On Making an Effort*

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Abstract. This paper is in the main a critical study of Robert Kane’s account of the nature of Free Choice. I begin by briefly describing Kane’s theory. I then consider four questions about a concept that is central to his account—viz., the concept of an Effort of Will. I argue that Kane’s position affords satisfactory answers to three of these questions. Reflection on the fourth and final question, however, reveals a problem for Kanean Libertarianism. The problem, in brief, is this. It can be shown that the plausibility of Kanean Libertarianism is inversely proportional to the plausibility of a certain principle of agency. The latter is at least fairly plausible, so the former is at best fairly implausible. This is a strike against Kanean Libertarianism. I conclude by drawing two general lessons from the preceding discussion.

1. Introduction

This paper is in the main a critical study of Robert Kane’s account of the nature of Free Choice.1 I begin by briefly describing Kane’s theory. I

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then consider four questions about a concept that is central to his account—viz., the concept of an Effort of Will.\textsuperscript{2} Here are my questions:

1. What is the structure of an Effort?
2. Can an Effort be deterministically caused?
3. What kind of control do agents have over their Efforts?
4. Does the kind of control an agent has over his Effort ensure that he is personally responsible for the choice caused or produced by that Effort?

I shall argue that Kane’s position affords satisfactory answers to the first three questions. Reflection on the fourth and final question, however, reveals a problem for Kanean Libertarianism. The problem, in brief, is this. Any theory of Free Choice that entails that agents are not personally responsible for their Free Choices is unsatisfactory. A certain principle of agency entails that, on Kane’s view, agents are not personally responsible for their Free Choices. The plausibility of Kanean Libertarianism is thus inversely proportional to the plausibility of the indicated principle of agency. The latter is at least fairly plausible; so, the former is at best fairly implausible. This is a strike against Kanean Libertarianism. I conclude by drawing two general lessons from the preceding discussion.

2. An Explication of Kanean Libertarianism
Kane founds his account of Free Choice on a general theory of agency known as ‘Causalism’. Roughly, Causalism is the thesis that an event $E$ is a basic action\textsuperscript{3} performed by agent $S$ if and only if (henceforth, ‘iff’) $E$ is

\textsuperscript{2} To avoid verbosity, I shall henceforth usually abbreviate ‘Effort of Will’ as ‘Effort.’

\textsuperscript{3} A (metaphysically) basic action is one whose performance does not require the performance of a distinct action. We need only consider basic actions here, since (a) our main concern is Kane’s account of the nature of nonderivatively (or, directly) Free Choices and (b) tokens of the types of actions that figure in this account—viz., efforts and choices—are (typically) basic actions.
an actional\textsuperscript{4} event that is nondeviantly and directly caused by a prior mental event E* that involves S.

Causalism is a reductive account of agency. Reductive accounts of agency characteristically maintain that, strictly speaking, only events or occurrences can be terms of the causal relation. Kane’s endorsement of Causalism thus works to make his view metaphysically modest in two important respects. First, on his view, the making of a Free Choice is explicable in terms of causation by events or occurrences. Kane thus eschews the claim that Libertarians need to countenance more than one kind of nonderivatively causally efficacious entities. Second, his view entails that the making of a Free Choice does not require the creation of a novel causal chain, one that is in no way connected to antecedent events. Instead, Free Choices occupy non-initial positions in event-causal chains. His theory thus explicitly acknowledges that ‘our actions are always limited by circumstances in that they cause only as parts of complex webs of background causes and circumstances.’\textsuperscript{5}

In order to yield a distinctively Libertarian theory of Free Choice, Kane augments Causalism with nondeterministic causal relations among certain mental events. Of course, the mere presence of nondeterministic causal relations in a deliberative process does not suffice for its product’s being a Free Choice. A nondeterministic causal linkage must occur at an appropriate location in a deliberative process if the process’s product is to qualify as a Free Choice.

For Kane, paradigmatic examples of Free Choices occur when persons are ‘torn between competing visions of what [they] should do or become,’\textsuperscript{6} and so ‘have to make an effort to overcome temptation to do

\begin{itemize}
  \item[4] The term ‘actional’ appears in the definiens in order to forestall a flat-footed objection to the effect that the Causalist implausibly counts as basic actions certain non-actional events that are nondeviantly and directly caused by mental events involving an agent. On this point, see (\textit{inter alia}) Alfred Mele’s ‘Introduction’ in \textit{The Philosophy of Action}, ed. Mele (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p.4.
\end{itemize}
something else [they] also strongly want.\textsuperscript{7} Paradigmatic Free Choices are preceded and caused by Efforts. Moreover, the uncertainty and tension one experiences in such cases corresponds to the indeterminacy of one’s Effort, i.e., one’s Effort’s failing to antecedently guarantee one particular outcome as opposed to another. This indeterminacy opens ‘a window of opportunity that temporarily screens off complete determination by influences of the past.’\textsuperscript{8} In sum, Free Choices are causally undetermined products of Efforts. The appropriate location for the occurrence of nondeterministic causation in a deliberative process whose outcome is a Free Choice is at the ‘back edge’ of an Effort.

3. The Structure of Efforts
The concept of an Effort is central to Kane’s theory of Free Choice. A natural next question, then, concerns the structure of Efforts.

Notice first that Efforts are actions. In the context of a Causalist account of agency, this means that an Effort is an actional event that is caused by some prior mental events involving an agent. More fully, an Effort is an action that comprises a group of mental items that involves a number of competing, incommensurable motives. An agent who comes to possess such a group of mental items is thereby trying to form an intention on the basis of some subgroup of the items in the group. Whatever the content of the intention ultimately formed by an agent in possession of such a group, that intention will be produced nondeterministically by some or other of the mental items present in the group.

For concreteness, let’s examine an agent who is in possession of such a group of mental items. Call our agent ‘Norm’, and call that group ‘G’. Let G include both a ‘moral’ motive (call it ‘M\textsubscript{1}’) and a ‘self-interested’ motive (call it ‘M\textsubscript{2}’), and let these motives be of equal strength. Now, suppose Norm finds himself in the following situation. He is on his way to an important business meeting, and has just spotted a beaten man on

\textsuperscript{7} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{8} Ibid.
the shoulder of the road. Upon seeing the man, Norm is internally conflicted, torn between competing and incommensurable motives. In his current predicament, Norm can perform either of two mutually excluding actions. He can either choose to help the man or choose to go on to his meeting. Whatever the content of the choice Norm ultimately makes, he will have to struggle to make it. His choice will thus be a causally undetermined product of an antecedent Effort.

4. Efforts and Indeterminism
Must Efforts, like Free Choices, be nondeterministically caused by antecedent events? In a word, No. It’s possible for an Effort that is itself deterministically caused to issue in a Free Choice. Writes Kane:

I distinguish three senses of freedom, all of which I think are required for a complete account of free action and free will: (1) not being coerced, compelled, controlled, and so on; (2) acting ‘of one’s own will’ in the sense of a will of one’s own making … ; and (3) being an undetermined self-forming, plural voluntary action … Sense (1) is compatibilist …; senses (2) and (3) are incompatibilist. Efforts of will preceding [Free Choices] are free in senses (1) and usually (2) also … ⁹

Focusing on an agent’s first Free Choice reveals that Efforts may be deterministically caused. Recall Norm from above. He will soon choose between helping the beaten man and attending his meeting. Suppose that, whichever choice Norm ultimately makes, it will be his first Free Choice. It follows that the Effort Norm is currently making is not free in what Kane calls ‘sense (2)’; for that requires an agent to have made at least one prior Free Choice. Moreover, Norm’s Effort may be necessitated by prior events involving certain of his mental items. So, Efforts that precede Free Choices need not themselves be non-deterministically caused for their undetermined causal products to qualify as Free Choices. Deterministically caused Efforts can issue in Free Choices.

5. Efforts and Control

Presumably, if one is to be personally responsible for some of the products of one’s Efforts, one must have or exercise some kind of control over those Efforts. A natural next question, then, concerns the kind of control agents have over their Efforts. In particular, is the control relation agents bear to their Efforts causal or noncausal?

Kane claims that an Effort is not ‘something someone controls by doing something else’ but rather ‘the agent’s doing something in order to control something else (e.g., which choice is made or whether an overt action is performed).’ On his accounting, then, the strict and literal truth is that an agent ‘makes the effort, not that she causes it by doing something else (which would clearly lead to a regress) … ’

Call the noncausal control relation Kane posits between a person and her Effort ‘Ownership’. We can now distinguish between actions that are owned, on the one hand, and actions that are caused, on the other, as follows:

- Agent S owns action A (or, has ownership control over A) iff A is an action of S’s that is caused by a mental event E involving S that is not an action performed by S.
- Agent S causes action A (or, has causal control over A) iff A is an action of S’s that is caused by a mental event involving S that is an action performed by S.

Simply put, agents control their Efforts not by causing them but by owning them. Free Choices are thus causally undetermined products of events to which agents bear a certain noncausal control relation.

In sum, then, one’s making an Effort is explicated in terms of one’s being possessed of a certain kind of group of mental items, where this event is nondeviantly and directly caused by a prior mental event involving one that does not itself qualify as an action. Kane thus denies

11 Ibid.
that agents cause their Efforts. He does not wish to claim, however, that Efforts have no causal antecedents whatsoever. On the contrary, Efforts are actions, and so (given Causalism) are caused by certain mental events involving agents.

6. Efforts and Personal Responsibility for Free Choices

We have arrived at our fourth and final question concerning Kanean Efforts, viz., that of whether, in a case of Free Choice, the noncausal control relation an agent bears to her Effort ensures that she is personally responsible for her Effort’s causally undetermined product or outcome.

I shall now describe what I take to be a fairly serious problem for Kanean Libertarianism. The problem, in brief, is this. If Kanean Libertarianism is true, then either (a) agents are not personally responsible for their Free Choices or (b) a certain principle of agency is false. If (a), then Kanean Libertarianism is false. A consistent Kanean Libertarian, then, must reject the indicated principle of agency. The plausibility of Kanean Libertarianism is thus inversely proportional to the plausibility of the indicated principle of agency. The relevant principle is, however, at least fairly plausible; so, Kanean Libertarianism is at best fairly implausible. Let me explain.

Recall our man Norm. Suppose God has created Norm ex nihilo. In his creative act, God has both (a) endowed Norm with a group, G, of mental items that involves a number of competing, incommensurable motives and (b) placed Norm in circumstances that determine or necessitate his acting for some or other subgroup of the items involved in G. Now, suppose the event Norm’s having G is nondeviantly and directly caused by a prior mental event involving Norm—say, a belief that he must now try to make a choice. The event Norm’s having G thus

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12 Incidentally, divine creative activity does not play an ineliminable role in my case. My main reason for appealing to it is to make the case vivid. A case in which an agent’s initial complement of mental items is brought about by thoroughly natural entities would serve my purposes equally well. What’s important is my (innocuous) assumption that every (human) agent has an initial complement of mental items.
qualifies as an action. Finally, suppose that Norm’s having G nondeterministically causes the formation of an intention, N, to help the beaten man.

The formation of N satisfies Kane’s conditions for an event’s qualifying as a Free Choice. Moreover, given that an event E is a Free Choice made by S only if S is personally responsible for E, it follows that Norm is personally responsible for the formation of N.

It seems, however, that Norm is not personally responsible for N’s formation. Let us go through the case in low gear. At time t₁, God creates Norm ex nihilo. At t₂, Norm acquires a certain belief, say, a belief that he must now try to make a choice. Neither of these events is up to Norm. At t₃, his belief causes Norm’s having G. Now, Norm does not have causal control over the latter event; instead, he enjoys ownership control over it. Norm’s having G then nondeterministically causes, at t₄, another event involving Norm, viz., the formation of N. Now, on Kane’s view, Norm is not a primitive, non-derivative cause of the latter; rather, he causes it in a derivative way, by being involved in an event that non-derivatively causes or produces it. My intuition here, for what it’s worth, is that Norm is not personally responsible for N’s formation. He does not have the kind of control over and responsibility for N we prereflexively take ourselves to enjoy in paradigm cases of Free Choice.

When I reflect carefully on why I wish to deny personal responsibility to Norm for the formation of N in the lately described case, I find that I believe three principles which entail that Norm is not personally responsible for N’s formation. They are as follows:

(α) Event E is a Free Choice made by agent S only if S is personally responsible for E.

(β) S is personally responsible for E only if E is up to S.¹³

¹³ I take the locution ‘E is up to S’ to be synonymous with such locutions as ‘E is within S’s power’ and ‘S has a choice about E.’
(γ) If E occupies a non-initial position in an event-causal chain, then E is up to S only if some event that is causally relevant to E is up to S.\textsuperscript{14,15}

I take it that (α) and (β) are straightforward enough for present purposes. On the other hand, (γ) requires some commentary.

Perhaps we can get a better handle on (γ) by reflecting on the contrapositive of its consequent. The claim here is that, where E is an event that occupies a non-initial position in an event-causal chain, if none of the events that are causally relevant to E is up to S, then E is not up to S either. This claim just seems true to me. Reflection on a particular case may be of help to those who are not immediately persuaded.

Consider an event that occupies a non-initial position in an event-causal chain, say, the shattering of a window by a baseball. Our shattering is caused by (inter alia) some events involving the baseball. Suppose an agent, Maggie, is such that none of the events that are causally relevant to the shattering is up to her. I submit that the shattering cannot be up to her. (How could it be? In virtue of what could the shattering be up to her?) Notice, finally, that this is precisely what (γ) predicts.

Now, observe that (α), (β), and (γ) jointly entail that Norm is not personally responsible for the formation of N. N’s formation is an event that occupies a non-initial position in an event-causal chain. By (γ), the formation of N is up to Norm only if some or other of the events that are causally relevant to it are up to him. As far as I can see, the only candidate is N’s proximal cause, \textit{viz.}, Norm’s Effort. But Norm’s Effort seems not to be up to him; for it is caused by an event over which he has no control, \textit{viz.}, his acquisition of a certain belief. By (β), then, Norm is not personally responsible for N’s formation. Finally, by (α), the

\textsuperscript{14} Peter van Inwagen deploys the concept of Causal Relevance in his \textit{An Essay on Free Will} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983). See, e.g., p.152. Following van Inwagen, I take this concept as a primitive in what follows.

\textsuperscript{15} I am indebted to Donald Smith and Thad Botham for discussions concerning this and similar principles.
formation of N is not a Free Choice made by Norm.

A Kanean Libertarian may of course reject (γ). But how plausible a move is this? Rejecting (γ) commits one to the claim that an event that occupies a non-initial position in an event-causal chain may be up to an agent even if nothing causally relevant to the event is up to the agent. By my lights, (γ)’s denial is at best fairly implausible. The fact that Kanean Libertarians are committed to the denial of (γ) constitutes (so I say) a fairly strong case against their view.

7. Conclusion
I shall close by drawing two general lessons from the preceding discussion.

The first point is that a bit of reflection reveals that Kane’s theory of Free Choice is not the only view impugned by the lately developed objection. For notice that the objection in no way exploits the fact that the process that issues in the relevant choice is nondeterministic. Instead, the problem stems from the choice’s occupying a non-initial position in an event-causal chain and the agent’s failure to control anything causally relevant to the choice. In principle, then, the lately developed objection impugns any theory of Free Choice—Libertarian or Compatibilist—that is founded on Causalism. It seems, then, that (γ) yields an interesting argument for the incompatibility of Free Choice and Causalism.16

The second point is related to the first. While the lately developed objection calls into question a number of different Libertarian and Compatibilist theories of Free Choice, it does not—in the absence further argument, at least—have any obvious bearing on the question whether Free Choice is compatible with Causal Determinism. This is because it is at least arguable that neither Libertarianism nor Compatibilism entails Causalism, and that each is compatible with a theory of Free Choice that is itself compatible with (γ)—viz., the view that

16 Donald Smith and I discuss these issues more thoroughly in our ‘An Argument for Agency Theory’ (not yet committed for publication).
agents are nonderivative causes of their Free Choices.\textsuperscript{17} Apparently, then, both Libertarians and Compatibilists may comfortably endorse ($\gamma$). The issue of ($\gamma$)’s truth seems to be orthogonal to the issue of the compatibility of Free Choice and Causal Determinism.

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