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STUMP ON LIBERTARIANISM AND THE PRINCIPLE OF ALTERNATIVE POSSIBILITIES

Stewart Goetz

Eleonore Stump has argued that a proponent of libertarian freedom must maintain that an agent is sometimes morally responsible for his mental action and that such moral responsibility is incompatible with that mental action's being causally determined. Nevertheless, she maintains that this moral responsibility does not require that the agent be free to perform another mental action (act otherwise). In this paper, I argue that Stump fails to make a good case against the view that moral responsibility requires the freedom to act otherwise.

In a previous article,¹ I argued that Eleonore Stump had failed to provide a clear statement of her own view of libertarian freedom, and that her Frankfurt-style counterexample (FSC) for the falsity of the principle of alternative possibilities (PAP)² was unsound. In her response to me,³ Stump has clarified her view of libertarian freedom which is designed to be compatible with the falsity of PAP and provided a new argument for PAP's falsity.

In what follows, I will argue that Stump has not shown that PAP can be false and libertarianism true. Her most recent FSC against the truth of PAP fails because its assumed coherence is questionable. Thus, it is reasonable for a libertarian to continue to believe the truth of PAP. In addition to developing a new FSC against PAP, Stump claims that a libertarianism which asserts the truth of PAP implies the truth of Cartesian dualism and is, for that reason alone, suspect. I will briefly argue that even if a libertarianism which endorses PAP implies the truth of Cartesian dualism, Stump has not shown that Cartesian dualism is implausible.

I

According to Stump, there are two species of libertarianism. Both hold that (1) human beings are sometimes morally responsible for their acts and (2) moral responsibility for an action is incompatible with that act's being causally determined. Where the two species differ is with respect to (3) which asserts that moral responsibility requires alternative possibilities (PAP). The species of libertarianism which Stump defends denies the truth of (3) or PAP while the other species affirms PAP.⁴

PAP has been under sustained attack since Harry Frankfurt's initial

assault thirty years ago.⁵ At the heart of Frankfurt's criticism is the idea that an agent is morally responsible for the action he actually performs even though circumstances make it such that he has no alternative to what he actually does. An agent is morally responsible for what he actually does because he does it on his own. Frankfurt-style counterexamples (FSCs) to PAP are abundant in the literature. The following is a typical FSC which I set out in my previous article:

FSC1: Black is a nefarious neurosurgeon. In performing an operation on Jones to remove a brain tumor, Black inserts a mechanism into Jones' brain which enables Black to monitor and control Jones' activities. Jones, meanwhile, knows nothing of this. Black exercises his control through a computer which he has programmed so that, among other things, it monitors Jones' voting behavior. If Jones shows an inclination to choose to vote for Carter, then the computer through the mechanism in Jones' brain intervenes to assure that he actually chooses to vote for Reagan and does so vote. But if Jones chooses on his own to vote for Reagan, the computer does nothing but continues to monitor—without affecting—the goings-on in Jones' head. Suppose that in the circumstances Jones chooses to vote for Reagan on his own, just as he would have if Black had not inserted the mechanism into his head. In this situation, Jones is morally responsible for choosing to vote for Reagan, even though he could not have done otherwise.

Recently, David Widerker has pointed out that FSCs such as FSC1 beg the question against the libertarian.⁶ Widerker's argument against such FSCs can be briefly summarized as follows: FSCs presuppose the following principle, or something similar to it:

P1: Jones' showing an inclination to choose to vote for Carter is in the given circumstances a causally necessary condition of his choosing to vote for Carter.

If P1 were false, says Widerker, then Jones would be free to choose to vote for Carter without the inclination. With the inclination not being a necessary condition of Jones' choosing to vote for Carter, there would not be anything to tip off Black about how Jones would choose, and his mechanism could not operate in time to cause Jones to choose to vote for Reagan. If Jones' showing an inclination to choose to vote for Carter is in the given circumstances a causally necessary condition of his choosing to vote for Carter, then his not showing an inclination in the circumstances is causally sufficient for his not choosing to vote for Carter. In the given circumstances, however, there are only two alternatives, namely, either choosing to vote for Carter or choosing to vote for Reagan. Therefore, if Jones does not show an inclination to choose to vote for Carter and thus does not choose to vote for Carter, then he must choose to vote for Reagan and the latter choice is causally determined. Thus, Jones' choice to vote for Reagan is not free and, therefore, he is not responsible for making it. In short, a

necessary condition of an FSC's falsifying PAP is that libertarianism be false. But this just begs the question against libertarians.

Though she admits the intuitive force of Widerker's critique, Stump nevertheless continues to deny the truth of PAP. Her latest FSC (which I will call FSC2) begins as follows: Let us assume that what is causally undetermined is Jones' act of will, *W*, in the actual sequence, where *W* is a choice (decision). *W* must be correlated, and may be identical, with a neural sequence of events, *N*,⁷ where *N* consists, say, of events *N*1—*N*L. The occurrence of *N* is necessary and sufficient for the occurrence of *W*,⁸ but none of the members of *N* causes *W*.⁹ Moreover, while the nature of *W* may seem to its subject to be simple and its occurrence instantaneous, the complex neural event process *N* is neither.¹⁰ What the indeterministic nature of *W* implies with respect to *N* is that if *W* is identical with *N*, then the first event (*N*1) in *N* must be causally undetermined.¹¹

Stump claims that while it is essential to a libertarian view that *W* be undetermined, its being undetermined does not guarantee that Jones is free to will otherwise. In continuing to develop FSC2, she claims that Widerker's critique of FSCs is dependent upon figures such as Black who utilize a prior sign (in FSC1, it is an inclination to choose to vote for Carter) of an act of will, *W**, in the alternate sequence. This sign is a necessary causal condition of *W** which causes *W**'s occurrence unless Black, acting on the sign, *preempts* the occurrence of *W** and himself causes *W*. According to Stump, however, FSC's don't require such preemption, but rather they can be formulated using the concept of a prior sign which serves as a basis for *interruption* by Black.¹² In FSC2, *W** is correlated, and perhaps identical, with a neural sequence of events *N** whose first and last members are *N*1* and *N*L* respectively. As is the case with *W*, the occurrence of *N** is necessary and sufficient for the occurrence of *W**, but none of the members of *N** causes *W** and *W** cannot occur until all the members of *N** have occurred. Therefore, Black can prevent *W**, not by being able to prevent *N*1*, but by noticing its occurrence (it functions as an interruptive sign) and then interrupting or preventing the occurrence of subsequent events in *N**. Because the occurrence of *W** requires the occurrence of all of the members of *N**, when events subsequent to *N*1* in *N** are interrupted, *W** doesn't occur. Thus, Black is able to guarantee that Jones will do *W*, if he doesn't do it on his own, because he (Black) is able to prevent (by interrupting events in *N**) the occurrence of *W** and make Jones do *W*. Because the feature to which Widerker objects in FSCs such as FSC1, namely, the occurrence of some prior necessary causal condition of *W** which causes *W** and serves as a preemptive sign for Black, is not present in FSC2, we have a sound FSC which shows the falsity of PAP and the defensibility of a species of libertarianism which does not require PAP's truth.

II

Contrary to what Stump claims, I believe that FSC2 is no more successful than other FSC's in undermining the truth of PAP. To understand why, consider *N*1—*N*L and assume that it occurs at time *T*1—*T*L. Now, when does *W*, the mental act of choosing to vote for Reagan, occur? Stump says

that there is "no mental act in an agent unless and until the correlated sequence of neural firings in that agent's brain is completed."¹³ This might be taken to mean that *W* occurs only at TL. Now, consider the state of the world at T2. Presumably, it causally determines that the sequence N3—NL occur. Does this not imply, then, that the state of the world at T2 causally determines the occurrence of *N*? And, given the correlation of *N* with *W*, does this not imply that the state of the world at T2 causally determines the occurrence of *W*? Hence, contrary to what Stump claims, *W* is causally determined.

One might respond to this argument by maintaining that *W* does not occur only at TL when NL occurs. Rather, *W* occurs and is correlated with the entirety of the temporally extended neural process N1—NL and is completed when NL occurs. If this is the case, however, problems of a different sort arise. To see why, let us turn to the alternate sequence and *W*^{*}, which can be thought of as Jones' choice to vote for Carter. Following Stump's lead,¹⁴ consider the simplest version of FSC2 which is one in which *W*^{*} is identical with *N*^{*} and where *N*^{*} is a process consisting of the series of events N1*—NL*. Because N1* is the beginning of the process, it would seem to be plausible for a libertarian to claim that what Jones would be responsible for (were it to occur) is the mental action of his *beginning to choose* to vote for Carter.¹⁵ Given that beginning to choose to vote for Carter is identical with N1*, Black cannot intervene to prevent Jones from beginning to choose to vote for Carter because on Stump's own account of FSC2, there is no prior sign which can be used by Black to preempt Jones from beginning to choose to vote for Carter. Jones is free to begin to choose to vote otherwise and FSC2 fails to be a counterexample to PAP. In this case, Stump has (as I suggested in "Stumping for Widerker")¹⁶ merely relocated the locus of libertarian freedom (from choice to beginning to choose).

Although Stump does not discuss this response to her argument, it seems clear that she is aware of it. Thus, she explicitly states that there is no mental action or active mental event of beginning to choose to vote: there is no "mental act of engaging in the beginning of a decision."¹⁷ On introspective grounds this seems correct: choices seem to be simple mental actions with no event parts of any kind, and this casts doubt on Stump's thesis that mental acts can be identical with complex neural processes.¹⁸ Given, however, the assumption that choices are identical with temporally extended complex neural processes and do not occur only at TL when NL occurs but from T1—TL, one wonders how it can be the case that choices do not have active mental beginnings which agents make or perform.¹⁹ On this assumption, Stump's denial that such choices have active mental beginnings seems to have no intuitive bite at all. Rather, the denial appears to be counterintuitive and thoroughly *ad hoc* in nature in so far as it is made only in order to undermine PAP.

Given the assumption that *W*^{*} is identical with and occurs for the entirety of the temporally extended neural process *N*^{*}, there are at least three ways to tease out the counterintuitive nature of the denial that N1* is the beginning of a mental action. First, let us assume for the moment that there is no counterfactual intervener such as Black.²⁰ According to Stump, Jones' choice to vote for Reagan in the actual sequence is undetermined. If it is,

then it is plausible to claim that Jones is free to begin to choose to vote for Carter. That is, Jones is free to do or perform N1*, and it is natural to view N1* as a mental act of Jones'. Now, if we reintroduce Black, Stump maintains that he cannot prevent the occurrence of N1*. All he can do is interrupt the neural sequence which is subsequent to N1*. The mere reintroduction of Black, however, is no grounds for thinking that N1* is no longer a mental action of Jones'. While Black has the power to prevent the occurrence of neural events, he does not have the power to change the ontological status of any of them from actions to non-actions. Thus, to simply stipulate that N1* cannot be the beginning of a mental action when its occurrence is unpreventable by Black is thoroughly counterintuitive and *ad hoc*.

The counterintuitive nature of Stump's stipulation that N1* (or any other truncated series of neural events in the alternative or actual sequence) is not an active mental event can be brought out in a second way. This time, consider the actual sequence and the series of neural events N1—NL (Jones' choice to vote for Reagan). In the present scenario, N1 is the initial part of the choice to vote for Reagan and because it is uncaused that choice is uncaused (undetermined). What, however, is the explanation for N1's occurrence? By hypothesis, because it is uncaused, it cannot have a causal explanation. Given that it is supposedly the initial part of the mental action of choosing to vote for Reagan, one might be tempted to say that the explanation for its occurrence is the purpose or reason for which Jones chooses to vote for Reagan. Here, however, matters become confused, if not incoherent. On Stump's account, N1 itself is not active in nature because there is no mental action of beginning to choose to vote for Reagan. Let us assume for the moment that for whatever reason (e.g., Jones dies or he has a brain seizure), the neural sequence which begins with N1 is truncated before it reaches completion. For the sake of simplicity, let us assume it is truncated immediately after N1 occurs. Now, what is the explanation for N1's occurrence? It has no cause, so there is no causal explanation. Moreover, because it is not active in nature, it is not made by Jones for a reason. In short, its occurrence is thoroughly inexplicable and random in nature. Let us now reverse course and assume that the neural sequence is not truncated but is completed. It would now seem that N1 has an explanation, namely, the reason which Jones has for choosing to vote for Reagan, because N1 is now part of a choice of Jones'. Thus, whether N1 has an explanation depends upon what happens *after* it has occurred. If we know anything about the nature of explanations, however, it is that they exist or occur at the same time as, if not prior to, the events which they explain. No event can occur and then acquire an explanation because certain other events took place after its occurrence. Thus, stipulating that N1 is not itself the active beginning of an action has counterintuitive implications with respect to the issue of whether or not it has an explanation. Indeed, the assumption that N1 is not itself active in nature seems to entail consequences for its explanation which are not even coherent.

In defense of Stump's position about the non-active status of N1, I can conceive of the following response: While it is true that N1 is uncaused, it does not follow from this that if the neural sequence subsequent to it were truncated, then N1 would not have an explanation. After all, many materi-

al events which are not (parts of) actions have explanations in terms of purposes. For example, consider the motion of a baseball to home plate. It is presumably not an action, yet it has an explanation in terms of the pitcher's purpose, which is to get the batter out. Notice, however, that in a case such as this, the agent has performed an action which leads to or results in the flight of the ball, and the purposeful explanation of the ball's movement is identical with and, thus, parasitic upon, the explanation of the pitcher's action. In the case of N1, however, there is no earlier action which produces its occurrence because N1 is not caused by anything. And if it were the causal result of an uncaused free mental action,²¹ the locus of libertarian freedom would have been changed²² and the question of the coherence of FSC2 with respect to that action would arise all over again.²³

Third, and last,²⁴ consider the example Stump uses to illustrate how a mental act is correlated with a neural sequence:

When I suddenly recognize my daughter's face across a crowded room, that one mental act of recognition, which to me feels sudden or even instantaneous, is correlated with many neural firings as information from the retina is sent through the optic nerve, relayed through the lateral geniculate nucleus of the thalamus, processed in various parts of the occipital cortex, which take account of figure, motion, orientation in space, and color, and then processed further in cortical association areas. Only when the whole sequence of neural firings is completed, do I have the mental act of recognizing my daughter.²⁵

It seems to me that an act of recognizing my daughter's face across a crowded room is not an action. It is not something I do but something which happens to me. Thus, even if Stump is correct about this mental event requiring the occurrence of a whole sequence of neural events before it occurs, this fact implies, little, if anything, about what occurs with mental actions. A non-active mental happening such as a recognition does not occur until the end of the neural process. A mental action such as a choice, however, originates from me and is active from the outset. Thus, regardless of what happens at the end of the neural process which, by hypothesis, is Jones' choice to vote for Reagan, if the sequence is not active from the beginning (if N1 itself is not active in nature), then there is no mental action of choosing to vote for Reagan when N is completed.

Stump, however, would have us believe the very opposite. According to her, N1 is not an active mental event. Given that it is not, why should we think that N itself of which N1 is the initial part is an action once NL occurs? After all, though N1 is uncaused, it is not active in nature. Add N2 to it, and there is now an undetermined but internally deterministic sequence, but still no mental action. The same is the case with N3, and so on. How can it be the case, however, that adding one more internally determined event, NL, to the end of the chain of events transforms what was not a mental action into something which is? It seems that all we have at this point is Stump's word that this is what happens. The transforming power of NL, however, seems thoroughly magical in nature.²⁶

I conclude that Stump's FSC2 is no more successful than her earlier one

in undermining the truth of PAP. When a counterexample such as FSC2 against an intuitively plausible principle such as PAP requires the truth of so many questionable and seemingly counterintuitive stipulations, one cannot help continuing to assent to the intuitively plausible principle.

III

In addition to her Frankfurt-style argument against PAP, Stump claims that the kind of libertarianism which denies the truth of PAP is more attractive than the kind which endorses PAP because the latter is associated with Cartesian dualism in a way that the former is not and, thereby, that the latter is saddled with undesirable baggage that the former is not. Her reasoning in support of this point seems to be that if a person is made of matter and the falsity of Cartesian dualism is thereby guaranteed, then it is easier to accommodate FSCs which falsify PAP while still remaining a libertarian.²⁷

If we assume for the sake of argument that Stump is correct that the species of libertarianism which affirms the truth of PAP also implies the truth of Cartesian (substance) dualism, is there reason to think that that form of libertarianism is false because of its implications with respect to Cartesian dualism? In closing, I will briefly contend that there is no good reason to believe that the answer to this question is 'Yes'. This is so for the following reasons:

First, Cartesian dualism (as I understand it) claims that a choice is a simple mental event in the sense that it has no proper event parts of any kind which comprise it. This simplicity, however, is not counterintuitive, and Stump herself admits that a choice seems to its agent to be simple in this way.²⁸

Second, a Cartesian can maintain that a simple choice made by a Cartesian soul can be correlated with a neural event because when an agent chooses to perform an action, the choice causes a neural event (in this case, there would be a one-one relation).²⁹ The choice itself, however, cannot be causally determined by any neural event or by anything else because it cannot be determined, period. This does not imply that the choice is unexplained because its agent makes it for a reason which is a teleological explanation of that choice.³⁰

Stump maintains that there is a much stronger connection between mind and brain than Cartesian dualism supposes.³¹ At one point she asserts that given the kinds of bodies and mental natures human beings have, "the correlation between a mental act or state and the firings of neurons must be a one-many relation."³² I have argued in Section II that she has not presented a coherent libertarian account which presupposes such a relation. Thus, Stump has not shown that a libertarian who affirms PAP and a causal connection between the mind and the brain which is Cartesian in nature is inadequate.³³ Until she provides some other argument to support her statements about the inadequacy of Cartesian dualism, her argument that PAP is false because of its association with Cartesian dualism is unpersuasive.³⁴

NOTES

1. Stewart Goetz, "Stumping for Widerker," *Faith and Philosophy* 16 (1999): 83-89.

2. In this paper, I assume a version of PAP which asserts that a person is morally responsible for his choice, only if he could have chosen otherwise.

3. Eleonore Stump, "Dust, Determinism, and Frankfurt: A Reply to Goetz," *Faith and Philosophy* 16 (1999): 413-422.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 415.

5. Harry Frankfurt, "Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility," *Journal of Philosophy* 66 (1969): 829-839.

6. David Widerker, "Libertarian Freedom and the Avoidability of Decisions," *Faith and Philosophy* 12 (1995): 113-118; and "Libertarianism and Frankfurt's Attack on the Principle of Alternative Possibilities," *Philosophical Review* 104 (1995): 247-261.

7. Stump, "Dust, Determinism, and Frankfurt: A Reply to Goetz," pp. 415-416.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 422, endnote 17.

9. It is relevant to note that Stump has changed her view about the relation between N and W, where the latter is the decision (choice) with respect to which Jones is free. (*Ibid.*, p. 419.) In her paper entitled "Libertarian Freedom and the Principle of Alternative Possibilities" (in *Faith, Freedom, and Rationality*, ed. by Jeff Jordan and Daniel Howard-Snyder [Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996], pp. 73-88) to which I responded in "Stumping for Widerker," she claimed that neural events a, b, and c were causal predecessors of W. Now she denies that they are causal predecessors.

10. Stump, "Dust, Determinism, and Frankfurt: A Reply to Goetz," p. 418.

11. *Ibid.*

12. *Ibid.*

13. *Ibid.*, p. 417.

14. *Ibid.*, pp. 418 and 419.

15. David Widerker originally made this point to me. Both of us would acknowledge the mental act of beginning to choose only for the sake of discussion, because we believe that a choice is a simple mental action.

16. "Stumping for Widerker," p. 88.

17. Stump, "Dust, Determinism, and Frankfurt: A Reply to Goetz," p. 419.

18. "[A]lthough a mental act such as a decision may feel, subjectively, as if it is simple . . ." *Ibid.*, p. 418. My only quarrel with Stump about the simplicity of a decision (choice) is that a decision does not *feel* simple. I have pointed out elsewhere ["Libertarian Choice," *Faith and Philosophy* 14 (1997): 197] that a mental action such as a choice has no feel to it. Thus, an agent is just aware of a choice's simplicity.

19. Stump says that "For those who think that mental states are identical with neural states, . . . the correlation between mind and brain has the implication that a mental event is temporally extended throughout the microseconds it takes for all the neurons in the correlated sequence to fire." ("Dust, Determinism, and Frankfurt: A Reply to Goetz," pp. 421-422, endnote 16). But if the mental event is temporally extended and identical with a complex neural process, it is difficult to understand how it does not have an active or actional beginning.

An anonymous referee stated that Stump explicitly denies the assumption of identity between neural events and choices. As I pointed out in the second paragraph of Section II, however, Stump herself makes this assumption of identity for purposes of illustration. In her earlier article ("Libertarian

Freedom and the Principle of Alternative Possibilities," p. 78), which I criticized ("Stumping for Widerker"), she explicitly states that FSCs are 'philosophy-of-mind-neutral' in the sense that they are compatible with both identity and non-identity theories. Thus, on her view, even if choices are not identical with temporally extended complex neural processes, they must be "strongly correlated" ("Dust, Determinism, and Frankfurt: A Reply to Goetz," p. 419) with them. Therefore, under the present alternative where a choice does not occur only at TL when NL occurs, it will still be temporally extended and seem to have an active beginning.

20. The helpfulness of this supposition was suggested to me by David Widerker.

21. If it were the result of a determined action, the actual sequence would involve determinism.

22. See my "Stumping for Widerker," p. 88.

23. Matters do not improve any for Stump's FSC2, if N is not identical with W. This is because N1 is still not an action and its occurrence is either permanently inexplicable if N is truncated before completion, or inexplicable until N is completed and then it somehow becomes explicable in virtue of W's occurring (upon the completion of N) after it.

24. I owe this point to Tom Flint.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 417.

26. I owe this point to Tom Flint.

27. "Does the claim that human beings sometimes act with moral responsibility and that morally responsible acts are indeterministic commit us to accepting PAP? If human beings are made out of matter, then, in my view, the answer is 'no'." Stump, "Dust, Determinism, and Frankfurt: A Reply to Goetz," p. 416.

28. It is worth quoting Stump again on this issue: "[A]lthough a mental act such as a decision may feel, subjectively, as if it is simple . . ." *Ibid.*, p. 418.

29. An anonymous referee stated that it is unclear why a Cartesian must maintain that the causal relation is one-one in nature as opposed to one-many. In the latter case, the choice causes a sequence of neural events, presumably with no event in the sequence causing another event in that sequence in order to avoid problems of causal overdetermination. I do not believe that a Cartesian must maintain a one-one causal relation, but I also do not see how this issue is particularly relevant to the purposes of this paper. If there are insuperable problems for a Cartesian one-one mental-to-neural causal relation, I do not see how matters improve by asserting a one-many mental-to-neural causal relation. If a Cartesian mental event cannot cause one neural event, I do not see how it helps to multiply the number of neural events which it supposedly causes. Thus, for the sake of illustration (again following Stump's lead), I discuss Cartesianism in term of a one-one mental-to-neural causal relation.

30. See my "Libertarian Choice," pp. 195-211.

31. Stump, "Dust, Determinism, and Frankfurt: A Reply to Goetz," p. 415.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 417.

33. I have argued elsewhere ("Dualism, Causation, and Supervenience," *Faith and Philosophy* 11 [1994]: 92-108) that the Cartesian dualist's claim that a substantial soul causally interacts with its physical body is no more problematic than any non-dualist's view of the mental-physical relation.

34. Thanks to Tom Flint, Robert Kane, David Widerker and two anonymous referees for reading earlier drafts of this paper and making numerous helpful suggestions.