

# Kane

Free Will: Ancient Disputes, New Themes



## How Responsible Are We?

- Parenting, society, and genetic makeup all influence our behavior
- Is there anything left in our characters for which we are responsible?
- If we are to be ultimately responsible for our lives and characters, then there must be some factors which we have control over
- We need more than “surface freedoms” (ability to make decisions and choices), we need “ultimate freedom” (ability to be the “original creators of our own wills--causes of ourselves”) to be morally responsible
- Surface freedoms are compatible with determinism, but ultimate freedom is not compatible with determinism

## The Problem of Indeterminism

- Free will is not compatible with determinism
  - If all one's actions are determined by some prior causal factors, then one cannot act freely
- Similarly, free will appears not to be compatible with indeterminism
  - If one's choice is undetermined, then one could have made a different choice even given the same antecedent causes
  - Kane on Indeterminism: "exactly the same past, different outcomes"
  - Indeterminism: the view that some things, including human choice, are not caused or determined

## Not All Acts are Indeterminate

- Some acts are determined by our characters and motives
- When are our acts free and when aren't they?
  - Even if our acts are determined by our existing characters and motives, they can still be free to the extent that we formed our motives and characters from previous, undetermined acts
  - If we are responsible for the acts that are a result of our character, then we must have been free, at some point, to shape that character

## When Are We Free to Shape Our Character?

- “Self-forming Choices or Actions” (SFAs)
  - SFAs occur at difficult times of life whenever we are faced with making a decision about
    - who we are,
    - what we are to become,
    - or what we should do
  - During these times of competing motivations, there is tension and uncertainty in our minds about the “best” course of action

## Businesswoman Example

- A businesswoman on a way to an important meeting observes an assault taking place in an alley
- She struggles with the choice of whether she should call for help or go to her meeting
- She has to overcome the temptation to go to her meeting and not lend assistance
  - If she overcomes the temptation, it is because of her effort
  - If she fails to overcome the temptation, she did not allow her effort to succeed

## The Role of Uncertainty

- The uncertainty in our minds plays a certain role at the physical level
  - Uncertainty “screens off complete determination by influences of the past”
- In conditions of uncertainty, the outcome is not determined because of the preceding indeterminacy
  - But, the outcome can be willed by the agent
  - When “indeterminate efforts...become determinate choices, we *make* one set of competing reasons or motives prevail over the others then and there *by deciding*.”

## Willing and Indeterminacy

- If we can will a course of action during times of indeterminacy, then we are acting rationally and voluntarily
- If we can will a course of action during times of indeterminacy by making a decision, then we have control and responsibility
  - Indeterminacy does not necessarily undermine rational and voluntary control and moral responsibility

## Neural Network Explanation

- In the cases where the conflict is internally generated, Kane thinks competing neural networks cause noise and this noise creates indeterminacy
- When a choice is made, one has overcome the indeterminate noise through effort
- One cannot control or determine which choice will occur **before** it occurs
  - if one could, then one's choice would be determined
- But, just because one cannot control which choice will occur before it occurs does not mean that one does not control which one occurs **when** it occurs

## Plural Voluntary Control

- “Agents have plural voluntary control over a set of options (stopping to help or going on to a meeting) when they are able to bring about *whichever* of the options they will, *when* they will to do so, for the *reasons* they will to do so, *on purpose* rather than by mistake or accident, without being coerced or compelled in doing so, or otherwise controlled by other agents or mechanisms.”
- When these conditions have been met, the agent exercises control over one's future life at that moment when one decides

## “Doubling” of Choices

- When faced with two conflicting choices, the agent voluntarily chooses whichever choice they actually choose
  - E.g., since the businesswoman was both faced with the decision to help the person in the alley and to get to her meeting on time, whichever choice she made was the one she was trying to make
  - In this sense, she is acting voluntarily and responsibly
- SFAs are when agents are trying to resolve two parallel and competing cognitive tasks

## Indeterminism and Chance

- Indeterminism precludes *deterministic* causation
- But, indeterminism does not preclude non-deterministic or probabilistic causation
  - In these two forms of causation, the outcome is not inevitable
- There is no room for chance in indeterminism of effort
  - Chance does not mysteriously make the choice for the agent
  - Effort to decide and the indeterminism is fused: the effort is indeterminate and the indeterminism is a property of the effort

## Choice

- “a choice is the formation of an intention or a purpose to do something”
- Making a choice
  - resolves uncertainty and indecision in the mind about what to do
  - “sets the mind” on one alternative rather than another
- This notion of choice does not mean that there is no indeterminism or uncertainty about what to do

## Does One Have Control Over One's Choices?

- The problem of indeterminism raises the question of whether one has control over one's choices
- Does indeterminism create an obstacle to our freedom?
  - Kane thinks indeterminism does diminish control over and hinders us in our purposes
  - But, even this diminishing of control can be from one's free will (in the businesswoman's case the desire and effort to do the opposite of going to her meeting)
  - Indeterminism is a hinderance in the form of resistance of the will in making one decision rather than another

## Indeterminism and Free Will

- “Thus, by being a hinderance to the realization of some of our purposes, indeterminism paradoxically opens up the genuine possibility of pursuing other purposes—of choosing or doing otherwise in accordance with, rather than against, our wills (voluntarily) and reasons (rationally).” (435)
- To be genuine SFAs and to have free will
  - there must be obstacles or hinderances in our wills
  - we must overcome these obstacles or hinderances
  - indeterminism is a necessary condition for having responsibility for our decisions

## Are Choices Arbitrary?

- In the businesswoman’s case, there is no determined or overriding prior reasons for her making one choice rather than another
  - So, it looks as if her making one decision rather than the other is arbitrary
- It is the agent’s choice that makes one set of reasons for an action prevail over the competing reason
  - But, one could have chosen differently and then the other set of reasons would have prevailed

## Value Experiment

- Kane agrees that there is some arbitrariness in the decision process, but that this illuminates free will
- “Every undetermined self-forming free choice is the initiation of...a ‘value experiment’” justified in the future and not wholly explained by past reason
  - When we make a choice in these situations, we are saying...
    - “Let’s try this. It is not required by my past, but is consistent with my past and is one branching pathway my life can now meaningfully take. Whether it is the right choice, only time will tell. Meanwhile, I am willing to take responsibility for it one way or the other.” (437)
  - One is not a fully formed person before, or after, one’s choice
  - The lifetime collection of choices is what defines each of us