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Derk Pereboom, FREE WILL, AGENCY, AND MEANING IN LIFE

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These critical suggestions notwithstanding, both these rich, carefully argued books make significant advances in developing positions their authors had previously sketched, but in ways that—to sceptics—raised as many questions as answers. The gap between Kierkegaardian narrativists and narratosceptics may now be narrower than hitherto. But the process of exploring the disagreement in detail has brought to the surface valuable discussions the content of which I suspect was previously unimagined by contributors on either side of the debate.

Free Will, Agency, and Meaning in Life, by Derk Pereboom. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. 219 pages. $45 (hardcover).

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Free Will, Agency, and Meaning in Life presents a "reworked and expanded version" of the view that Derk Pereboom first developed thirteen years ago in *Living Without Free Will*[1] (4). Pereboom's position may be categorized as free will skepticism, the view that it is unlikely that we have the sort of free will required for "basic desert" moral responsibility. While the book contains one new chapter on the possibility of rational deliberation, most chapters present updated versions of arguments for claims he has previously defended. Pereboom evidently takes seriously objections that have been raised against his reasoning, spending a good portion of the book responding to them, and the newer material is exploratory in tone, giving the impression that he is open to further objections and modifications of his position. (At one point he even suggests that "the resolute incompatibilist" is as unreasonable as the "resolute compatibilist" and "confirmed agnostic" on the issue of the compatibility of free will and determinism, since none is prepared to change her mind in light of further considerations (94).) The book as a whole provides the philosopher of free will with much food for thought, and is admirable in its insistence that our practices of holding each other responsible are not immune to theoretical challenges, but must be considered (and reconsidered) in light of what we know and don't know about the nature and extent of human freedom. Below I raise a few critical questions about the structure and cogency of Pereboom's arguments for free will skepticism, as presented in the first few chapters of his book, before going on to discuss the significance of his "articulation of [the] practical components" of his position, in the later chapters.

[1]New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

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Chapter 1, Pereboom says, is "devoted to arguing for the source view" of free will. But it is not immediately obvious how this argument is supposed to go, or how it is supposed to relate to Pereboom's case for free will skepticism. Instead of being presented with an explanation of what sourcehood amounts to or an argument for why we should think this is the crux of freedom, the reader finds herself plunged headlong into a long and complex discussion of Frankfurt counterexamples to the Principle of Alternative Possibilities, according to which an agent is responsible for her action only if she had the ability to do otherwise. Pereboom says that he is arguing for the source view "by way of" a Frankfurt example (5), but it is unclear why, if it turns out that moral responsibility does not require alternative possibilities, this should give us reason to think that "responsibility is to be explained by the agent's being the actual source of her action in a specific way" rather than by some other feature (9). And it is further unclear why it matters whether the source account is right, since Pereboom makes no explicit reference to sourcehood in his later arguments for free will skepticism. His manipulation argument for the conclusion that determinism is incompatible with free will relies only on the premises that certain kinds of manipulation rule out free will, and that there is no relevant difference between such cases of manipulation and cases in which a person's action is determined by the laws of nature and events beyond her control. And his disappearing agent objection to event-causal libertarianism depends only on the premises that on an event-causal indeterministic account of free will, nothing settles whether a person's decision occurs, and that this is incompatible with the control necessary for freedom. None of these claims obviously depend on a particular (source) account of free will; rather, both simply appeal to our intuitions about cases in which agents are not in control of or responsible for what they do.

Chapters 2, 3, and 4, in which Pereboom argues against event-causal libertarianism, agent-causal libertarianism, and compatibilism, respectively, are more to the point. Pereboom's argument against event-causal libertarianism seems to have changed since *Living Without Free Will.* In that earlier book, his arguments that event-causal indeterminism and determinism both rule out the sort of free will required for moral responsibility relied on the same principle (O): that in order for an agent to be morally responsible for making a decision, "the production of this decision must be something over which the agent has control, and an agent is not morally responsible for the decision if it is produced by a source over which she has no control" (2001, 47). As Pereboom noted, according to (O), an agent cannot be responsible for decisions *determined* to occur by factors beyond her control; but neither can she be responsible for decisions that are *not produced by anything at all*. He then argued that on the event-causal libertarian picture, the production of a free decision is "only a combination of [these] . . . two types of responsibility-undermining factors," since events beyond the agent's control are indeterministic causes of the agent's decision, "while there is nothing that supplements the causal contribution of

these factors" to produce the decision. Thus, he concluded, an agent cannot be responsible for decisions that are merely indeterministically caused by agent-involving events (2001, 47). In *Free Will, Agency, and Meaning in Life*, in contrast, Pereboom argues that event-causal libertarianism "cannot accommodate the requirement that in an indeterministic context the agent or something about the agent *settle* whether the decision in question occurs" (5, emphasis added). This principle may seem more controversial than (O), and is not defended anywhere in the book. While I find the principle intuitive, an event-causal libertarian may complain that it begs the question against her view, since "settle" seems to mean "determine," and the event-causal libertarian denies that an action must be determined in order to be under the agent's control. Thus Pereboom's argument could be strengthened by motivating the key principle underlying his disappearing agent objection to event-causal libertarianism.

In chapter 3, Pereboom takes aim at agent-causal libertarianism, but here his stance is more provisional. He argues that "the difficulty of integrating reasons-explanation, together with issues several critics have raised for our conception of agent-causal control, count against the coherence of this position"—though these concerns "don't go so far as to definitely establish its incoherence" (5–6). In the end, though, Pereboom says that the main problem with agent-causal libertarianism is that "our best empirical theories yield strong reasons to doubt that we are in fact agent causes of the sort that this theory specifies" (50). Pereboom's treatment of the various coherence objections to agent-causal libertarianism—some of which he proposes responses to—is, if not totally novel, still penetrating, and will hopefully occasion further debate on the issues. Of particular note is his discussion of whether agent-causation is compatible with the existence of universal laws of a statistical nature. Pereboom argues here (as he did in *Living Without Free Will*) that it would be a "wild coincidence" if agent causes acted just as these laws would predict. But, he says, we have no evidence that agent-causes are "strongly emergent," in the sense that their activities are *not* wholly governed by probabilistic laws of micro-physics but diverge from what those laws would predict. While I think he is right about the difficulty of squaring universal probabilistic laws with agent-causal libertarianism, if this is his main reason for rejecting agent-causal libertarianism—which he thinks, conceptually, is our only hope of having free will—it would nice to have some discussion of the actual evidence of such universal laws. Though Pereboom discusses Timothy O'Connor's agent-causal view in detail, nowhere does he consider the work of O'Connor and others on the evidence for the existence of strongly emergent phenomena, for instance, in O'Connor and Carradini's recent edited volume *Emergence in Science and Philosophy*.[2] Nor does he discuss the work of such philosophers as E. J. Lowe and Helen

[2]Routledge, 2010.

Steward,[3] who argue that their respective versions of agent-causal libertarianism are both consistent with what science actually tells us about the world, and plausible in their own right.

In chapter 4, Pereboom rehearses his manipulation argument against compatibilism. The purpose of this argument is two-fold: first, to show that the most developed compatibilist accounts of free will do not specify conditions sufficient for the sort of freedom required for moral responsibility, since such accounts are compatible with freedom-undermining sorts of manipulation; and second, to raise a "challenge" for the compatibilist, to point out a "relevant and principled difference" between such cases of freedom-undermining manipulation, on the one hand, and cases in which an agent's action is simply determined by the laws of nature and events beyond her control, on the other (75). The majority of the chapter is spent responding to criticisms of the argument put forth by Alfred Mele, John Fischer, Michael McKenna, and others. Pereboom admits that his argument is properly construed not as a deductively valid argument, but as an inference to the best explanation for why his cases of manipulation are in fact freedom-undermining (his proposed explanation being that the actions are causally determined by factors beyond the agent's control). For this reason, the manipulation argument may be considered inherently weaker than other arguments for incompatibilism, such as the Consequence argument. However, one strength of Pereboom's argument is, as he puts it, that it serves as "a vehicle for making the supposition of causal determination salient in a way that effectively brings it to bear" on judgments of moral responsibility which may have been formed on the assumption that our actions are *not* determined by factors beyond control our (88). This point can also serve as a response to the compatibilist approach that McKenna considers, according to which Pereboom's argument shows that the agents *are* responsible for their actions in the manipulation cases, since there is no relevant difference between such cases and the "standard" deterministic one. Since, Pereboom argues—rightly, to my mind—that the manipulation cases are "formulated so as to correct for inadequacy in the extent to which we take into account hidden deterministic causes in our intuitions about ordinary cases" (that is, to a not-great-enough extent), it would be problematic for the compatibilist to allow her intuition about the "standard" case to influence her intuition about the manipulation case, rather than vice versa (95).

While the first half of the book constitutes Pereboom's case for free will skepticism, the second half focuses on the implications of this view for rational deliberation, reactive attitudes, blame and punishment, and a sense of achievement, among other things. Pereboom's assessment is that, on the whole, not much that we find meaningful or valuable in life would be lost to us if we accepted his skeptical position. On the other

[3]See, for instance, E. J. Lowe's *The Metaphysics of Mind and Action* (Oxford University Press, 2008), and Helen Steward's *A Metaphysics for Freedom* (Oxford University Press, 2012).

hand, he maintains that we would do well without most of the attitudes and practices that depend on the assumption of basic desert responsibility. For instance, while resentment, indignation and retributivist punishment are unjustified on the free will skeptic's account, Pereboom argues that resentment and indignation are not essential to good personal relationships, while retributive punishment is objectionable on grounds independent of the free will debate. And other attitudes and practices which really are essential to good relationships and human flourishing can be retained. For instance, even without the assumption of basic desert, we can still discourage vicious behavior and encourage virtue, protect the innocent while respecting the rights of offenders, and express such attitudes as guilt, repentance, forgiveness, and love (or at least close analogues of these).

While I find much of Pereboom's proposals in these chapters convincing, regarding what meaning and value in our lives could be retained if we embraced free will skepticism, a question raised for me is whether Pereboom has left anything of importance out of his considerations. For instance, one issue he does not address in the book is whether the sort of control he thinks is ruled out by both determinism and event-causal libertarianism is necessary not only for *free* agency, but for *agency* itself. If that were the case, then the skepticism he counsels would have devastating effects on our self-conception, to which agency is fundamental. Furthermore, in chapter 5, before arguing that rational deliberation is compatible with the assumption that one's decision will ultimately be determined by factors beyond one's control (so long as one is not certain what she will do, and believes in the efficacy of her deliberative process), Pereboom notes, "A further issue is raised by the plausible contention that in rational deliberation we presuppose that as agents we are able to settle which decision occurs" (105). This would seem to suggest that, on Pereboom's own view, we might not capable of rational deliberation after all. For on his view, event-causal indeterminism definitely rules out the agent's "settling" what she will do, and event-causal determinism may as well. Pereboom remarks, "I won't weigh in on this debate, because given my aims, I don't need to. Deterministic agent-causal theory of action is available to the free will skeptic, and so there is a skeptic-friendly position, which could in fact be true, on which an agent's power to settle which decision occurs is secure enough" (105). But it is unclear if Pereboom's objections to the coherence and/or empirical plausibility of agent-causal libertarianism would apply also to a deterministic agent-causal theory, and if so, whether such a position "could in fact be true." If it couldn't, then rational deliberation might be out the window, and Pereboom's free will skepticism would again turn out to have more dire consequences for our self-conception as rationally deliberative agents (not to mention for our practice of rational deliberation) than he seems ready to acknowledge.

Despite these omissions in Pereboom's treatment of the practical consequences of free will skepticism, his extensive exploration of the issues is

impressive. Pereboom forcefully argues that anyone who is even moderately moved by his arguments to doubt the existence of free will must take seriously the implications of such skepticism for our practices of blame and punishment, since such practices inflict serious harm on their targets, and "justification for harm must meet a high epistemic standard" (158). His insistent reminder that our debates about the nature and extent of human freedom in the metaphysics classroom have implications for everything from public policy to personal relationships—and that these implications must be faced squarely by free will theorists—is to be applauded.

Anselm's Other Argument, by A. D. Smith. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014. 256 pages. $49.95 (hardback).

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A. D. Smith takes a winding and uneven route to what I find an exciting and plausible conclusion: Whether or not Anselm intended it, there is a valid and persuasive argument for the existence of God to be found—or at least suggested—in Anselm's *Replies*, that is, in his responses to Gaunilo's criticisms of the *Proslogion II* argument. On the way to this conclusion, Smith argues that, contrary to the views of some, Anselm does not present a Modal Ontological Argument in *Proslogion III*, or indeed anywhere else. In order to make his case against any modal argument and in favor of the "other" argument of the title, Smith sets out what he takes to be Anselm's position on the nature of "conceivability" and "possibility." The book, then, is an attempt both to present Anselm's own thinking on some issues which are key to certain sorts of proofs for the existence of God, and to develop and defend an argument inspired by Anselm's *Replies*.

Smith's discussion of Anselm's understanding of conceivability and possibility is not as thorough as it might be, and it contains some unnecessary digressions. One such digression offers a brief overview of Anselm's position on the question of whether or not there is a best world, such that a perfectly good God "must" actualize it. The issue comes up in connection with Anselm's approach to counterfactuals, but the discussion, though several pages long, is not substantive enough to settle the question in terms of interpreting Anselm, does not contribute to the perennial philosophical debate, and does not seem to have much bearing on Anselm's approach to counterfactuals. One can make sense of counterfactuals whether or not one holds that ours is the only world a perfect God could actualize.

Regarding the rather "quick" interpretation of Anselm on conceivability and possibility, Smith does offer some historical perspective, but it is in the

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