

The 'Self' is the Source of Human Beings' Decision-Making Process: A Critical Examination on Theories of Free Will

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Abstract

The concept of 'free will' states that when more than one alternative is available to an individual, he/she chooses freely and voluntarily to render an action in a given context. A question arises, how do human beings choose to perform an action in a given context? What happens to an individual to choose an action out of many alternatives? The free will theorists claim that free will guides individuals to choose an action voluntarily. Therefore, he/she is morally responsible for his/her voluntary actions. This paper attempts to answer whether a person's action is an outcome of his/her free will or brain processes? While answering this question, it examines the relation between free will and the principle of causality. It analyses participation of free will for human beings' decision-making process(es) for voluntary actions and therefore acceptance of moral responsibility for that action. This paper submits that human beings use their 'free will' to decide the course of an action and therefore they 'own' their actions. This paper also tries to trace the source of human voluntary actions to 'free will' and submits that the experience of 'free will' is an outcome of the experience of 'self'.

Keywords: free will, moral responsibility, self, decision-making process, principle of causality

1. Introduction

Are human beings free? What does it mean when we say that human beings are free to make their decisions and thereby they are morally responsible for their action? Free will theories certainly negate the deterministic theories in some sense.

Determinism as a theory presupposes that things are quantifiable and occupy space and time. Free will theories in some sense presuppose that material things are determined and that which has immaterial/spiritualistic character only can be free. When free will theorists claim that free will is the source of our actions and due to which we are morally responsible, a genuine doubt arises; from where does free will arise? This paper attempts to trace the source(s) of free will, and submits that 'self' is the source of free will.

Ancient philosophers used self, spirit, psyche, or soul in equivalent sense. Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle defined self in terms of the soul having immaterial and spiritual characters. During the medieval and modern period, 'self' having these spiritual characteristics separate from physicalist or materialistic characteristics gave rise to body and mind dualism. William James proclaimed 'self' as being partly subject and partly object. Freud considered 'self' as the epicenter of one's personality and behaviour. Searle (2004) claimed that such an entity that has consciousness, perception, rationality, the capacity to engage in action, and the capacity to organize perceptions and reasons, which operates on the supposition of freedom when we do voluntary actions, could be said to be the source of agents, especially moral agents. Being a moral agent is not an easy task. An agent before performing an action needs to weigh the pros and cons of making a choice of any action and after performing an action need to own that action. In the process of decision-making, what really guides an agent to make the choice of an action? There are complex situations wherein an agent has to struggle to make a choice of an action. Still an agent chooses a course of action. This paper is an attempt to study critically the theories of free will and finding out what really causes an agent to decide in situations of contrasting choices.

Let us suppose a situation wherein a student who wishes to apply for a scholarship which is very essential for him/her in continuing further studies. The student is working on a research fellowship application on a desktop computer while sitting near to the window of his/her hostel room. It is the last day and there are hardly fifteen minutes left to submit the

fellowship application on the online portal. There are lots of details to be filled in the online application. Certainly, the student is tensed and anxious as there are hardly a few minutes left to submit the application. At that very moment, he/she hears someone screaming and crying for help. It could be a prank, very well. But then he/she hears the screaming recursively in a frantic tone. The student is really in a dilemma whether to go out of the room and attend to the person crying for help or complete the application and beat the deadline of submitting the application. It is difficult for someone to make a choice between these two alternatives. The student could be trapped in a plethora of thoughts such as; if he/she goes out of the room and finds that it is a prank by a hostel mate then the student would miss submitting the fellowship application on time. Further, if he/she does not submit the application that year, he/she will not be eligible to apply for the same research fellowship in the coming years. Another thought that could perturb the student is, if he/she submits the research fellowship application on time, and then attend to the person who was crying for help, it might be too late to save the life if the person is really injured. Would it not make the student feel guilty about this decision later? Would he/she not think had he/she attended to the injured person a few minutes earlier, the hostel mate could have been probably saved from the danger? Certainly, it is a complex situation wherein the student has to make a choice.

In this backdrop, this paper discusses the relationship between human beings' free will, their decision-making ability followed by voluntary actions and moral responsibility for the action. Let us begin with the notion of free will,

The expression, free will¹ has no ontological existence but can be comprehended through linguistic expressions. For example, an agent(S) chooses to do action (A) at time (T) and place (P). The agent's free will guides him/her to do A when other alternatives are available to him/her such as B, C, D, etc. Choosing to do A affirms the existence of the agent's free will. Dennett (1991), Tooby & Cosmides (1992), Campbell (1974), Keil (1979), and Bargh (2008) state that free will is a *design* in the processes of natural selection of an action or an object. It is

a *feeling* that has evolved in due course of time due to human beings' adaptive behavior towards worldly affairs. It is an essential element of human being's normal cognitive functions (Tranel, Bechara, and Damasio 2000). The *feeling* of having free will gives rise to the feeling of being in control (Taylor 1989; Wegner 2002). A question arises, if free will exists then what causes its existence? Is it an outcome of an individual's conscious state of mind or something else? Spinoza (1677/1951) holds that human beings believe themselves to be free merely because they are conscious of their actions, even though actions are determined by unconscious causes. In fact, it is true in the narration. The student did not know what happened to him/her when he/she is faced with two alternatives; whether to go out of the hostel room and help the person in need or fill the fellowship application and submit it on time. The student could be conscious of his/her thoughts, but he/she was unaware of what caused his/her thoughts and what guided him/her to act in a particular manner in that situation. Libet (1999) provides his experimental research findings in this regard. He claims that *readiness potential* (RP) appears 550 milliseconds before a person acts. Free will appears 200 milliseconds prior to his/her action. He conveys that RP is initiated in a person that is not known to him/her, but an intention to perform an action is generated through an unknown mechanism, that is free will. He further expresses that free will has a power that guides a person to choose an action from many alternatives. His experimental findings are depicted in the following figure.

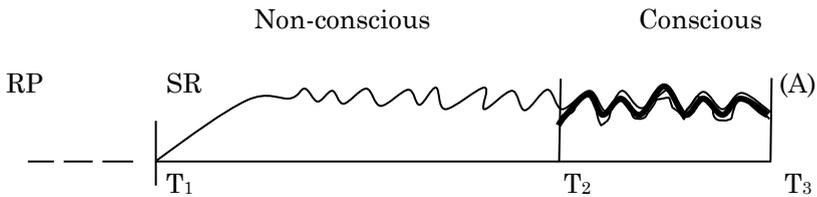


Fig. 1: Timeline chart of a person's action, free will and readiness potential
 RP: Readiness Potential, SR: Stimulus Response, A: Action, T1: Time one, T2:
 Time two, and T3: Time three.

Libet argues RP is the urge that comes in spontaneously almost 1000 milliseconds before the actual action takes place. The time line between T_1 and T_3 is about 550 milliseconds where T_1 is the starting point of non-conscious action known as SR. The timeline between T_2 and T_3 is about 200 milliseconds, which is a conscious process, where T_2 is the actual awareness of free will and T_3 is the time of actual action (A). According to Libet, free will precedes the actual action (A), which signifies that free will determines whether to go ahead with an action or *veto* the action.

Wegner and Wheatley (1999) express that human being's feeling of having free will is nothing but an attribution or inference of an event. According to them, the experience of having free will, which guides us, to act in a certain manner arises from contextual/situational interpretations only. They claim that the timing of a person's thought about performing an action could be manipulated without his/her awareness of it. The right combination of certain variables such as time (T), language (L), situation (S), etc. produced feelings of having free will in human beings' mind. Thus, free will is not under human being's control. Baumeister et al. (1998) argue that making a conscious choice or decision in a given situation asserts a person's ability to engage in self-control. It shows that human beings are conscious about their self-regulatory capacity/ ability.

From the above analyses, we may assert that free will is not the source of an action as something else caused free will. Free will only determines whether an action is to be performed or not. This is endorsed by Bargh (2008) in his work *Free will is unnatural*. If free will is not the source of a human action then what causes an action? This paper discusses the mechanism(s) that resulted in an action in the following passages. It also examines the causes that are causally connected to each other to guide human beings to render actions in their mundane life.

1. The Principle of Causality and Free Will

Human beings render a variety of actions in their mundane life for different purposes. The fact of the matter is that they perform actions in every moment of their life. A question arises, what process in humans leads them to choose

to perform an action out of the many alternatives presented to them in a given situation? In this regard, the authors propose the principle of causality as an underlying philosophy that operates behind a human action. The principle of causality states that every event has a cause. Nothing on the earth happens without a cause. To put it in other words, actions are necessarily caused by *something*. This *something* is nothing other than the free will as Duns Scotus (1986) affirms as the cause of any action.

The notion of free will may be put under two categories, Compatibilists' and Incompatibilists' views on free will. For Compatibilists, free will is the power or ability to do what a person wants or desires to do even though he/she might be causally determined or logically determined.² Here, causal determinism expresses that every event or action is necessitated by antecedent events and conditions together with the laws of nature (Hofer 2016). Logical determinism expresses that proposition about future event or action would be treated as true if the present propositions referring to the worldly affairs were true. Further, there should be a necessary connection between present propositions and future propositions. Compatibilists bring a distinction between *constraint* and *causation*. The former refers to the condition, which prevents us from doing what we want to do, whereas the latter does not impede our will to do what we wish to do. For compatibilists, free will and determinism can be compatible with each other because determinism is understood as a mere causation. As Kane (2005) observes that compatibilists claim that voluntary actions cannot be uncaused; such actions must have the right kinds of causes- causes that come from within and express our characters and motives. No external causes prompt our will to do an action. Determinism states that an action is necessarily determined by something. Hence, it is not compatible with free will. But if determinism is used in the sense of causal connection between motive and action and one's character and motive then it cannot be opposed to free will, and it thus becomes an absolute condition for free will. So, for compatibilists, free actions are unconstrained and not uncaused. We must also note that when compatibilists claim

that determinism and free will can be compatible, determinism is not to be confused with fatalism.³ Fatalists are of the view that human beings freely willing to do an action are ineffective. For fatalists, free will or freedom to do an action is only an illusion and therefore cannot be compatible with determinism. Fatalism holds that human beings do not have the power to change the cause of events: whatever happens, it happens. If we take this argument, then there is no such thing as moral responsibility.

Incompatibilists like Pereboom (2001), van Inwagen (1983), Robert Kane (2005), Robert Nozick (1995), Chisholm (1982), and a few philosophers argue that free will and determinism both cannot be true. If one is true, the other must be false and vice-versa. That is, if free will is true then determinism is not true. And, if determinism is true then free will is not true. Incompatibilists who support determinism and deny free will are called determinists and those who affirm *free will* and deny determinism are called libertarians. Why do the Incompatibilists take either of these positions? Ayer (1954) suggests that Incompatibilists perhaps could not comprehend the notion of natural causes or laws of nature. Whereas compatibilists claim that free will can be compatible with determinism. What it implies, is that the agent is free to act even though the time, environment, the agent's nature can be caused by various other factors in accordance with natural laws. The existence of natural laws indicates that certain events follow some events in a regular and rigid manner. Dennett (1984) evokes that one should be aware of the notion of 'control' while discussing the relation between determinism and free will. Dennett argues that only an agent can purposefully exercise control over another. It is really a categorical mistake to think that nature can control us. Dennett (1984) says, "Nature may determine us but it cannot control us" (p. 61). Pereboom (2001) proposes a third category in incompatibilism what he calls as hard incompatibilism. It is the view that designates that both determinism and indeterminism are incompatible with having free will and moral responsibility. This view denies the existence of free will in case of human actions.

Peter van Inwagen (1983) defends incompatibilism by holding consequentialist arguments. He argues:

If determinism is true, then our acts are the consequences of the laws of nature and events in the remote past. But it is not up to us what went on before we were born; and neither is it up to us what the laws of the nature are. Therefore, the consequences of these things (including our own acts) are not up to us. (1983, 16)

Our free will is not the cause of our actions. This argument conveys that determinism conflicts with human beings' free will. It shows that determinism conflicts with human beings' ability to do otherwise in a given situation.

Libertarians are, in fact soft determinists who hold the view that human beings have free will and determinism is a false phenomenon in a rigid sense. They believe that one can have control over his/her volition or choice (Ginet 1990; Goetz 2002). Chisholm (1982) states that libertarians do not accept the fact that human actions are caused by some other events. For them, the agent is not totally determined but he/she has certain freedom to choose an action according to his/her will. But they cannot claim that an act 'is not caused' at all. Hobbes (1837) also confirms, "voluntary actions have all of them necessary causes and therefore are necessitated" (p. 133). For Hobbes, talking of free agents was non-sense, if free means uncaused and random. Chisholm (1982) claims that libertarians agree to a fact that free acts are caused, not by any other events or natural laws, but by agents themselves (agent-causation⁴). Taylor (1974), O'Connor (1996), and Clarke (1996), endorse the 'agent-causation theory' in support of Libertarians views' on free will.

2. Human Actions and Moral Responsibility

Aristotle argues that human beings seek pleasure and avoid pain (Aristotle 1985). He confers that voluntary actions lead to pleasure while involuntary actions lead to pain. A question arises, which actions are to be judged as voluntary? In other words, when can an action be called as voluntary? According to Aristotle, involuntary actions are the results of force and ignorance. Voluntary actions are supported by reason and rationality (Aristotle 1985). The issue of moral

responsibility arises with reference to voluntary actions alone. Human beings are morally responsible for their actions because they are expected to perform actions complying with their rational choice and reasoning. Further, to become morally responsible, it necessarily implies one must be self-conscious about his/her actions. Again, one must have the freedom to choose an action out of many alternatives. This choice of rendering an action makes one responsible for the action and gives satisfaction and contentment. Why do human beings search for satisfaction and contentment for their actions? The reason is that they feel happy and satisfied when they do something good (praiseworthy) and they feel ashamed and guilty when they do something wrong or inappropriate (blameworthy). Kane (1998) writes that owning up the responsibility for an action (or omission of an action) is related to the fact that we are distinguishable from other creatures in the world *as selves*. Mele (1992) asserts that an act out of a rational decision-making ability, which comes under the purview of moral responsibility. The rational decision of an agent implies that an agent is self-controlled when he/she acts. Bramhall (1844) conveys that free will requires not only to decide the course of an action but also 'the ability to act otherwise'. Reid (1983) says that the ability to render an action implies the ability to have control over the action. Kant (1960) writes "the act, as well as its opposite, must be within the power of the subject at the moment of its taking place" (p. 45). To sum up, the ability to do the opposite of an act is a necessary condition for free will and subsequently supports the arguments of moral responsibility. Only if the ability to do the opposite is exercised consciously, an action is treated as voluntary action and the agent is held responsible for that action. Frankfurt (1969) and Dennett (1984) have challenged this proposal. When a person with Tourette's syndrome⁵ does certain actions as a result of brain functions, that do not involve conscious processes, do we not hold that person morally responsible for the actions? Intentions are also intimately connected to a conscious act.⁶ Every action begins with an intention, in a sense that intentions must be the immediate cause of an action for which we attribute moral responsibility. Bratman (1987)

explains that we execute our motivations by plans consisting of a hierarchically ordered set of intentions. The intentions are free in some sense.⁷ Intentions are partly responsible for decision-making process(es). There could also be unconscious intentions but only conscious intentions are taken into consideration for moral responsibility.

Moral responsibility is linked to a person's voluntary actions. Wallace (1978) while explaining the normative function of moral responsibility asserts that an agent is morally responsible in so far as it is fair to hold him morally responsible. Oshana (1997) agrees that when we say a person is morally responsible, we are essentially saying that the person did or caused an act voluntarily. Pereboom (2001) asserts that an agent is morally responsible for an action if and only if the action belongs to the agent. If each and every action belongs to an agent how do we account for omissions? Is an agent morally responsible for omitting an action that he/she is supposed to carry out at a given context? Wallace (1994) states that it is unfair to blame an agent if he/she has not done anything wrong in the given context. Clarke (2018) observes that our conduct is caused not by reasons alone do but by absences of reasons as well. For example, natural causes and external forces also compel us to act in certain manner in a given situation. The causal influence for an action and absence of reasons constitute our sensitivity to act in a certain manner in a given situation (Clarke 2018). From these explanations, we may submit that causation and absences of reasons are the grounds for holding someone morally responsible for his/her actions. Does it really solve the dilemma as to the origin of decision-making process is?

3. Source(s) of Free Will, Voluntary Actions, and Moral Responsibility

To become morally responsible for an act, an agent must exercise his/her free will. It means that the agent could have acted differently if situation demanded for it. With reference to the narration, if the student had a choice to act otherwise, we could say that she/she was free and that he/she could be held responsible for the action. The student had these options at

hand; either he/she could continue to work on the application without bothering about the hostel mate's cry for help, or, he/she could have come out of the room to help the injured hostel mate promptly. Further, the student could have called up the security office and informed them about the situation. Again, he/she could have informed the hostel officials to do the needful. The student had these options before him/her to choose one among these. Here a question may be raised, what led the student to choose one particular action over the other options—that is, going out of the hostel room and saving the person from a spinal cord injury?

Compatibilists would argue that these choices were available to the student because of his/her biological, theological, psychological and physical (causal) determinants (Myers 2008). These determinants played a role in shaping the choices available to the student in the narration at the time of an action and subsequently compelled him/her to make the choice among the available options. At the end, the student made a choice. Compatibilists thus subscribe to the theory of agent-centered causation,⁸ not a mechanistic-centered causation for choosing an action out of many alternatives in a given situation. For Compatibilists, an agent has an intention to have a reason to make a choice. To avail of the reason, there is a top-down controlling feature that an agent experiences at any given situation while deciding to perform or not to perform an action. This controlling feature is treated as an ontologically 'deep' entity known as *the feeling of self-hood*.

Incompatibilists argue that due to a multi-choice model an agent takes a decision for an action out of many alternatives available to him/her in a given context. The multi-choice model is not free from lacunas.⁹ As Kane (2008) points out, the Incompatibilists necessarily must be in a position to explain the (logically) sufficient conditions, sufficient causes and sufficient motives due to which the agent chooses to do a particular action. With reference to the narration, the student made a choice rationally and voluntarily. A question arises, what made him/her to make that choice out of the many alternatives? Libertarians invoked factors that are responsible for one's decision to render an action in that situation such as noumenal

selves, trans-empirical power centers, Cartesian egos, special acts of will, and acts of attention or volitions. These factors can neither be determined in principle nor explained through physicochemical processes (Kane 1998). Kane (2008) argues that Incompatibilists are not in a position to explain logically the sufficient conditions and motives of a person due to which he/she chooses to render a particular action in a given situation.

The cause for free will cannot be causally determined by the laws of chemistry, physics, quantum mechanics, or any other physical or material thing. Kane (2005) points out that free will has an origin and that *origin* helps the free will to take a decision for an action when many alternatives are available in a given situation. The origin of free will lies in an agent and not anywhere else. The source of free will *in an agent* cannot be located in his/her heart, liver, and brain or in any parts of the body, as these are mutable and replaceable. Thus, we argue that the source of free will is the *feeling of one-self*, the experience of ‘one-self’ would be ‘free’ from the cause and effect determinism of the natural universe. This experience guides our thoughts and beliefs in our mundane life and it does not occur in an agent due to external forces.

4. Free Will, Self, and Agency

When we make choices of action, the voluntary actions, they don’t happen to us simply but we feel that ‘we’ make those choices of actions and feel completely ‘in charge’. The sense of agency refers to this feeling complete control of our voluntary actions. Thomas Reid (2002) puts it, “the foundation of all rights and obligations, and of all accountableness” (p. 112) comes from personal identity. Personal identity gives one the feel of one ‘self’ that guides towards moral agency. Bandura (2004) and Rorty (1993) propose that the exercise of moral agency has dual aspects: inhibitive and proactive. The inhibitive form of moral agency manifests in the exercise of power to refrain from engaging in inhumane acts. The proactive form is expressed in the power to actively engage in some humane acts. This dual nature of moral agency guides an individual to refrain from harmful activities and to do actively morally praiseworthy acts even at times sacrificing self-

interests. Haggard and Tsakiris (2009) have shown that sense of agency plays a key role in guiding attributions of responsibility. Responsibility is closely related to the concept of free will. For most of the people it only makes sense to hold someone responsible for their actions if they are freely in control of them. For Frith (2014) this bearing of responsibility for one's own actions has a greater significance as a social function, for the smooth functioning of the society.

Nichols (2011) highlights an interesting observation regarding the interrelation of free will, agency and self. The free will problem arises because on the one hand we feel like we are conscious and that we are really rational agents. The feeling of sense of agency gives rise to this feeling of free and rational agency. But on other hand, we also know that we are not totally free. According to Nichols, understanding the neurocognitive origins of free will beliefs will not tell us if they are true or not, but will help us evaluate whether or not those beliefs are justified. And therefore, study on the interrelation of free will and agency that is connected to self is to be carried further because of two reasons (there could be more). One, study on this interrelation of agency and free will has a bearing on the well-being and health of individuals. Langer and Rodin (1976) and Rodin and Langer (1977) have pointed out that reduction in the sense of agency is associated with poor health and a reduction in quality of life. Second, Berberian et al. (2012) have pointed out that study of the interrelation of agency and free will has a lot to reveal in the study of human-computer interface. When we study human-computer interface, it becomes evident that agency and free will belongs to 'self' that is conscious, not to unconscious entity such as machines. So ultimately, 'consciousness' is the thread that supports the subsistence of the notion of agency.

5. Conclusion

This paper agrees with Swinburne's (2013) suggestion that our belief in the reality of free will is epistemically basic. It is reasonable to accept its functions in human beings' decision-making process(es) without requiring independent evidential support for its existence. This paper explained the source of

decision-making process in human minds. It submitted that free will is an ‘instinctive’ character of human beings’ decision-making process(es) that guides human beings to decide course of an action in a given situation and thereby hold them morally responsible for the consequence(s) of their action. This paper also submitted that ‘free will’ is experienced in an individual due to the experience of ‘self’ of that individual.

NOTES

¹ Bargh (2008) notes freedom at the political level does not have the same concerns as the freedom of the individual will. Free will as a psychological concept concerns the individual actions and actions that are under the individual’s power to perform. However, freedom or free will as a political or societal concept concerns the plurality and actions that depend on or are restricted by the consent and cooperation of others. Secondly, free will is to be distinguished from a free action (Kane 1998). To act freely is to be unhindered in the pursuit of one’s purposes. ‘To will’ freely is outlined as the power or ability of an agent to choose a course of action from the various alternatives and must be absent of both internal and external constraints.

² Determinism is a metaphysical thesis that proposes that whatever facts of the past, in conjunction with the laws of nature entail the truth about the future. Determinism is to be distinguished from fatalism and predictability where the source of fatalism is located in the will of the gods, or some teleological powers and the source of determinism in natural causes or laws. (Mckenna, M., and Coates, D. J. 2015. “Compatibilism”, in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/compatibilism/>

³ Fatalism is the view that whatever is going to happen, is going to happen no matter what we do. As J. S. Mill (1874) points out that a fatalist believes that whatever is about to happen will be the result of infallible result of causes that precede it and there is no use in struggling against it. It will happen however we may strive to prevent it. The source of the guarantee that those events will happen is located in the will of the gods, or their divine foreknowledge or some intrinsic teleological aspect of the universe. A fatalist believes that a man’s character is formed for him, and not by him. His character is formed by his circumstances.

⁴ It is a philosophical position, which prescribes that an agent, can start a new causal chain, which is not preceded by any other prior events.

⁵ Tourette syndrome (TS or simply Tourette’s) is a common neuropsychiatric disorder with onset in childhood, characterized by multiple motor tics and at least one vocal (phonic) tic. These tics are typically preceded by an unwanted urge or sensation in the affected muscles. Some common tics are eye blinking, coughing, throat clearing, sniffing, and facial movements.

⁶ Searle (1983), in his book, *Mind, Brain, and Science*, explains that one of the main features of consciousness is intentionality.

⁷ For a detailed explanation about intentions and how they affect agent's actions and their role in moral responsibility, one can refer to Sinnott-Armstrong (2011, 242-43).

⁸ In the mechanistic case, objects have specific causal powers or dispositional tendencies, associated with their fundamental intrinsic properties. The powers might concern a unique outcome or a range of possible effects that is structured by a specific probability measure. As O'Connor (2000) observes the cause here is the event of the object's having these power-conferring properties in those circumstances, whereas in agent-causation the agent having the relevant internal properties will have it directly within his/her power to cause any range of states of intention delimited by internal and external circumstances. One might say that agent-causation is essentially purposive whereas mechanic causality is not. Mechanic causality is dyadic whereas agent causality is triadic. Taking the agency theory seriously within an emergentistic framework raises several theoretical problems. The most fundamental of these is determining the precise underlying properties on which an agent-causal capacity depends.

⁹ Kane (1998) points out the problems like how to explain satisfactorily why only one choice occurs rather the other and insists that libertarians must come up with more radical properties for reconciling indeterminism and free will.

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