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LIBERTARIANISM AND AVOIDABILITY: A REPLY TO WIDERKER

John Martin Fischer

In previous work, I have claimed that the Frankfurt-style counterexamples to the Principle of Alternative Possibilities work even in a world in which the actual sequence proceeds in a manner congenial to the libertarian. In "Libertarian Freedom and the Avoidability of Decisions," Widerker criticizes this claim. Here I cast some doubt upon the criticism. Widerker's critique depends on the falsity of a view held by Molina (and others) about the possibility of non-deterministic grounds for "would-conditionals." Apart from this point, there are plausible versions of libertarianism which avoid the thrust of Widerker's criticism.

I have claimed that an agent might be morally responsible for a decision even though he could not have made a different decision. Further, I have suggested that even a libertarian could accept this point. That is, I have suggested that one could require that the actual sequence that issues in the decision not be causally deterministic, and nevertheless say that there are certain conceivable circumstances in which an agent is morally responsible for a decision even though he could not have made a different decision.¹

In "Libertarian Freedom and the Avoidability of Decisions," David Widerker rejects my suggestion.² Widerker begins by laying out the Frankfurt-type example (of Jones and Black) on the basis of which I claimed that a certain sort of libertarian could reject the alternative-possibilities requirement for moral responsibility for decisions. In this example, Jones decides to vote for Reagan on his own, without any weird intervention; it seems to me that Jones can legitimately be held morally responsible for his decision, although he cannot have decided to vote for Carter (in virtue of the existence of the "counterfactual intervener," Black). It appeared to me that nothing in the formulation—explicit or implicit—of the case requires that causal determinism obtains (or that the "actual sequence issuing in the decision and action ... proceed in a deterministic way"), and thus I claimed that even a libertarian could accept the claim I derived from it.

Widerker argues that, contrary to my supposition, the case does indeed implicitly presuppose causal determinism. To see why, consider more carefully how it is supposed to work. Let us say that prior to the time $T+i$ of the decision, Jones would be in either a state which Black could "read" as an



inclination to decide to vote for Reagan at $T+i$, or a state which Black could “read” as an inclination to decide to vote for Carter at $T+i$. That is, at T Jones would either show a sign that he would in fact decide to vote for Reagan or that he would in fact decide to vote for Carter at $T+i$. If Black sees the sign at T of Jones’ deciding to vote for Reagan at $T+i$, he does nothing, simply monitoring the situation; but if Black sees the sign at T of Jones’ deciding to vote for Carter at $T+i$, he intervenes to ensure that Jones votes for Reagan.³

Now the thrust of Widerker’s criticism can be presented. If the sign at T is not in fact causally sufficient for (say) the decision to vote for Reagan at $T+i$, then Black is not in a position to prevent Jones from deciding to vote for Carter. For suppose Jones manifests the sign at T that he will decide to vote for Reagan at $T+i$. Still, insofar as this sign is not causally sufficient for Jones’ deciding to vote for Reagan at $T+i$, Jones may indeed decide to vote for Carter at $T+i$ despite having shown the prior sign of voting for Reagan. Thus, even if Jones does in fact decide to vote for Reagan on his own at $T+i$, this would not be a case in which all of the following would be true: the actual sequence issuing in the decision is not causally deterministic, Jones is morally responsible for his decision, and he couldn’t have decided otherwise. After all, given the lack of causal sufficiency of the prior sign, he *could* have decided to vote for Carter, despite having shown the sign of voting for Reagan. And if the prior sign is envisaged as causally sufficient, then Black is in a position to prevent Jones from making another decision; but now apparently the actual sequence issuing in the decision is causally deterministic.

Widerker’s criticism is very insightful, and it deserves more careful attention than I can give it here. But I shall here make two observations. First, I claim that Widerker’s criticism appears simply to presuppose (without argumentation) that Molinism is false. Second, I shall suggest that there are certain libertarian approaches whose adherents can indeed say that an agent may be morally responsible for a decision even though he could not have made a different decision.

Of course, I cannot here lay out or seek to defend the views of Molina pertaining to free will.⁴ I do not have confidence that Molina is correct, but then again I am not certain that he is wrong. On Molina’s view, it may be that even though the prior sign at T that Jones will decide to vote for Reagan at $T+i$ is causally insufficient for Jones’ deciding to vote for Reagan at $T+i$, nevertheless there can be “noncausal facts”—perhaps facts about Jones’ values, character, configuration of motivational states, and so forth—by reference to which one could in principle know in advance that Jones will decide to vote for Reagan at $T+i$. Thus, on this sort of view, the facts by virtue of which the example works need not be causal facts. (Others besides Molina would hold this kind of view, and other views of Molina are not entailed by this position; “Molinism” is just a convenient term for the specific view under consideration here.)

To see how the Molinist reply to Widerker's criticism would go, consider the conditional, discussed by Widerker,

- (5) If Jones shows an inclination at T to decide to vote for Reagan at T+i, then Jones will decide to vote for Reagan at T+i.

The Molinist claims that this conditional can be rendered true by "noncausal facts" or at least facts which fall short of implying that the prior inclination is causally sufficient for the subsequent decision. If this (admittedly contentious) Molinist claim is correct and given that Jones does in fact show the inclination at T, then if Jones is able at T+i to decide to vote for Carter, he must be able so to act that the past would have been different from the way it actually was. This is because Jones' making the decision to vote for Carter at T+i would require that Jones not have shown the inclination at T to decide to vote for Reagan at T+i. But since the libertarian accepts the fixity of the past, he will deny that Jones is able at T+i to make a different decision from what he actually makes.

Now I wish to emphasize that I recognize that the Molinist view presented very briefly above is highly controversial. All I claim here is that Widerker's criticism of my suggestion presupposes its falsity. Incidentally, I am puzzled by some of Widerker's remarks about (5). He points out that the following is an "interpretation" of (5):

- (5b) If Jones shows an inclination at T to decide to vote for Reagan, then Jones will *freely* decide at T+i to vote for Reagan.

Widerker then points out that on the basis of this sort of interpretation of (5), the libertarian "may again claim that in the actual situation, when Jones shows an inclination to decide to vote for Reagan, he has it within his power not to decide to vote for Reagan."⁵ But part of what is at issue here is whether an agent can "act freely" or "decide freely" without being free to do (or decide) otherwise; thus, one cannot in this context simply assume that Jones' freely deciding to vote for Reagan implies that he is free to make a different decision.

Also, Widerker says:

Note that in case a libertarian construes (5) in terms of (5b), Black can, if he knows (5b), *ensure* that Jones will decide to vote for Reagan by inserting the mechanism in Jones's brain. However, if he acts in this way, he does not deprive Jones of his freedom to decide otherwise. He does not do this any more than someone knowing that if he asks me what time it is, then I will freely tell him the time, can, by asking me this question, deprive me of my power not to answer his question.⁶

But the Jones/Black case is very different from Widerker's "time-telling" case. Let us suppose that someone asks Widerker at T what time it is. Suppose further that Widerker shows some sign at T+m if he is inclined to obey the instructions and respond at T+n. There is no special reason however to suppose that there are any facts which render it true that if Widerker were to

show this sign at $T+m$, then he *would* (rather than probably would) respond at $T+n$. Further, there is no reason to suppose that if Widerker were to exhibit an inclination at $T+m$ *not* to respond at $T+n$, then someone (or something) would intervene to ensure that he so respond at $T+n$. Thus, in contrast to the Jones/Black case, there is no reason to say that Widerker lacks the freedom not to say what time it is.

Thus, if Molinism is correct, there are forms of libertarianism in which the relationship between the agent's decision and what precedes it is not causally deterministic according to which an agent may be morally responsible for making a decision even though he could not have made a different decision. Now I wish to proceed to my second observation about Widerker's critique. That is, I wish to develop (in an extremely sketchy way) another sort of libertarianism; on this kind of approach, the relationship between the relevant "sign" or "signal" and the subsequent choice *is* causally deterministic, but there is nevertheless a *lack* of causal determination along the sequence that issues in the decision (and action). And I shall point out that this approach also seems to lead to the view that an agent can be morally responsible for making a choice even though he could not have (at any relevant time) made a different choice.

I do not have the space here to lay out this second family of libertarian accounts fully or carefully. But I shall simply sketch the main ideas and hope that enough of the content of the approach will emerge to convince the reader that this family of views constitutes a minimally plausible, serious libertarian approach—worth further elaboration and evaluation in the context of the issues under discussion here. In his article, "On Giving Libertarians What They Say They Want," Daniel Dennett has presented this family of approaches; he does not necessarily endorse the view,⁷ but presents it as the most plausible and appealing version of libertarianism.

What is crucial to Dennett's view is that indeterminacy be installed at the appropriate place, and Dennett argues that this is *not* between the judgment that a particular act is the best among one's alternatives and the subsequent choice. He says, "Clearly, what the libertarian has in mind is indeterminism at some earlier point, prior to the ultimate decision or formation of intention...."⁸ Rather, Dennett argues that there can be lack of causal determinism (of a certain sort) within the process of deliberation that leads to the agent's judgment as to what is the best option (under the circumstances). He attributes the following thought to the poet, Paul Valery, and claims that it nicely captures the basic idea of the approach he is suggesting on behalf of the libertarian:

It takes two to invent anything. The one makes up combinations; the other one chooses, recognizes what he wishes and what is important to him in the mass of the things which the former has imparted to him. What we call genius is much less the work of the first one than the readiness of the second one to grasp the value of what has been laid before him and to choose it.⁹

Dennett goes on to say:

When someone is faced with an important decision, something in him generates a variety of more or less relevant considerations bearing on the decision. Some of these considerations, we may suppose, are determined to be generated, but others may be non-deterministically generated. ... Those considerations that are selected by the agent as having a more than negligible bearing on the decision then figure in a reasoning process, and if the agent is in the main reasonable, those considerations ultimately serve as predictors and explicators of the agent's final decision.¹⁰

So Dennett's picture suggested on behalf of the libertarian involves some lack of causal determination in the process of deliberation, but no such lack in the link between the judgment as to what is best and the formation of an intention (or the making of a decision). Let me emphasize that I am not in a position here fully to lay out this view (or set of views) or to defend it. Dennett argues that it is the only sort of libertarianism that is plausible, and I believe that it is at least minimally plausible. I also believe that it is libertarianism. Note that Widerker only considers those forms of libertarianism according to which no state of the world (including the judgment as to what is best) prior to the decision causally determines the decision. But this unduly restricts the options open to the libertarian, and it was not the understanding of libertarianism with which I operated in "Responsibility and Control"; there I spoke more broadly of a lack of determination in the actual sequence issuing in the decision and action:

...nothing about Frankfurt's example *requires* the actual sequence issuing in the decision and action to proceed in a deterministic way; if it proceeds in a non-deterministic way that satisfies the libertarian, then Jones can be held responsible, even though he could not have done otherwise.¹¹

Now if roughly the sort of libertarianism suggested by Dennett is correct, then we can take the prior sign to be the agent's judgment about what is best to do. By hypothesis this sign is deterministically related to the subsequent decision. Given the approach suggested by Dennett, the example of Jones and Black can be developed as follows. Prior to T, Jones engages in deliberation; some aspects of this deliberation—perhaps the precise considerations that emerge or the precise order of Jones' reflections—are not causally deterministic. At T Jones comes to judge that voting for Reagan is best. On the basis of this judgment, at T+i Jones decides to vote for Reagan. Given the libertarian view of the fixity of the past, Jones cannot at T+i refrain from deciding to vote for Reagan. And yet the actual sequence that issued in his decision was not causally deterministic. Further, given the presence of Black and his ability to intervene should Jones form the judgment at T that voting for Carter would be best, it is true in the example that Jones at no relevant time has the ability to decide to vote for Carter (or anyone else). And yet he may be deemed by the libertarian morally responsible for voting for Reagan.

But perhaps Widerker would here object that I have simply pushed the debate back to the issue of whether the relevant agent can make a different judgment as to what is best (and how this ability relates to moral responsibility). And I agree that in a full discussion of the relevance of alternative possibilities to moral responsibility one would need carefully to consider these matters.¹² Let me say a few brief words here.

There obviously are cases (perhaps different from the Jones/Black case) in which it is absolutely clear what one should do—cases in which there are extremely strong reasons to do something and no good reasons not to. For example, a baby has fallen into a swimming pool in front of you and is in immediate danger of drowning. All you have to do is bend over and pick the baby up; this would be extremely easy for you, and we may suppose that there are no other morally relevant reasons. On the picture suggested by Dennett and given the presence of a counterfactual intervener such as Black, if you decide to save the baby, you may well be morally responsible for this decision even though you could not have made a different decision. And this is compatible with lack of causal determination in the sequence leading to the decision: the precise ordering of considerations in the (admittedly brief) deliberations that preceded your decision may have been indeterministic. (Thus far, the analysis implies that things are the same as in the Jones/Black case.)

Now is it plausible here to say that it is in virtue of the fact that you could have formed a different judgment as to what is best that you are morally responsible for your decision? That is, does the existence of *this* alternative possibility *ground* your moral responsibility for your decision? I do not deny that the alternative possibility exists, but I do very much doubt that it is what grounds your moral responsibility. For what would such an alternative possibility be like? It would be the possibility to judge best something for which there are no good reasons—failing to bend over and save the baby. And it does not seem to me plausible to say that *this kind of possibility* is what grounds your moral responsibility for your decision.¹³ Thus, I believe that this case is plausibly construed as a case in which the actual sequence exhibits the lack of causal determination, the agent does not have the ability to make a different decision, and the agent is morally responsible for making his decision; further, the ascription of moral responsibility is not based on the existence of *any* alternative possibility.

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NOTES

1. John Martin Fischer, "Responsibility and Control," *Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 89 (1982), pp. 24-40.

2. David Widerker, *Faith and Philosophy*, vol. 12 (1995), p. 118, n. 4..
3. The “prior indication” version of the Frankfurt-type examples was given first (as far as I know) by David Blumenfeld in his, “The Principle of Alternate Possibilities,” *Journal of Philosophy* 67 (1971), pp. 339-45. My point was that the Frankfurt-type cases, so developed, do not appear to require the truth of causal determinism (although they are surely compatible with it).
4. As a good starting point, see Luis De Molina, *On Divine Foreknowledge: Part IV of the Concordia*. Trans., Notes, and Introduction by Alfred J. Freddoso. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988).
5. Widerker, *Faith and Philosophy*, vol. 12 (1995), p. 116.
6. Widerker, *Faith and Philosophy*, vol. 12 (1995), p. 117.
7. Daniel C. Dennett, “On Giving Libertarians What They Say They Want,” in D. C. Dennett, *Brainstorms* (Montgomery, Vermont: Bradford Books, 1978), pp. 286-99.
8. Dennett, 1978, pp. 292-93.
9. Dennett, 1978, p. 293.
10. Dennett, 1978, pp. 293, 295.
11. Fischer, 1982, p. 33.
12. For a more detailed and systematic treatment of the relationship between alternative possibilities and moral responsibility, see John Martin Fischer, *The Metaphysics of Free Will: An Essay on Control* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1994).
13. In Chapter Seven of Fischer, 1994, I argue against various views which I call “Flicker of Freedom” views. These approaches identify alternative possibilities—flickers of freedom—even in the Frankfurt type cases. What I argue is that even if these flickers exist, they cannot plausibly be said to ground our moral responsibility attributions in such cases because they are (for various reasons) *insufficiently robust*. I would make a similar kind of argument with regard to the judgment of what is best in the case discussed in the text. The proper analysis of this sort of case melds considerations presented in Fischer, 1994 and those developed in Susan Wolf, *Freedom Within Reason* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990). Wolf presents cases in which an agent performs a good act and in which it is implausible to suppose that his or her moral responsibility depends on the possibility of his behaving badly; my point here is related but slightly different. My point is that it is implausible to suppose that one’s moral responsibility is grounded on the possibility of forming a certain sort of judgment about what is best: a judgment on behalf of doing something there are no good reasons to do.