

Is Freedom Really a Mystery ?*

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...LIBERTY, NECESSITY, and so forth, upon whose desperate and unconquerable theories so many fine heads have been turned and cracked.

L. Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*

I. A Philosophical Scandal

In the early decades of the 20th century, the community of analytic philosophers substantially neglected the problem of free will.¹ Few wrote extensively on the subject, and most of them simply held, with few minor changes, the classic Humean view on the matter, later called 'compatibilism'.² According to this view,

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¹ As it has been noticed (for example by Robert Kane, *The Significance of Free Will* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1996], pp. 12-14), the term 'problem of free will' covers different issues. Here I will discuss in particular the possibility of justifying the intuition of freedom, and the compatibility of freedom with causal determinism and indeterminism.

² On this point, see Peter van Inwagen, *Metaphysics* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1993), p. 187: "the majority of twentieth-century English-speaking philosophers have been compatibilists." Indeed, the fortune of compatibilism (in its many different versions) during the early decades of last

the problem could be easily solved by correctly defining freedom as the lack of compulsion or impediment in action. If freedom was such a thing--the compatibilists affirmed--, how could it be threatened by the possible causal determination of our actions?³ From this point of view, it was common to conclude that the whole free-will debate simply idled around a pseudo-problem. Moritz Schlick, for example, famously wrote:

[I]t is really one of the greatest scandals of philosophy that again and again so much paper and printer's ink is devoted to this matter, to say nothing of the expenditure of thought, which could have been applied to more important problems.⁴

Four decades later, Donald Davidson echoed this point, with reference to the arguments that would supposedly prove the incompatibility of freedom and causal determination:

century was limited to the analytic world, since traditionally most continental philosophers sympathize for the opposite view of 'incompatibilism', according to which freedom and causal determinism are incompatible. (Customarily, incompatibilists who believe in human freedom are called 'libertarians'; those who deny it, and hold causal determinism, are called 'hard determinists'). For an analysis of these views, see L. W. Ekstrom, *Free Will. A Philosophical Study* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2000).

³ See, for instance, Moritz Schlick, "When a Man is Responsible," English translation in Bernard Berofsky, ed., *Free Will and Determinism* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966, pp. 54-63); R. E. Hobart, "Free Will as Involving Determinism and Inconceivable Without It," in Berofsky, ed., *Free Will and Determinism*, pp. 63-95; Alfred Ayer "Freedom and Necessity," in Gary Watson, ed., *Free Will* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), pp. 15-23. Actually these authors, and many others, affirm (following Hume) that freedom is not only compatible with causal determinism, but actually *requires* it; this position is sometimes called 'supercompatibilism'. For a contemporary version of compatibilism that is not supercompatibilist, see D.C. Dennett, *Elbow Room* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1984).

⁴ Schlick, "When a Man is Responsible," p. 54.

I will not be directly concerned with such arguments, since I know of none that is more than superficially plausible. Hobbes, Locke, Hume, Moore, Schlick, Ayer, Stevenson, and a host of others have done what can be done, or ought ever to have been needed, to remove the confusions that can make determinism seem to frustrate freedom.⁵

Even Quine--the maestro of analytic philosophy in the second half of last century--made it clear that in his opinion the 'problem of free will' had an obvious solution (which probably explains why he never wrote on this subject at length):

Like Spinoza, Hume, and so many others, I count an act as free insofar as the agent's motives or drives are a link in its causal chain. Those motives or drives may themselves be as rigidly determined as you please...It is for me an ideal of pure reason to subscribe to determinism as fully as the quantum physicists will let me.⁶

Thus, for many years compatibilism represented the orthodoxy on the issue of free will, at least among analytic philosophers. And it was also common to agree with Schlick in thinking that only the persistent influence of an obsolete way of doing philosophy could make it possible to believe that human freedom represented a philosophical problem worth of a serious discussion.

Today, however, the situation is very different since the problem of free will has regained the prestigious position it traditionally held in the philosophical discussions of the past. Undoubtedly, Moritz Schlick would not be happy to see how many books, articles and conferences have been dedicated to the issue of

⁵ Donald Davidson, "Freedom to Act," in *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), pp. 63-81; quotation from p. 63.

⁶ W. V. Quine, "Things and Their Place in Theories," in *Theories and Things* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press), pp. 1-23; quotation from p. 11.

free will in the last few years:⁷ “the scandal--he would probably growl--has arisen again.” Nor would he like the indisputable fact that nowadays compatibilism has lost much of its appeal, whereas no other conception has gained large credit. Finally, Schlick would probably be quite incredulous about a striking feature of the contemporary debate on free will: the increasing fortune of skepticism. A relevant number of philosophers currently claim that the problem of free will is, and will always remain--*pace* Schlick--, utterly mysterious; and many others state, even more radically, that the same idea that freedom is possible--much less that is real--should be simply given up.

In the present essay, I shall argue that this wave of skepticism is the most important consequence of a very common strategy of facing this problem--and the most evident sign of this strategy's inadequacy. In fact, such a strategy crucially depends on some (often tacit and dogmatic) metaphysical premises that are consequences of a 'restricted' or 'scientific' naturalism.⁸ In the last part of the

⁷ Watson, ed., *Free Will*; Timothy O'Connor, ed., *Agents, Causes, and Events. The Metaphysics of Free Will* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995); *Philosophical Topics* (24), 1996 (special issue); Laura W. Ekstrom, ed., *Agency and Responsibility. Essays on the Metaphysics of Freedom* (Boulder: Westview, 2001); Robert Kane, ed., *Free Will* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002); Robert Kane, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Free Will* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2002).

⁸ I take the term 'restricted naturalism' from Barry Stroud's "The Charm of Naturalism" (reprinted in this volume); for the term 'scientific naturalism' see the Introduction to this volume. Both these terms refer to the views that attribute absolute epistemological and ontological primacy to the sciences--in particular to the natural sciences, and very often to physics only. With regard to this, I agree with Jennifer Hornsby who sees continuity between contemporary orthodox naturalism--what can be called 'restricted' or 'scientific'--and the physicalism of the 1960s and 1970s (see her *Simple Mindedness. In Defense of Naive Naturalism in the Philosophy of Mind* [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997], p. 9; see also Putnam's essay in this volume). This, of course, cannot be said of the sorts of naturalism

essay, I shall claim that once these metaphysical premises are given up, as it would seem reasonable to do, the rationale to be skeptical about the problem of free will appear much less compelling.

II. Mystery and Illusion

If one compares the current discussion on free will with the debates regarding other crucial philosophical issues, one could easily realize that the former proceeds in a very peculiar way. With regard to the debates concerning, say, personal identity, the mind-body problem, or the nature of ethical concepts, alternative conceptions face each other, none of which is perhaps entirely convincing, but none (or almost none) is completely implausible either. However, when one comes to the question of free will, the situation is much more intricate and unsatisfactory. To describe it, it is helpful to appeal to Thomas Kuhn's accounts of the periods of "extraordinary science."⁹ According to Kuhn, it happens sometimes that a scientific theory, which used to represent the dominant "paradigm" in a certain field, goes through a deep crisis, and loses much of its appeal, whereas none of the alternative conceptions is able to gain any significant consensus. The result is a serious theoretical conflict, which may lead to the restoration of the old paradigm, to the emergence of a new paradigm or to the recognition that "the problem resists even apparently radical new

defended by Hornsby herself or by John McDowell in *Mind and World* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994).

⁹ T.S. Kuhn, *The Structure Of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1962), ch. 8.

approaches.” And in the latter case the scientific community may “conclude that no solution will be forthcoming in the present state of the field.”¹⁰

This account applies well, I believe, to the present discussion of free will. Compatibilism--which, as we have seen, until recently was the majority view--is currently undergoing vehement attacks. As a result, its credibility is weakened to the point that, according to an authority in the field, compatibilism is “nowadays widely regarded as implausible.”¹¹ However, certainly all the alternative conceptions--and particularly the main of them, *libertarianism*--are in no better shape. The reason is easy to tell: convincing arguments have been offered *against* all the major views, as we will see shortly, but no truly persuasive arguments have been conceived in support of any of them. In describing this situation, Thomas Nagel writes:

[M]y present opinion is that nothing that might be a solution has yet been described. This is not a case where there are several possible candidate solutions and we don't know which is correct. It is a case where nothing believable has (to my knowledge) been proposed by anyone in the extensive public discussion of the subject.¹²

Indeed, Nagel concludes pessimistically, “at the end of the path that seems to lead to freedom and knowledge lie skepticism and helplessness.”¹³

Similarly, for a long time Peter van Inwagen has been arguing that none of the alleged solutions of this problem is even slightly convincing. Moreover, in the last years van Inwagen's skepticism has become even more radical. In several

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 84.

¹¹ Peter van Inwagen, *Metaphysics* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1993), p. 33.

¹² Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 112.

¹³ Ibid., pp. 119-120.

sharp essays, including the eloquently entitled “The Mystery of Metaphysical Freedom”¹⁴ and “Free Will Remains a Mystery,”¹⁵ he has argued that probably no human being will ever be able to solve the problem of free will. This problem is, according to van Inwagen,

so evidently impossible of solution that I find very attractive a suggestion that has been made by Noam Chomsky (and which was developed by Colin McGinn in his recent book *The Problems of Philosophy*) that there is something about our biology, something about the ways of thinking that are ‘hardwired’ into our brains, that renders it impossible for us human beings to dispel the mystery of metaphysical freedom. However this may be, I am certain that I cannot dispel the mystery, and I am certain no one else has in fact done so.¹⁶

Finally, as van Inwagen says, also Colin Mc Ginn defends a similar position (“Free will is a mystery, and therein lies its possibilities”).¹⁷ Nonetheless, Nagel’s, van Inwagen’s and McGinn’s views, however radical, are far from being the most extreme in the contemporary debate on free will. In spite of their pessimism, these authors think (even though for different reasons) that the idea that we enjoy free will plays a relevant and unavoidable role in our lives, and that it would be wrong, and even absurd, to try to dismiss it.¹⁸ They are skeptical only about

¹⁴ Peter van Inwagen, “The Mystery of Metaphysical Freedom,” in Peter van Inwagen and David Zimmerman, eds., *Metaphysics: the Big Questions* (Oxford: Blackwell 1998), pp. 365-74.

¹⁵ Peter van Inwagen, “Free Will Remains a Mystery,” *Philosophical Perspectives*, 12 (2000): 1-19.

¹⁶ Van Inwagen, “The Mystery of Metaphysical Freedom,” p. 374.

¹⁷ Colin Mc Ginn, *The Mysterious Flame. Conscious Minds in a Material World* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), p. 168.

¹⁸ See van Inwagen, “The Mystery of Metaphysical Freedom,” p. 373: “whether or not we are all, as the existentialists said,

the possibility of *explaining* how freedom can be reconciled with a world that seems entirely ruled by the objective, inescapable laws of nature. It is because such an explanation looks unattainable that, according to Nagel, van Inwagen, and McGinn the whole issue of free will is a *mystery*.

In the last years, however, many philosophers have been by far more skeptical in arguing that the idea of freedom is a mere *illusion*--a useful one, perhaps, but nothing more than an illusion. A mere listing of titles of some recent book dedicated to this topic will make the point apparent: *The Non-reality of Free Will*,¹⁹ *Free Will and Illusion*,²⁰ *Living without Free Will*,²¹ *The Illusion of Conscious Will*.²² These works, and many others,²³ aim at dissolving, from different points of view, the same idea of free will, as it has been conceived by modern Western philosophy. In this perspective, the point is not that we do not, and perhaps cannot, know how to reconcile freedom and nature, but that the idea of freedom is hopelessly delusive.

Furthermore, this radically skeptical attitude has been frequently extended to another fundamental philosophical notion, that of moral responsibility. The usual

condemned to freedom, we are certainly all condemned to believe in freedom."

¹⁹ Richard Double, *The Non-Reality of Free Will* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

²⁰ Saul Smilansky, *Free Will and Illusion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). In this book, Smilansky (who labels his conception "Illusionism") recognizes the relevance of the idea of freedom, even though he thinks that it is nothing more than an illusion: "Humanity is fortunately deceived on the free will issue, and this seems to be a condition of civilized morality and personal success" (p. 6).

²¹ Derk Pereboom, *Living Without Free Will*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

²² D.M. Wegner, *The Illusion of Conscious Will* (Cambridge (MA), MIT Press, 2002).

²³ See, for example, Ted Honderich, *A Theory of Determinism*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988); Galen Strawson, *Freedom and Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986); Richard Double, *Metaphilosophy and Free Will* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

rationale for this is that, in spite of some remarkable attempts to prove the opposite,²⁴ moral responsibility is still thought to require some substantial form of free will.²⁵ In this perspective, numerous philosophers who think that the kind of freedom that is morally relevant is either unreal or impossible have consequently drawn the same conclusion with regard to moral responsibility. Richard Double, for example, has put the question in these terms: "The most-likely-to-be-true picture of what exists contains neither free choices nor moral responsibility, irrespective of whether human choices are determined."²⁶

To sum up, two different forms of skepticism are nowadays common with regard to the free-will problem (and to its implications for moral responsibility). According to the first, expressed by Nagel, van Inwagen, and McGinn this problem, even if genuine, is a mystery because of its *insolubility*. This view is a form of epistemic skepticism; let us call it the *mystery view*. According to the second form of skepticism, on the contrary, there is no genuine problem of freedom--and of course no real mystery either--, since the same idea that we have, or even that we *could* have, free will is *illusory*, and can be shown to be so. This is a form of *anti-realistic* skepticism; let us call it *illusion view*.

²⁴ For example, Harry Frankfurt ("Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility," *Journal of Philosophy*, 66 [1969]: 829-839) argues that moral responsibility does not require the 'possibility to do otherwise,' which many consider an essential component of freedom together with some form of 'self-determination' or 'control'. On this point, see J. M. Fischer, "Frankfurt-style Examples, Responsibility and Semi-compatibilism," in Kane, ed., *Free Will*, pp. 95-109, and here, par. 3. Similar theses are defended by P.F. Strawson ("Freedom and Resentment", *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 48 [1962]: pp. 1-25) and Dennett (*Elbow Room*, ch. 8).

²⁵ See Kane, *The Significance of Free Will*, chap. 3; Ekstrom, *Free Will*, pp. 139-214.

²⁶ Double, *Metaphilosophy and Free Will*, p. 156.

In the following, I will argue that in most cases, and notwithstanding their differences, the mystery view and the illusion view have a common origin--and one that is instructive to analyze. But before discussing this point, two preliminary considerations are necessary.

First, I am not claiming that skepticism--in either of the two particular forms mentioned above--has become the dominant view in the contemporary discussion on free will. On the contrary, it is evident that many philosophers still support compatibilism and libertarianism.²⁷ Even so, in the last couple of decades, the number of authors who have assumed a skeptical stance on this matter has become remarkably high, and it seems to keep increasing. This is a new relevant fact in the history of the debate on free will, and one that should be explained. (Of course, it is not that skepticism about free will was unknown in the past;²⁸ nowadays, however, it is much more commonly held, and arguably much better justified.)

Secondly, it should be noticed that the above-mentioned skeptic views about free will, far from being at odds with our best epistemic practices, in fact *spring* from them--or rather, as I will argue, from a very common way of interpreting them. As we will see shortly, the mystery view and the illusion view share the assumption that what science finds out about the ontology, the laws and the kind of causation of the natural world is radically at odds with the conceptual requirements of freedom; then, from this assumption the mystery

²⁷ See Kane, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Free Will* for a discussion of many contemporary libertarian and compatibilist views.

²⁸ Lorenzo Valla, C.S. Peirce and William James, for example, was skeptical about the possibility of *knowing* that we are free, whereas (from different hard-determinist perspectives) Luther, Diderot, La Mettrie, Holbach, Schopenhauer and Laplace were skeptical about freedom altogether.

view infers that freedom cannot be proven, whereas the illusion view infers that freedom is impossible altogether. However, in both cases *positive* reasons are adduced for a skeptical thesis, reasons that derive from a scientific view of the world--or, more precisely, from what many contemporary naturalist philosopher consider *the* scientific view of the world.²⁹ It is time, now, to consider these positive reasons more in detail.

3. Springs of Skepticism

Common-sense definitions tell us that agents are free when they *control* what they do, or when their decisions and actions are *up to them*, or are *in their power*. Generally, these vague notions are interpreted as expressing two conditions: the *self-determination* (or autonomy, or self-direction) of the free agent, and the *possibility of doing otherwise* (that is, the availability of alternative possibilities to the agent). It seems very reasonable to think that, in order to be satisfactory, any theory of freedom should account for both conditions³⁰. The crux of the free will problem is that both *compatibilism* (for which freedom is compatible with causal determinism) and *libertarian incompatibilism* (for which freedom is compatible only with causal indeterminism) have difficulties in accommodating these conditions—or, as the skeptics argue, perhaps they are

²⁹ See David Macarthur's essay in this anthology for a defense of the idea that naturalism (or rather what we call here 'scientific naturalism') has similar skeptical implications also with regard to the beliefs about the external world.

³⁰ "Any adequate conception of free agency must provide for possibility and autonomy in some sense" (Gary Watson, "Free Action and Free Will," *Mind*, 96 [1987]: 145-172; quotation from p. 145).

just unable to do so. Therefore, since it may be argued that causal determinism and causal indeterminism are logically exhaustive, we are in a serious predicament. Let consider this line of argument more in detail.

Traditionally, the main difficulty faced by compatibilism is to show how the 'possibility-to-do-otherwise' condition can be reconciled with causal determinism. The long debate on this issue is, in truth, a little tedious: the compatibilists keep on proposing increasingly sophisticated ways out (in particular, conditional readings of this condition), and their adversaries continue in labeling those moves as entirely *ad hoc*.³¹ However, the main reason why, in the last decades, many people have started doubting the alleged virtues of compatibilism is a new, important argument: the so-called 'Consequence Argument', different versions of which have been offered by van Inwagen, David Wiggins, Carl Ginet, Thomas McKay and David Johnson, Alicia Finch and Ted Warfield.³²

Here is an informal version of the argument. In order to act freely with respect to any particular action, an agent has to *control* that action; however, to be able to do this, the agent should control either the events in the remote past or the laws of nature on which--if causal determinism is true--that action depends. Alas, both factors are beyond one's control, since the past is *inalterable* (nothing, or nobody, can control it), and the laws of nature are *inescapable* (no human being can affect them). Thus, since every action is beyond the control of the agents, nobody can ever act freely.

³¹ On this debate, see Bernard Berofsky, "Ifs, Cans, and Free Will: The Issues," in Kane, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Free Will*, pp. 181-201.

³² See Tomis Kapitan, "A Master Argument for Incompatibilism?", in Kane, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Free Will*, pp. 127-157, and Kane, *The Significance of Free Will*, pp. 44-52.

This argument has been, and still is, widely discussed, especially because its formal versions depends on a controversial rule of inference in which the lack of control is transmitted over time.³³ Even so, in my opinion this argument is convincing, and so think many philosophers who, because of it, oppose compatibilism. Yet, not a few of these philosophers are also unconvinced by the opposite view of libertarianism, especially because of a critical argument that, in different versions, has bothered such a view since it was presented by Hobbes and Hume. According to the basic version of this anti-libertarian argument, indeterminism cannot allow any space for freedom, as the libertarians would like to think, since it can only produce lack of causation, that is, randomness-- something on which, of course, nobody can exercise any control.³⁴ However, now most authors think that this version of the argument is effective only against *some* libertarian views, the ones that equate indeterminism with lack of causation.³⁵ Actually beyond deterministic causation, there can also be indeterministic, or probabilistic, forms of causation that do not seem to make the attributions of power and responsibility impossible.³⁶ (Assuming, for the sake of

³³ See David Johnson and Thomas McKay, "A Reconsideration of an Argument Against Compatibilism," *Philosophical Topics*, 24 (1996): 113-122; Alicia Finch and Ted Warfield, "The Mind Argument and Libertarianism," *Mind*, 107 (1998): 515-528; Ekstrom, *Free Will*, ch. 2; van Inwagen, "Free Will Remains a Mystery."

³⁴ On this issue, see Ayer "Freedom and Necessity"; van Inwagen, *An Essay on Free Will* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), pp. 126-152.

³⁵ See, for example, Carl Ginet *On Action* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

³⁶ Philippa Foot, "Free Will as Involving Determinism," *The Philosophical Review*, 56 (1957): 429-450; John Austin, "Ifs and Cans," in *Philosophical Papers* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1961), pp. 153-180; G. E. Anscombe *Causality and Determination. An Inaugural Lecture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971); Hilary Putnam, "The Place of Facts in a World of Values," in *Realism with a Human Face* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976), pp. 151-156; Ekstrom,

the argument, that the effect of throwing a dice is not determined, it does not follow that the number that comes out is uncaused too.) Therefore, stated in the traditional way, the anti-libertarian argument only works against one kind of libertarian view.

Nevertheless, this argument can be reformulated in a more general way. If an action *A* is indeterministically caused, then in the causal chain of events that ends with that action there has to be a moment, *t*, in which more than one future course of action is possible; yet it is not *determined* which of these courses of action will become actual. (If, after the action is performed, time went backward to *t*, a different action might originate from the same circumstances.) So, even though the action *A* is actually caused, nothing, or nobody, can *control* its happening, in contrast to the possible happening of the other potential actions. And without control, we have seen, there cannot be any free actions, but only mere accidents. Therefore, like causal determinism, also causal indeterminism seems to leave no space for freedom.

Free Will, chap. 4. Libertarian views that appeal to indeterministic causation are presented in Robert Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981), pp. 291-316, and Robert Kane, *The Significance of Free Will*.

³⁸ See Roderick Chisholm, "Human Freedom and the Self," in Watson, ed., *Free Will*, pp. 24-35; Richard Taylor, *Action and Purpose* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1966); Timothy O'Connor, *Persons and Causes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). Peter van Inwagen, in "Free Will Remains a Mystery," has argued that agent causation cannot even offer an answer to the anti-libertarian argument mentioned above. In my opinion, however, this charge can only be raised against the versions of agent-causation that acquiesce in the metaphysical realism of causal-indeterministic libertarianism, and merely *add* to it a preternatural form of causation--for which, by the way, they do not offer any convincing independent reasons. Here I cannot argue more for this thesis; however, in my opinion agent causation is not necessarily affected by the problem of control.

There is, however, another version of libertarianism, the so called 'agent causation' --inspired by Thomas Reid--, which attempts at bypassing the problem of control by saying that agents can *originate* new causal chains.³⁸ According to these authors, *agent causation* differs from *event causation*, and is logically prior to it. Such a conception, however, has never been very popular, mostly because it looks metaphysically obscure, and according to many it is conceived *ad hoc* to solve the difficulties of libertarianism. So, according to the skeptic also agent causation fails as an acceptable theory of freedom. (In the last part of this paper I will propose an argument that, in my opinion, shows that a scientifically respectable version of agent causation *can* be built).

Notwithstanding all these difficulties, we *do* have the intuition that sometimes we act and choose freely. Moreover, the content of this intuition--that is, our freedom--seems to be a fundamental basis for our moral judgment, for making sense of activities like pondering and deliberating, for fundamental social practices like praise and punishment, and even for the attribution of rationality to agents.³⁹ Van Inwagen takes the intuition of freedom very seriously: "Whether or not we are all, as the existentialists said, condemned to freedom, we are certainly condemned to *believe in* freedom--and, in fact, condemned to believe that we *know* that we are free."⁴⁰

³⁹ On this point, see Thomas Nagel, *The View From Nowhere* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1986), chap. 7, and Christine Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). For a different point of view about the relevance of the free-will issue, see Susan Wolf, "The Importance of Free Will," *Mind*, 90 (1991): 386-405.

⁴⁰ Van Inwagen, "The Mystery of Metaphysical Freedom," p. 373. For a defense of the thesis that the negation of free is contradictory, see van Inwagen, *An Essays on Free Will*, p. 160-161.

Thus, on the one side, we have the strong intuition that we enjoy freedom; on the other side, seemingly the combination of the arguments against compatibilism and libertarianism prove that freedom is chimerical. According to van Inwagen, if this is not a mystery, nothing is: "Free will seems . . . to be impossible. But free will also seems to exist. The impossible therefore seems to exist."⁴¹

In principle, says van Inwagen, there are only two possible ways out from this predicament. Either we prove that something is wrong with the anti-compatibilist and/or the anti-libertarian argument or we accept both of them, and consequently dismiss our trust in the intuition about freedom (notice that van Inwagen does not consider agent causation as a plausible alternative). However, many philosophers--who share van Inwagen's diagnosis up to this point--think that the former option is not practicable, since both the arguments are sound; for this reason, they bite the bullet, and opt for the latter option. Our idea that we are free will is only grounded on an intuition--these philosophers maintain--, but intuitions *may* be wrong, and not infrequently in fact are (do not we have the intuition that the earth is still?). Thus, according to such a line of reasoning, there is no genuine doubt here: having to choose between some sound arguments and an intuition, we should certainly dismiss the intuition. Therefore, they conclude, freedom is a mere illusion.

The defenders of the illusion-view split as to the weight of the illusion of freedom in our lives. Some of the advocates of this view think that this illusion is indispensable, and cannot be eradicated (Paul Smilansky, for instance, writes: "Humanity is fortunately deceived on the free will issue, and this seems to be a

⁴¹ Van Inwagen, "Free Will Remains a Mystery," p. 11.

condition of civilized morality and personal sense of value"⁴²). Others, such as many 'hard determinists', think that the awareness of our lack of freedom cannot affect our lives in any relevant way.⁴³ What is important here, however, is that all the defenders of the illusion view assume that the alleged mystery of freedom fades away when we realize that the intuition of free will is entirely deceptive.

4. Nature and Freedom

Nobody doubts that from a *practical* point of view the intuition of our freedom plays a very relevant role. However, from a *theoretical* point of view, the situation looks very different, since such an intuition seems refuted by the skeptical arguments considered above, and many think that nothing will ever be able to revive it. Should we admit, then, that Dr. Johnson was right in saying that "all theory [is] against freedom of the will," even if "all practice [is] for it"?⁴⁴

Perhaps not. As we have seen, the mystery view and the illusion view share the idea that the anti-compatibilist argument and anti-libertarian arguments, taken together, show that freedom is not possible (while these two views diverge

⁴² Smilansky, *Free Will and Illusion*, p. 6.

⁴³ For two recent defences of hard determinism, see Honderich, *A Theory of Determinism*, and Pereboom, *Living Without Free Will*. As it is well known, from a hard-determinist point of view, if we became aware of our lack of freedom, the *justification* of some of our social practices would be affected, but not the practices themselves: prisons would continue to exist, even though they would be justified only by utilitarian reasons, and not by appealing to notions like responsibility, desert and retribution.

⁴⁴ Quoted, from Boswell's biography of Samuel Johnson, in W. L. Rowe "Two concepts of freedom," in O'Connor, ed. *Agents, Causes, and Events. Essays on Indeterminism and Free Will*, pp. 151-171; quotation from p. 151.

with respect to the credit that should be respectively given to those arguments and to our intuition of freedom). However, to reach such a skeptical conclusion one has not only to assume that these arguments are valid, but also that this way of arguing refutes *all* the sound conceptions of freedom. Therefore, if we found a conception of freedom unaffected by such arguments, a theoretical conflict would emerge, which would suggest that something might be wrong with the skeptical strategy.

In this light, some points deserve discussion. One could wonder, for example, if it is true that *all* theory shows that freedom is impossible, as both Samuel Johnson and the contemporary skeptics think. In other words, one should determine whether it is true that there is no way of *theoretically* justifying the possibility of freedom, notwithstanding its *intuitive* appeal.

In my opinion, this is not true. In fact, we *do* have *theoretical* reasons for thinking that in some cases we enjoy freedom. That is in fact an implicit but essential assumption of most of the theories of human and social sciences that aim at explaining *agency*. More specifically, in most cases the attributions of rationality and autonomy to the interpreted agents made by intentional psychology, sociology, history, and anthropology essentially require that such subjects choose and act *freely*. Such Kantian point has been clearly expressed by G.H. von Wright:

The concepts used for describing and explaining a man's action, such as motive, reason, intention, choice, deliberation *etc.*, are all of them tied to the idea of 'freedom'. To deny that an *agent* is free is to commit a

contradiction in terms. The 'mystery' of freedom, if there is one, is the 'mystery' of the fact that there *are* agents and actions.⁴⁵

Acting because of a reason (of a deliberation, of a choice) is a process that intrinsically requires both the *self-determination* of the subject and the *possibility of doing otherwise*--that, is the two classic conditions of freedom (whatever freedom may be). Actions are the special kind of events they are exactly because of their essential connection with the agent's reasons and motives--that is, because they are *self-determined*. And 'reason', 'deliberation', and 'choice' are notions that conceptually refer to the alternative between different courses of action (reasons, for example, make some actions preferable to others).

It is true that attempts have been frequently made to set the study of agency on a hard-determinist ground that would not leave space for freedom (think of sociobiology, of some forms of eliminativism in psychology, etc.); so far, however, these attempts have been, if anything, only very partially successful. Therefore, one can confidently say that the great majority of the *best* explanations offered by the human and social sciences look at the agents in the way suggested by von Wright, since they postulate that in many cases the agents do choose and act *freely*. What are the most enlightening explanations one can offer in order to explain, let us say, the events of the French revolution? Definitely, those given by human and social sciences, which in most cases posit the freedom of the agents (for example, by assuming that Danton and Robespierre made such and such rational plans, and chose some courses of actions instead of others after having weighed up their respective pros and cons-

⁴⁵ G. H. von Wright, *Freedom and Determination* (Amsterdam: North-Holland Publishing Co., 1980), pp. 78-79; see also the Introduction to Rosaria Egidi, ed., *In Search of a New Humanism. The Philosophy of Georg Henrik von Wright* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1999).

-and *because of that* their behavior can be understood and rationally evaluated).⁴⁶

From this point of view, freedom--far from being mysterious or illusory--has to be thought as an essential requirement for understanding human beings, as a fundamental precondition of our theories about agency. It is not true, then, that the idea of freedom has only an intuitive appeal, since *theoretical* support can be offered in its favor as well. In the light of this, since the best accounts of agency are typically offered by theories that presuppose the existence of freedom, one could think of a peculiar form of *inference to the best explanation*, in order to justify the belief that agents enjoy free will. What can support our ontological assumptions--including the ones that concern humans and their properties--more adequately than our *best* epistemic practices?⁴⁷

If this is correct, we have an *argument* that justifies our intuitive beliefs that *agents enjoy freedom*. Since our best theories of agency presuppose that agents enjoy freedom, and we accept those theories, we should be committed to the idea that we are free as well. However, a typical objection can be raised to this line of reasoning. According to it, no genuine ontological commitment can be legitimately derived from the human and social sciences,⁴⁸ since, if this were

⁴⁶ Hilary Putnam, "Reductionism and the Nature of Psychology," *Cognition*, 2 (1973), pp. 131-146, offers some persuasive reasons for thinking that *in principle* the explanations of the human and social sciences cannot be reduced to those of natural sciences.

⁴⁷ Of course, what is in question here is not whether human and social scientists actually draw the ontological consequences implicit in their theories, or whether they should. The point is a strictly *philosophical* one, since it concerns the strategies that should be used in trying to outline the general ontological structures of reality.

⁴⁸ I call 'genuine' the ontological commitments of a theory that are accepted only insofar as they do not conflict with the ontological commitments of other theories that are considered more basic (such as the theories of physics).

possible, an irreconcilable fracture between the natural and the human world would immediately become evident, a fracture that surely could not be overcome using the linguistic trick of *stating* that the world of agency is just a part of the natural world. Jaegwon Kim expresses a related concern when he states that the failure of the 'causal closure of the physical domain'--which is implied by that scenario--would amount to "an anachronistic retrogression to Cartesian interactionist dualism."⁴⁹

In view of this objection, a sharp distinction is often drawn between seriously acceptable, 'first class' theories (that is, theories belonging to the natural sciences, particularly to physics) and 'second class' theories that make essential reference to intentional and normative notions (that is, the theories of human and social sciences).⁵⁰ From this point of view, ontological implications are legitimately drawn only from first class theories, but not from the theories of the human and social sciences--with regard to which, by the way, according to some philosophers the same term 'science' is used in a very suspicious way.

Many defenders of the skeptic view about freedom appeal to arguments similar to this. The arguments against compatibilism and libertarianism--these skeptics argue--reflect the light that is shed on this matter by the natural sciences, particularly physics: the point of these arguments is precisely that they show that physical causation, whether deterministic or indeterministic, does not leave any room for freedom. If these arguments are correct, there is no

⁴⁹ Jaegwon Kim, "Dretske on How Reasons Explain Behavior," in *Supervenience and Mind. Selected Philosophical Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 285-308; quotation from p. 290.

⁵⁰ W.V. Quine, *Word and Object* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1960). For some critical remarks on this view, see S. J. Wagner "Truth, Physicalism, and Ultimate Theory," in Howard Robinson, ed., *Objections to Physicalism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), pp. 127-158.

possibility to save freedom, in spite of what human and social sciences may say in that respect.

However, this argument is open to objections. First, one could doubt that the skeptical arguments against freedom really express the point of view of the natural sciences on the issue. Second, and more generally, one could challenge the same idea of a rigid separation between 'first class' (ontologically relevant) theories and 'second class' (ontologically irrelevant) theories.

As to the first point, it could be objected, following Davidson, that the skeptical arguments are centered on the analysis of causation, whereas the more a science is advanced the least it appeals to causal notions--to the point that contemporary physics tends to expel them altogether.⁵¹ If this is true, it is wrong to think that the above-mentioned arguments against freedom, which are based on analyses of causation, offer the last word on this matter *because of* their alleged privileged relation with the account of nature given by physics.⁵²

But even if one grants that causation is a kosher physical notion, it is not obvious that these arguments simply reflect the light of contemporary science upon the free-will issue--and that, *consequently*, we should consider such arguments as the last word as regards that issue. On the contrary, there are good reasons to think that, in essence, those arguments are highly metaphysical or even ideological.

⁵¹ Donald Davidson, "Problems in the Explanations of Actions," in Philip Pettit, Richard Sylvan, Jean Norman, eds., *Metaphysics and Morality. Essays in Honour of J.J.C. Smart* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), pp. 35-49.

⁵² One should remember that Davidson connects the thesis that mature physics does not appeal to causal notion with the idea that any causal relation instantiates a law of physics (see "Mental Events," in *Essays on Actions and Events*, pp. 207-227, and "Laws and Causes," *Dialectica*, 49 [1994], pp. 264-279). However, since the two theses are logically independent, one can hold the former without accepting the latter.

Consider, for example, the idea of the 'causal closure of the physical domain'. As a *methodological* assumption for the physicists, it works very well;⁵³ but why should we interpret it as an *ontological* postulate?⁵⁴ What reasons do we have for being sure that *every* event has a *sufficient* physical cause? Even if for many events we have found out such causes, obviously induction cannot suffice for justifying the universal quantification at stake here.⁵⁵ And, notoriously the attempts to support this point by referring to the notion of an 'ideal physics'-- which would give the monolithically *true* description of the world--besides being a clear expression of an extreme metaphysical realism, are deeply unsatisfactory.⁵⁶ Finally, as it has been well explained by Hilary Putnam, it is

⁵³ Max Planck, for example, wrote that the law of causality is a "heuristic principle, a signpost and in my opinion the most valuable signpost we possess, to guide us through the motley disorder of events and to indicate the direction in which scientific inquiry must proceed in order to attain fruitful results" (quoted in John Earman, "Determinism in the Physical Sciences," in M.H. Salmon et alii, *Introduction to the Philosophy of Science* [Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1992], pp. 232-268; quotation from p. 234).

⁵⁴ See John Dupré, *The Disorder of Things. Metaphysical Foundations of the Disunity of Science* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), pp. 229-233, where it is argued that the methodological ideal of unification is very different from, and much more justified than, the ontological principle of the unity of the world (to which the principle of the causal closure of the physical domain is strictly connected). On this, see also Hornsby, *Simple Mindedness*, part 1, and Dupré's essay in this volume.

⁵⁵ In *The Dappled World. A Study of the Boundaries of Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), Nancy Cartwright maintains convincingly that "the impressive empirical successes of our best physics theories may argue for the truth of these theories, but not for their universality" (p. 4).

⁵⁶ See Tim Crane and D.H. Mellor, "There is No Question of Physicalism," *Mind*, 99 (1990), pp. 185-206. A strenuous critic of physicalism is Hilary Putnam: see his "Reflections on Goodman's *Ways of Worldmaking*," in *Realism and Reason*, vol. 3 of the *Philosophical Papers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 155-169; "Is the Causal Structure of the Physical Itself Something Physical?," in *Realism with a Human Face*, ed. James Conant (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University

reasonable to think that the notion of causation is interdependent with the notion of explanation, and that different explanations generalize to different classes of cases (there are “as many kinds of cause as there are senses of ‘because’”)⁵⁷. If this is true, the causal closure of the physical domain, conceived as an ontological principle, is evidently false.

One should wonder, then, whether the refusal of the ontological (physicalist) unity of the world really implies the “retrogression” to Cartesianism feared by Kim. Indeed, this is true only if one assumes that Cartesianism and physicalism are exhaustive. As to this, Kim himself has offered good reasons to think that *non-reductive physicalism* is an untenable position;⁵⁸ but why should one think that physicalism altogether is the *only* alternative to the intolerably obsolete ontological views of Cartesianism?

Recently some interesting forms of ontological pluralism that are very different from Cartesianism have been defended. John Dupré, in particular, has interestingly argued in favor of an anti-essentialist and anti-reductionist pluralistic view, which is *not* Cartesian either, for it explicitly denies the existence of purely mental entities.⁵⁹ Even if this is not the place for analyzing the prospects of this

Press, 1990), pp. 80-95; *Renewing Philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992), chap. 5; “Three Kinds of Scientific Realism,” in *Words and Life*, ed. James Conant (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994), pp. 492-499; and his essay in this volume.

⁵⁷ Hilary Putnam, *The Threefold Cord. Mind, Body, and World* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press), pp. 137-150; the quotation, taken from John Haldane, is at p. 137.

⁵⁸ Jaegwon Kim, “The Myth of Nonreductive Materialism,” in *Supervenience and Mind*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 265-84. Typically, non-reductive physicalists believe that even if all the individuals are physical, they can have non-physical properties that *supervene* on physical properties.

⁵⁹ See Dupré, *The Disorder of Things*. Dupré’s pluralism is non-Cartesian both because is based “not on different kinds of stuff but on irreducibly different kinds of things” (p. 92),

view in detail, one remark can be useful. In a pluralistic scenario of this kind, the idea of a distinction in principle between ‘first class’ and ‘second class’ theories loses its appeal, since the ontological relevance of a theory cannot be defined a priori (as it happens when it is limited by definition to physical theories), but depends on empirical and pragmatic reasons.⁶⁰ In such a perspective, *there is* room for thinking that the human and social sciences can contribute in shaping our ontology--so that rational agents, societies, political parties, and revolutions may have the same ontological dignity of atoms and molecules. In the same light, since the attribution of freedom to agents plays, as we have seen, an essential role in most of the theories of these sciences, we should be inclined to think that we are also *committed* to thinking that there are *free agents*.

Therefore, besides intuition and common sense, also a theoretical argument supports the idea of freedom; so *there is* some ground for being optimistic about the possibility of saving the idea of freedom from the destructive fury of the skeptics. But there is a price for this, of course: one has to give up the assumptions of the ‘restricted’ or ‘scientific’ naturalism that inspire the skeptical

and because, in his view, the mental does not have any special ontological status (“Minds are no more nor less anomalous than cells, societies, or weather systems”: p. 90). It should be noticed that Dupré, differently from the non-reductive physicalists, does not believe that non-physical properties supervene on physical ones. See also Cartwright, *The Dappled World*, pp. 31-33.

⁶⁰ In criticizing the old criterion of the unity of science, Dupré (*The Disorder of Things*, p. 11) lists some epistemic virtues to which we should refer for deciding what theories we should accept: “empirical accountability, consistency with common sense and other well-grounded scientific belief, and perhaps the more aesthetic virtues such as elegance and simplicity . . . [and] more straightforwardly normative virtues . . . [such as] a fundamental desideratum of democratic inclusion and accountability”. If one accepts pluralism in ontology, there is no reason not to be committed to the ontology of any theory that satisfyingly fulfils these criteria.

approaches. However, considering the strong metaphysical-realist flavor of this conception, and its many weaknesses, one should not worry too much about this.

On the other hand, as an ontological alternative to 'restricted naturalism', non-Cartesian pluralism certainly would deserve to be held in higher esteem than it usually is also because it makes the intuitive idea that we are free seem much less mysterious or illusory. And, considering how much we care about our freedom, this is a virtue that should not be ignored.⁶¹

⁶¹ I am specially grateful to Stephen White for some, very useful conversations concerning the issues treated here. Rosaria Egidi, Erin Kelly, David Macarthur, Giacomo Marramao and Portia Prebys provided some valuable comments on a previous version of this essay.