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Book Review: Free Will: A Guide For the Perplexed

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BOOK REVIEWS

Free Will: A Guide for the Perplexed, by T. J. Mawson. London: Continuum, 2011. ISBN: 9781441102096. 208 pages. \$19.95 (paperback).

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In *Free Will: A Guide for the Perplexed*, which is written as an introductory text on the topic of human freedom, T. J. Mawson presents a spirited and engaging defense of libertarianism. He opens *Free Will* (2–5) with a thought experiment about a fictitious People’s Republic of Freedom, which is a utopian country where everyone gets along perfectly well. This universal cooperation is made possible by a computer that causally determines each person’s desires, beliefs, thoughts, choices, etc., so that they harmonize in a utopian way. Everyone does what he or she wants, thus fulfilling the compatibilist conception of free will. Mawson believes that a person would rightly be worried about becoming a citizen of the People’s Republic of Freedom because joining would entail the loss of libertarian free will, which is a kind of freedom that Mawson seems to believe we *desire* to have.

Whether we desire it or not, Mawson is convinced that libertarianism captures our commonsense view of ourselves as free agents, as is evidenced by the following five everyday thoughts:

1. Sometimes I could do something other than what I actually do (what Mawson terms the Principle of Alternative Possibilities or Indeterminism).
2. Sometimes I’m morally responsible for what I do.
3. If I couldn’t do other than what I actually do, then I wouldn’t be morally responsible for what I do (what Mawson terms Incompatibilism).
4. If I wasn’t the ultimate author of my actions, then I wouldn’t be morally responsible for them.
5. To the extent that I did not will an action under the morally salient description, I am not fully morally responsible for it (174).



Mawson believes that Indeterminism is a presumption that lies just below the surface of our everyday thinking (14). This presumption is a pre-reflective belief that seldom, if ever, comes to the surface of consciousness (18, 143). Thus, when it is brought to our attention, it is not likely to strike all of us as something familiar and already believed (18). But what brings it to our attention? Mawson seems to believe that it comes to light in thought experiments like imaginatively rewinding time to a certain moment of choice and playing it forward again to see that different choices might be made on different rewindings (15). While Mawson maintains that such a thought experiment could not prove the truth of the presumption of Indeterminism, we nevertheless have no reason to doubt the truth of Indeterminism unless we are thoroughgoing skeptics (15–18).

Because of considerations of space, I pass over everyday thought 2 and briefly summarize Mawson's treatment of everyday thought 3 (Incompatibilism). Because Incompatibilism links everyday thoughts 1 and 2, it has less immediate support from our everyday experiences than they do (33, 51). But we do believe it. Mawson has a lengthy and informative discussion of the Consequence Argument in support of the antecedent of Incompatibilism. His conclusion to this discussion is that the compatibilist is best advised to accept the soundness of the Argument, because the classical compatibilist's (the person who believes in a conditional analysis of "could have done otherwise": "I would have done otherwise, if I had chosen or wanted") questioning of Rule Beta ("If there is nothing anyone can do to change a thing, X, and nothing anyone can do to change the fact that another thing, Y, is a necessary consequence of X, then there is nothing anyone can do to change Y") is less than persuasive, not only because Rule Beta is intuitively plausible but also because in the end the conditional analysis of "could have done otherwise" is itself implausible (86–92).

One of the most interesting parts of *Free Will* is Mawson's discussion of the burden of proof with regard to Incompatibilism (57–64). While Incompatibilism is not an immediate datum of our everyday experience, we do start out holding it as a basic belief. The basicity of this belief is reflected in our immediate reaction to a thought experiment in which scientists discover an Earth-like planet in another universe with creatures that look and behave exactly like us. The scientists also inform us that in the universe of this planet the initial conditions of the Big Bang and the laws of nature causally determine everything that happens thereafter, down to the smallest details. When we reflect about whether the creatures on this planet are morally responsible, we conclude that they are not (34). Our conclusion indicates that we believed Incompatibilism unconsciously all along and the thought experiment merely brings this unconscious belief into consciousness. The thought experiment is not an argument for the belief but exposes its existence. The thought experiment shows the belief in Incompatibilism is basic.

But, asks Mawson, is this belief in Incompatibilism *properly* basic? We can, he says, reason that if Incompatibilism is true, then belief in it is properly basic. After all, the kinds of things that make it true, if it is true, are fundamental metaphysical relationships concerning modality and moral responsibility, and because of the fundamental character of these relationships, we do not hold beliefs about something more fundamental from which we could infer a belief in Incompatibilism. Thus, while it is plausible to contend that Incompatibilism is true because Ultimate Authorship (see below) requires the falsity of determinism and moral responsibility requires Ultimate Authorship, our belief that moral responsibility implies Ultimate Authorship is not knowable with greater certainty than Incompatibilism. Moreover, while the Consequence Argument is an argument for Incompatibilism, it is hard for even proponents of the Consequence Argument to present its premises as more obvious than Incompatibilism itself. Something like the Consequence Argument always retains an element of artificiality about it. Thus, we cannot reasonably hope to base a belief in Incompatibilism on another belief.

If Incompatibilism is true, then belief that it is true is properly basic. Nevertheless, says Mawson, we might have a “scholar’s” interest in seeing if we can come up with a reason for believing Incompatibilism, and the Consequence Argument is such a reason. However, an interest in an argument for Incompatibilism might be heightened beyond this “scholarly” level and developed along the following two lines. First, if one is going to argue that a belief in Incompatibilism is properly basic, then one cannot do so without already believing in Incompatibilism, given that if Incompatibilism is true, then a belief in it is basic and one cannot arrive at a belief in its truth from an argument (because if the argument works and shows Incompatibilism is true, then given its truth, one already has a basic belief in it). Given this predicament, one might worry that one’s belief in Incompatibilism is a matter of good fortune and an argument would remove this worry. It is true that if an argument in support of Incompatibilism works, then one might conclude that one’s worry about its truth was unnecessary in the first place. But one cannot know that until one has looked at the argument. For one who is a philosopher, then, a scholar’s interest in an argument for Incompatibilism can be transformed into a personal interest. Second, an interest in an argument for Incompatibilism comes from a need to defend it against Compatibilist arguments against Incompatibilism. In this context, while, strictly speaking, a belief in Incompatibilism is innocent until proven guilty and this is the case even if every argument on its behalf fails, still, if one has an argument for its truth, then, in addition to rebutting Compatibilist arguments against Incompatibilism, one can also use this argument to bolster Incompatibilism’s truth.

Consider briefly, now, everyday thought 4 (because of limitations of space, I omit a discussion of everyday thought 5), which Mawson says is perhaps the most elusive of the five everyday thought assumptions

about ourselves (37). According to Mawson, moral responsibility requires Ultimate Authorship and Ultimate Authorship requires the truth of Indeterminism (38, 40, 45, 94–95). Mawson defends an agent causationist understanding of Ultimate Authorship: a person performs an action only if he or she agent-causes that action (43, 44, 152, 154), and no action can be causally determined because no agent can be causally determined to agent-cause an action (156). What an agent agent-causes includes his or her choice (decision) (144, 160). Moreover, a person is introspectively directly aware (has a direct experience) of his or her agent-causal “oomph” (158, 188).

As I indicated at the outset, *Free Will* is a spirited and engaging defense of libertarianism. However, in libertarian collegial good spirit, I will close with a few concerns about Mawson’s position. For example, given Mawson’s claim that we have a direct experience of agent-causing a choice, I found his treatment of our belief in the truth of Indeterminism puzzling. On the one hand, Mawson maintains that our belief in indeterminism is “not an immediate ‘datum’ of our everyday experience” (58) but instead “lies immediately underneath the surface of our everyday decision-making and reflection on it” and “is a belief that we seldom—if ever—raise to the surface of consciousness” (18). A “well-grounded belief that we could often do otherwise than whatever it is we end up doing” (115) comes through thought experiments like that mentioned earlier in this review. On the other hand, however, we have Mawson’s claim about our direct awareness of our undetermined agent-causal activity. It seems natural, then, to infer that this awareness of our agent-causal activity would be the solid ground for the belief in indeterminism. Moreover, if we immediately experience indeterministically agent-causing our choices, is it not most plausible to think that our belief in indeterminism is often fully present to consciousness?

As a libertarian, I believe Mawson is right to stress introspective awareness of our actions, especially our choices. However, like Randolph Clarke (see endnote 36, 188), I have no introspective awareness of agent-causing my choices. What I am aware of is choosing for a reason, where a reason is a *purpose* for my acting. And as a libertarian, what concerns me about Mawson’s book is the absence of any sustained discussion of purposeful or teleological explanation and its relationship to agent causation of choices. A consideration of this issue might lead one to conclude that there is no need for agent causation in a libertarian account of agency. After all, even if we do agent-cause our choices, we still have to explain why it is that we do so. According to Mawson, nothing can cause an agent to agent-cause his or her choices. But what, then, explains this agent-causal activity? If it is something real that an agent does, it must have an explanation. And surely the most obvious explanation of it is the reason for which the agent chooses to act. But if the agent’s agent-causing is directly and adequately explained by a reason, why couldn’t an agent’s choosing to act be directly and adequately explained by the same reason, without the mediation of agent causation? Agent causation seems explanatorily redundant. If Mawson

were to respond that ultimate authorship requires that an agent have ultimate and direct control over what he or she does and the causally undetermined nature of agent-causing makes this control possible, then why could it not be the case that the causally undetermined nature of choosing makes this control possible, *without agent causation*? Again, agent causation seems explanatorily dispensable.

Though I have questions about the need for and existence of agent causation, I have no questions about the excellence of *Free Will: A Guide for the Perplexed*. It is a first-rate and thought-provoking treatment of the topic of freedom.

The Image in Mind: Theism, Naturalism, and the Imagination, by Charles Taliaferro and Jil Evans. Continuum, 2011. 213 pages. \$130 (hardcover).

NICHOLAS WOLTERSTORFF, Yale University.

The co-authors of this book, Taliaferro and Evans, are a professional philosopher and a widely exhibited painter, respectively. That leads one to expect something out of the ordinary. And so it is. One doesn't often find a philosopher and a painter collaborating except, now and then, in a very superficial way. The outcome of this collaboration is far from superficial. It includes black and white reproductions of six paintings by Evans.

The authors nicely state the project of their book in the opening paragraph.

This is a book about images and imagination and their role in the greatest philosophical debate in the modern era: the debate over the credibility of theism versus naturalism. What is the theistic image of the world and how does it differ from the naturalist image? What is beautiful or ugly, deep or superficial, extravagant or empty, illuminating or stultifying, about these images? How do these images impede or enlarge our moral and personal lives? Despite the enormity of the naturalism-theism debate, there has been insufficient attention to the aesthetic nature of the images and imagination in these two profound visions of reality. (1)

Upon first reading, one wonders what the last of these five sentences has to do with the four that precede it. What's the connection between a study of the role of images in the theism-naturalism debate and attention to the aesthetic nature of those images? Shortly the connection becomes clear: the authors argue that the aesthetic nature of the images contributes significantly to the role the images play in the debate. The authors take a broad view of the aesthetic dimension of things. It consists, on their view, of "the affective or emotive features of objects and events," that is, of those features to which we respond affectively, whether positively or negatively (38).

By "theism" the authors have in mind what they call *Platonic theism*. "Central to such an outlook is an affirmation of the intrinsic goodness of