indefinitely back into the past. The come to a stop at selves as causes, or initiators, of actions. Some causal chains have a beginning.

But how does this differ from indeterminism? The theory is certainly not deterministic in Earman’s sense (of future Laplacean determinism). We can then also ask again the question: why does a particular chain begin at some particular time (rather than another), if it is initiated by a continuing thing, the Self?