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Rolling Back the Luck Problem for Libertarianism

Zac Cogley

Northern Michigan University

Biography

Zac Cogley is Associate Professor of Philosophy at Northern Michigan University. His research interests include moral responsibility, emotion, and other related concepts. His publications include pieces on trust, the blaming emotions, the nature of angry virtue and vice, and the grounds for deserving resentment.

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Rolling Back the Luck Problem for Libertarianism

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Abstract

I here sketch a reply to Peter van Inwagen's Rollback Argument, which suggests that libertarian accounts of free agency are beset by problems involving luck. Van Inwagen imagines an indeterministic agent whose universe is repeatedly 'rolled back' by God to the time of her choice. Since the agent's choice is indeterministic, her choices are sometimes different in the imaginary rollback scenarios. I show that although this is true, this need not impair her control over what she does. I develop an account of when and why the fact that an agent would choose differently impairs control, which provides a novel response to the Rollback Argument.

Keywords

Libertarianism, Luck, Peter van Inwagen, free will, Robert Kane

1. Introduction

Libertarians believe that free-will and moral responsibility are incompatible with determinism. They hold that only causal indeterminism (of the relevant sort) ensures that when an agent acts she chooses between a plurality of options so that, whatever she chooses to do, she was free to choose something else. On the libertarian view, this is required in order for an agent to be morally responsible for her actions. One of the most pressing objections to contemporary libertarian accounts of free-will is luck. Peter van Inwagen's Rollback Argument (2000) has recently gained favor as a way of highlighting the luck problem for libertarians. In this paper, I sketch a response to the Rollback Argument on behalf of libertarians. I argue that the phenomenon of rollback need not be problematic for libertarians. Whether an agent's freedom and control is seen as impaired when we consider rollback scenarios depends on the underlying core agential features of a person. Bringing these agential features to the fore demonstrates that rather than presenting a threat to libertarianism, rollback may actually be a helpful tool for libertarians in further developing theories of morally responsible action.

2. A Libertarian Sketch

According to libertarianism, we are at least sometimes able to make choices that are free and for which we are morally responsible.¹ Libertarians see this ability as grounded in the fact that at least some of our choices are not determined. I will assume an event-causal libertarian view, which explains a person's making a choice by appealing to certain agent-involving mental events that cause that choice.² Call the relevant mental events that cause a person's choices her *mental set*. A person's mental set is the collection of beliefs, desires, preferences, intentions, judgments, resolutions, and so on that plays a relevant role in making it the case that she makes a particular choice. If a choice were *determined* that would mean, given a person's mental set at the moment she was choosing, there would be only one choice she could make. So, for example, if my choice to work on this paper instead of go for a run were determined, it would only be possible for me to choose to work on the paper. Given my mental set at the time of my choice, I would not and could not choose to go for a run.

An animating idea of libertarianism, as I understand it, is that if I could only choose to work on the paper, I would seem to lack sufficient control over my choice for it to be truly free. If it were not truly free, I would not be morally responsible for making it. For a libertarian, an agent has sufficient control to be free and morally responsible only when it is true that, given her mental set, she really could choose in more than one way. So in the case above, for me to be morally responsible for choosing to work on the paper it would also have to have been possible for me to choose to go for a run (or choose something else, instead). Thus, my *choice* must not be determined by my mental set in order for it to be free and for me to be morally responsible for it.³

Take an example: suppose Anne, a businesswoman in a hurry on the way to an important meeting, must decide whether to intervene in an assault (Kane 2007, 26). Anne's presence at the meeting could aid her career, but she is also sensitive to the help

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1. Some philosophers allow for the separation of freedom and moral responsibility. I don't in this paper. I here treat free choice as the control condition on being morally responsible.
 2. Libertarianism comes in many 'flavors'; important types include noncausal, event-causal, deliberative, and agent-causal accounts. While I focus on an event-causal picture, I don't imply that invoking other kinds of libertarianism can't help with the luck problem. Perhaps they can; I am merely concentrating on the event-causal picture here. For more on the distinctions between libertarian views and the plausibility of libertarian accounts, see (Clarke 2003).
 3. While many define determinism as the claim that given the past and given the laws there is only one possible future, what matters most is that given the person's past mental set and the laws there is only one possible future choice.

needed by the assault victim. If Anne's choice is not casually determined by her mental set, then until she makes the decision there is at least some chance she will choose either to intervene or choose to continue on to the meeting. This means that there are possible worlds just like the actual one where *everything*—including her mental set—is the same right up until the point of the decision, but Anne chooses to go on to the meeting rather than help the assault victim. And there are possible worlds just like the actual one where everything is the same right up until her decision, but Anne chooses to intervene in the assault rather than go to the meeting.

Robert Kane terms this ability to choose either option *plural voluntary control*. According to Kane,

To have such control over a set of options at a given time is to be able to *bring about* any of the options (to go more-than-one-way) *at will or voluntarily* at the time. That is to say, it is to be able to do *whatever you will* (or most want) to do among a set of options, *whenever you will to do it*, for the reasons you will to do it, and in such manner that neither your doing it nor willing to do it was coerced or compelled. (Kane 1996, 111)

When an agent has such control over her action it is free because she and she alone controls it in the sense that whatever choice she makes is one willed by her. Either way Anne chooses, her choice will be made for reasons (Kane 2007, 29). Let us suppose, then, that Anne in fact chooses to stop and intervene in the assault. She aids the victim in driving off the attacker. Her choice is grounded in her sympathy to the victim's plight and her desire to not let the attacker successfully harm an innocent person. Since her stopping to help is free, libertarians believe she is morally responsible for the choice.

3. Luck

The luck problem results from the fact that Anne's choice to stop the assault—even if well-intentioned—may appear to be a matter of luck. Why? Well, consider that even though Anne stopped to help we know that she was not determined to do so. Importantly, her mental set did not determine that she would stop to aid the victim. It was possible that, given her mental set and the laws of nature, she would have chosen to continue on to her business meeting. It is possible Anne would have selfishly passed by the assault victim.

Christopher Franklin presents a schematic account of the problem that luck presents for libertarianism (Franklin 2011, 201):

- (i) If an action is undetermined, then it is a matter of luck.
- (ii) If an action is a matter of luck, then it is not free.

If this argument is successful, it establishes that undetermined actions are not free and that agents cannot be morally responsible for performing them. Even worse, it suggests that libertarianism is incoherent. It implies that undetermined actions are free *and* that undetermined actions are also not free! But the argument can be challenged—it all depends on what we take luck to involve. For example, suppose we say that an outcome, action, or choice is ‘lucky’ just in case it is determined at least in part by *something other than an agent*. For example, my hitting a hole in one was lucky because after I hit the golf ball the wind blew in just the right way so that the ball went into the cup. If the wind hadn’t blown in the way it did, I wouldn’t have made the shot.

However, if we examine Anne’s choice using *this* account of luck, we can see that Anne’s choice isn’t lucky. Anne’s choice to go to the meeting or help the assault victim is undetermined. But the fact that it is undetermined does not imply that it is determined by something other than Anne. Since only Anne’s mental set bears on the choice she will make, no other factors play a causal role in bringing about what she will choose. On this account of luck, then, it is false to say that her choice is lucky. So how the putative links are developed between indeterminism, luck, and freedom (or its absence) matters for evaluating whether or not luck is a threat to libertarians.

4. The Rollback Argument

4.1 The Initial Argument

Peter van Inwagen (2000) uses what has become known as the ‘Rollback Argument’ to develop the luck problem for libertarians.⁴ Van Inwagen asks us to imagine that Anne’s universe is ‘rewound’ by God to right before she make her choice. Suppose God then

4. Van Inwagen presents the Rollback Argument as a way of developing what he terms the *Mind* argument. As van Inwagen explicates it, the *Mind* argument develops the idea that libertarian choices are not free because they are “mere matters of chance” and the Rollback Argument is a way of developing this intuitive idea (van Inwagen 2000). But as Franklin (2012) points out, van Inwagen earlier (1983) presented the *Mind* argument as having three separate instances; van Inwagen does not say which the Rollback Argument is supposed to develop or whether it is somehow supposed to develop the overall idea of all three. Franklin then wants to separate luck arguments and the *Mind* argument; treating the Rollback Argument as an instance of the first. I here do the same, reading van Inwagen’s appeal to “mere matters of chance” as developing the concern regarding luck.

allows things to play out again. And then again, and again. Suppose that God rewinds the universe and causes it to replay 726 times. In about half of the replays, Anne chooses to intervene while in the other half she chooses punctual attendance at the meeting. After we observe the replays, van Inwagen comments:

...we shall be faced with the inescapable impression that what happens in the seven-hundred-and-twenty-seventh replay will be due simply to chance...[W]hat other conclusion can we accept about the seven-hundred-and-twenty-seventh replay (which is about to commence) than this: each of the two possible outcomes of this replay has an objective, 'ground-floor' probability of 0.5—and there's nothing more to be said? And this, surely, means that, in the strictest sense imaginable, the outcome of the replay will be a matter of chance. (2000, 15)

He continues,

If [Anne] was faced with [two options], and it was a mere matter of chance which of these things she did, how can we say that—and this is essential to the act's being free—she was *able* to [stop and help] and *able* to [go to the meeting]? How could anyone be able to determine the outcome of a process whose outcome is a matter of objective, ground-floor chance? (2000, 15–16 italics original)

The implied answer is clear: no one is able to determine the outcomes of such a process. I thus interpret van Inwagen as here providing an argument schema similar to the 'luck' schema presented by Franklin above. This argument runs

- (i) If an action is undetermined, then it is a *mere matter of chance*.
- (ii) If an action is a *mere matter of chance*, then it is not free.

Thus, I take van Inwagen to be offering an account of luck in terms of mere chance and then claiming that rollback scenarios show that rolled-back choices are matters of mere chance and thus not free. Importantly, while the claim that Anne's choice is a mere matter of chance gets significant intuitive support from consideration of the rollback scenarios, the key point is that her choice is a mere matter of chance even on the very first scenario. That is, van Inwagen presents the rollbacks as a way of intuitively showing that when Anne is faced with the choice in the *actual* world, it is a mere matter of chance that she chooses to stop and help the assault victim.

4.2 Franklin's responses

Christopher Franklin has recently responded to the Rollback Argument on behalf of libertarians. One strand of reply invokes the following account of abilities:

An agent S has the ability to Φ at t in W only if there is a set of possible worlds w , that is such that, all the worlds in this set have the same laws of nature as W , S 's intrinsic properties are sufficiently similar to her intrinsic properties in W , and S Φ -s. (Franklin 2011, 218)

This account of abilities is plausible and I additionally grant it to Franklin for the sake of argument. The idea is that if we understand what it is for an agent to have an ability, we will see that Anne has both the ability to stop and help and also the ability to go to the meeting. Thus, Franklin's account of abilities allows him to answer van Inwagen's first question in the second block quote above: "how can we say that—and this is essential to the act's being free—she was *able* to [stop and help] and *able* to [go to the meeting]?" We can say that she is able to stop and help because there are many worlds with the same laws of nature as the actual world, Anne's intrinsic properties in those worlds are sufficiently similar to her properties in the actual world, and Anne stops to help. And we can say that Anne has the ability to go to the meeting for the same reasons.

With this strand of argument, then, Franklin presents an account of abilities that grounds the claim that Anne has both the ability to help and the ability to go to the meeting. He admits that it is still undetermined that Anne *exercises* her ability to stop and intervene in the assault (2011, 218). But he believes that "we are left with little to no reason for thinking that indeterminism introduces a kind of luck or chance that is incompatible with an agent...being free and morally responsible" (2011, 218–219).

Franklin has met van Inwagen's initial challenge. Recall that part of van Inwagen's challenge was to answer the question "how can we say that—and this is essential to the act's being free—she was *able* to [stop and help] and *able* to [go to the meeting]?" We should agree that Franklin's account of abilities shows that Anne is able to do both. Adding further support for this claim, Franklin argues (2012) that rollback scenarios are just a way of demonstrating indeterminism, and thus don't present a significant challenge to libertarianism.⁵ His idea is that the rollback scenarios simply show what it would

5. Franklin also notes that van Inwagen's initial description of the rollback thought experiment is metaphysically impossible. That is because, as van Inwagen describes, God continually rolls back time in the same possible world, but we are asked to imagine that sometimes Anne makes different decisions in the future of that world. But Anne cannot make different decisions regarding the same choice at the same time period in the same world, as "a possible world has all its components essentially: a possible

mean for Anne's choice not to be determined and thus only "describe libertarianism in a rather colorful way. But one cannot raise the cost of libertarianism by simply describing it" (2012, 409). However, it is not clear that Franklin has fully vindicated libertarianism against the Rollback Argument.

4.3 Schlosser's reply

While Franklin is able to demonstrate that Anne possesses the dual abilities in question, the success of his ultimate reply to the luck problem has been questioned by recent work. Let us grant that Anne has both the ability to help and the ability not to help. Does that show that Anne's choice—the choice she makes in the actual world—is truly free? The worry about freedom is a worry about control. If Anne stops and helps, is she in sufficient control of her choice? To answer this question in the affirmative it may not be enough to show that whichever way Anne chooses she will have chosen for reasons and that she was not coerced or compelled—as alluded by Kane when discussing plural voluntary control. Markus Schlosser has recently argued that answering 'yes' to the question requires that Anne have the power to choose one alternative rather than another. On Schlosser's view, the real challenge the Rollback Argument presents to libertarianism is to give an account of how Anne has control sufficient to exercise her dual ability in one way rather than another. While she can either stop and help or go to the meeting, she cannot "exercise either one of the two abilities *such that* she can *select* which alternative to pursue" (Schlosser 2014, 381 emphasis original).

Seeing this might appear to show that, contra Franklin's assertions, the Rollback Argument does raise the cost of libertarianism. And it does that even though there is a sense in which the thought experiment simply shows a vivid demonstration of what indeterminacy between a person's mental set and her choice involves. If her choice is not determined then sometimes she could, and would, choose the other way rather than the way she actually does choose. That much is, and should not be, in dispute. The real threat of the Rollback thought experiment to libertarianism, however, concerns what it implies about *Anne's original choice*. It shows that while she has the ability to choose either way

world could not have been different" (Franklin 2012, 407). However, this is not a serious barrier to consideration of the rollback idea, because as Franklin notes, we can imagine instead God rolling back time and letting Anne decide again. Any decision that is different will thus take place in a *different possible world*. Technically, then, rollback scenarios rollback time to a possible world that has more than one world as direct 'descendant.' As time rolls forward the world 'branches' into at least two sets of worlds, one set where Anne stops and helps and the other where she continues on to the meeting.

she does not have sufficient control over the original choice itself. If it is simply a matter of objective chance that she chooses to stop and help rather than continue on to the meeting, she appears as much in control of her decision as she would have been if the way she chose were simply determined by a coin flip. Since Anne would not be in control when the coin-flip selects the option of stopping and helping, why think that she is in control when her act is the result only of her own mental set? Franklin has not given us an answer to this question, which I think is the real question forced on libertarians by the Rollback Argument.⁶

5. A Way Forward

5.1 Suggestive Return to Kane and van Inwagen

Kane develops the notion of plural voluntary control in conjunction with his account of *self-forming actions* (SFAs). I am worried that Kane's focus on the importance of *self-forming actions* (SFAs) may have led others astray in thinking about libertarian models of control. According to Kane,

SFAs occur at those difficult times of life when we are torn between competing visions of what we should do or become. Perhaps we are torn between doing the moral thing or acting from ambition, or between powerful present desires and long-term goals, or we are faced with difficult tasks for which we have aversions. In all such cases, we are faced with competing motivations and have to make an effort to

6. John Fischer has recently responded to the Rollback Argument in a way that might appear to address this worry (2012; forthcoming). He suggests we imagine that someone is morally responsible for her choice to raise her hand. Hold fixed the supposition that she is morally responsible for doing so, then imagine that we add to the description of her case a machine that 50% of the time will do nothing, but 50% of the time will stimulate her brain to cause her to refrain from choosing to raise her hand. Because the operation of the machine is random, we can run the rollback scenarios and see that 50% of the time the person raises her hand, while 50% of the time she does not. But, Fischer urges, if we supposed the person was morally responsible for raising her hand in the first place, we should still consider her morally responsible once we add the machine even though the machine makes it indeterminate that she will raise her hand.

I worry that Fischer's strategy does not fully address the argument because when the machine operates it *preempts* the person's choice: 50% of the time she chooses to raise her hand while 50% of the time the machine directly stimulates her brain to prevent her from choosing. So while the objective probabilities are the same as in Anne's case, there is a crucial difference from van Inwagen's rollback scenarios. In the rollback scenarios the worry about control emerges because it is clearly the agent, herself, who chooses differently.

overcome temptation to do something else we also strongly want.
(2007, 26)

Kane's idea is that libertarians do not need to require indeterminacy between a person's mental set and her choices at all times. They only need sufficient indeterminacy in the right place to ground an agent's ultimate responsibility for what she is like. Essentially, Kane's thought is that if an agent can be found ultimately responsible for her mental set then she will also be responsible for any choices that flow from that set.

SFAs are what Kane uses to ground that ultimate responsibility. As he notes, "In SFAs, the agent's will is divided and the agent has strong reasons or motives for making either choice" (2007, 29). In these cases, when our motives and reasons are balanced, "we *make* one set of competing reasons or motives prevail over the others then and there *by deciding*" (2007, 26–27). By making one set of reasons prevail over the others, we make ourselves; we impact the makeup of our mental set. And then it is by virtue of our responsibility for our mental set that we are responsible for all other choices. But SFAs only concern cases where our motives are balanced. For Kane, then, it is key that in SFAs the indeterminacy of a person's actions is reflective of a balancing of motives.

Consider, now, van Inwagen's initial presentation of the idea of rolling back, or replaying, an agent's choice. When presenting the Rollback Argument he notes that

We may, for example, observe that, after a fairly large number of replays, Alice lies in thirty percent of the replays and tells the truth in seventy percent of them—and that the figures 'thirty percent' and 'seventy percent' become more and more accurate as the number of replays increases. (2000, 14)

But he then goes on to imagine the "simplest case": the case where each choice occurs 50% of the time. Why? Well, one thought is that if the simplest case is sufficient to make the point there is no need to consider a more complex case. But another is that given the importance of Kane's SFAs in the literature, the simplest case is the most important one. Whatever the reasons, my concern is that a focus by libertarians and their critics on the simple case has made libertarians less able to respond to worries about luck. We don't yet have an account of how an agent can exhibit significant control if, in rollback scenarios, she acts differently 50% of the time. My strategy is to suggest that libertarians need to get further inside the heads of the relevant agents to respond to the worry about luck presented by the Rollback Argument. We need to say more about the mental sets of the

agents in question in order to more fully understand how they can be in control over their choices.

5.2 Anne and Jan

Let's return to Anne; I want to now reply to Schlosser's concern that Anne lacks sufficient control. I admit that Anne, herself, is not able to select exactly which alternative to pursue in the actual world. (Acknowledging this is just what Franklin has referred to as 'describing libertarianism.')

But I think there is room for libertarians to argue that Anne possesses as much freedom and control over what she does as is possible, so long as the evaluative elements of her mental set are equally inclining her toward either choice. This last fact is crucially important.

Consider, by contrast, Jan instead of Anne. Jan is also a successful businesswoman on the way to an important meeting. Like Anne, Jan happens upon someone being assaulted. She must decide whether to intervene and help the victim of the assault or continue on to her meeting. And like Anne, Jan's choice is to stop and intervene. Finally, like Anne, the link between Jan's mental set and her choice is indeterministic. Given her mental set at the time of her choice, it is not ensured that she will choose to stop and help.

Just like Anne, God 'rolls back' Jan's choice so we can see how she would choose in alternative scenarios. And again like Anne, we discover that Jan's choices are roughly split between the two alternatives as the scenarios unfold. The crucial difference, however, is that the evaluative elements of Jan's mental set vastly favor stopping and helping the assault victim over going to the meeting. But Jan is weak-willed, so her evaluation is not reflected in her pattern of choice, which obeys the simple case's 50%-50% split.

What do I mean by the evaluative elements of Jan's mental set? Well, suppose that Jan judges that it is best for her to stop and help the assault victim. Perhaps it *also* turns out that she has resolved in the past to help people in need even if it means forgoing important benefits to herself.⁷ (Maybe Jan worries that she is too quick to favor her own interests over the needs of others when the temptation arises. Her resolution reflects her commitment to change.) But in spite of these facts, Jan's actions in the rollback scenarios often also reflect her desire for the potential promotion she could secure via attendance

7. In a recent paper (2012), Joshua May and Richard Holton argue that the ordinary concept of weakness of will is a prototype, or cluster, concept that involves both acting contrary to best judgment and also too quickly revising a previously-made resolution. I try here here to include both elements in Jan's mental set. For more on resolutions, see (Holton 1999).

at the meeting. But this desire for progress up the corporate ladder is one that she repudiates, has resolved not to act on, and works actively to extinguish—suppose Jan is not proud of her attraction to status and the increased salary isn't worth the extra responsibility. Regardless of the particular explanation(s), we find Jan's pattern of action displayed in the rollback scenarios to not be well predicted by the evaluative elements of her mental set.⁸ Jan, I submit, is thus significantly out of control compared to Anne.

Anne's comparative control is explained by the fact that Anne is genuinely torn about what to do in the situation. She takes herself to have about equal reason to go to the meeting as to stop and help the victim of the assault. Perhaps she has also resolved to try to balance her career ambitions with her desire to help others from time to time. Thus, though Anne only helps the victim 50% of the time in the rollback scenarios, she does not display weakness of will in doing so. I take it that means Anne also does not display weakness of will in the *actual* scenario. When Anne decides to stop and help the victim, she does so for reasons she has and she endorses. They are not reasons she finds to be particularly overriding, of course. Anne would not be shocked at herself if in a similar future scenario she did not stop and help. Additionally, Anne is not coerced or compelled to stop and help. Anne has all the control over her act an agent can be expected to have.

In contrast, Jan would be horrified to discover about herself that she only helps the assault victim 50% of the time in rollback scenarios. She wholeheartedly judges that her minor status ambitions should take a backseat to helping others in sufficient need. Further, she has resolved to never fail to help others even if there is an enticing career prospect in play. Given these facts, knowing that she only stopped to help 50% of the time would shock her. (Or, at least, it would shock her if she also thinks of herself as a mostly continent person.) And these facts about Jan should bother us, too. We see exhibited in Jan a defect of agency—of agential *control*—which is not present in Anne.

Compare yet another agent, Stan, to both Anne and Jan. Stan is strongly committed to helping the assault victim in the actual scenario, just like Jan. He judges that it is clearly best for him to help and he has also resolved to always help in scenarios like this. When we rollback Stan's universe, however, we find that Stan chooses to help the assault victim 978 times, while he hurries on to the meeting only 22 times. Stan's choice is still not determined by the interaction of his prior mental set and the world. After all, he can

8. If Jan's resolution coupled with her judgments about what is best for her do not pick out the relevant elements of Jan's mental set that 'truly stand for her,' I invite the reader to substitute her own favored notions instead. That is, imagine whatever needs to be true for Jan to be strongly committed to acting one way, but at the same time, it is consistent that Jan often acts in the contrary manner.

and sometimes does choose to attend the meting over helping the assault victim. But since Stan chooses to help the assault victim 97% of the time, libertarians can hold—correctly—that Stan exercises significantly more control over his choice than Jan does.

Suppose that the right thing to do is to stop and help the victim of the assault. If so, then not only does Stan exercise more control over his choice to stop and help, his decision to stop and help is more praiseworthy than Anne's. The fact that he chooses to stop and help 97% of the time demonstrates both the strength of his moral concern for people unjustly victimized by others and his continence in choosing in such contexts. In contrast, neither Anne's nor Jan's choice-pattern reflects particularly well upon her. The important thing, however, is that it is for very different reasons. Anne's choice pattern reflects that she is not particularly concerned for those in need (at least, when there are payoffs for her), while Jan's reflects that she has significant weakness of will (at least, in this context).

Libertarians require an indeterministic link between an agent's mental set and her choices (at least, at certain key points in the life of an agent). What I am suggesting is that while the causal relation between an agent's mental set and her choices must be indeterministic, there is no reason that the indeterministic relation is always one where rollback scenarios show the agent choosing either option 50% of the time. What is more important, I urge, is the degree of fit between the outputs of the evaluative elements of an agent's mental set and her overall patterns of action. When the agent really is torn between two choices, her patterns of action in rollback scenarios should reflect that. If she is not on the fence, she should choose one option significantly more often when time is rolled back. My thought, then, is that libertarians might *embrace* rollback scenarios as potentially revealing important facts about an agent that impair agential control. Sometimes what rollback demonstrates weakens control, namely when the percentage of times the agent acts in a particular way does not reflect the degree to which she is committed to that option. However, sometimes it does not. To adequately respond to the Rollback Argument, then, libertarians need to talk more about agent's commitments to the various courses of action they consider.

5.3 Degrees of Control

I have argued that rollback scenarios need not harm libertarians. If we are more specific about the mental sets of the agents we consider, libertarians can use rollback scenarios to help explicate an agent's degrees of control and the praise or blameworthiness of her choices. My idea here relates libertarians to a somewhat unlikely ally. John

Martin Fischer and Mark Ravizza (1998) develop a similar account for *compatibilists*. On their model, an agent's control is explicated—roughly speaking—by appealing to counterfactuals about how the agential mechanism of a person's choice would perform in relevantly similar possible worlds. Thus, rollback scenarios are the libertarian counterpart to Fischer and Ravizza's compatibilist idea. Rollback scenarios are counterfactuals about how an agent would act in the *same world*, rather than relevantly-similar worlds.⁹

So rollback scenarios can do two helpful things for libertarians. First, they can show the degree of control an agent exercises over her action. To determine this, we ask in the rollback scenarios whether there is an appropriate mesh between the percentage of the time the agent chooses one option and the strength of her evaluative commitment to it. Thus, Anne and Stan exhibit more control than Jan, because their choices in the rollback scenarios comport with their evaluation of the desirability of the options. Jan's choices, by contrast, do not fully reflect where she stands on the issue confronting her.

Second, rollback scenarios can help to show the degree of praise and blameworthiness an agent bears for her action. Consider, then, the relative degree of praiseworthiness each agent—Anne, Jan, and Stan—bears for the act of deciding to stop and intervene in the assault. (Remember, in the actual world, all three stop and help.) Sometimes Anne helps, sometimes Jan helps, and sometimes Stan helps. However, in the rollback scenarios Anne and Jan each helps about 50% of the time, while Stan helps 97% of the time. Thus, Stan's choice to help is more praiseworthy as it is more reflective of both a substantial resolution to aid when needed and his judgment that helping is the best thing for him to do in the situation. Assuming that stopping to help is the right thing to do, Anne's choice to help is not nearly as praiseworthy, because she is only moderately in favor of helping in such scenarios. Similarly, Jan's choice is not significantly praiseworthy, but for a different reason: her lack of control. We have reason to withhold praise either when a person is not strongly committed to what is morally right or when she lacks the ability to exhibit her commitment to what is right in action. Both are moral defects, though of very different kinds.¹⁰

9. Potentially, this could provide a small advantage for libertarian accounts of free agency, as libertarians do not then need to invoke or define which worlds are the relevant ones.

10. We might also have reasons to praise a weak-willed person: i.e. reasons to praise someone who is not praiseworthy. Perhaps, for example, praising the weak-willed person will encourage her to be more continent. Such considerations would take us far afield of the current topic, which is when people really deserve praise and blame for their choices such that they are morally responsible for them. For more, see (Cogley 2013).

At this point, an objector might urge that there is nothing inherently *libertarian* about my response to the Rollback Argument. After all, consider an agent who is *totally* in favor of one of the options she confronts. Suppose Anne happens on a person in need and at the same time has a very strange thought that she could instead go get ice cream. Puzzled, she rejects this thought: she's all in for helping in this scenario. Thus, perfect continence and control for Anne in this case would be exhibited if in rollback scenarios she always chooses just that option; 100% of the time she chooses to help the person in need. But this would just be for Anne's action to be determined by her mental set: anathema to a libertarian.

Certainly, on the account I am developing, a libertarian must require an indeterministic link between a person's mental set and her choice. So the libertarian must balk at attributing full control when rollbacks show a person doing the same action 100% of the time. I do not have space to defend the claim that actually having leeway between options enhances a person's control over her choices. That is a fundamental libertarian commitment which I am simply assuming here. What I've tried to do is show that a failure to make the same choice 100% of the time in rollback scenarios is very much compatible with someone exhibiting significant control over what she does. I've thus provided a defense for libertarians against the rollback version of the luck problem, which is a problem about indeterministic agents having diminished control over their choices. Whether indeterministic agents have enhanced control over their choices compared to fully determined agents is another topic.

6. Conclusion

I've here sketched an account of how libertarians can respond to worries about luck presented by rollback scenarios. My thought is that discovering that in rollback scenarios someone would act differently than she actually does 50% of the time need not make us think the agent lacks substantial control over what she does. Libertarians can, and should, insist that control is fundamentally about the core evaluative elements of a person's mental set being translated into choice. If we are clear about the nature of a person's mental set and that she really is torn between the options, then finding out that she chooses differently 50% of the time just is to see her continence demonstrated via a divine mechanism.

Even if an agent's choice is undetermined, the choice may still be free and under her control if affected by the strength of the agent's commitment to the various courses of action. Counterfactual rollback scenarios that show how the agent could have acted if

the world were rewound to the exact state and time of her choice might then be a way of exhibiting the agents commitment and continence. The fact that an agent would have acted differently in such scenarios is thus consistent with her having control over her action sufficient for her to be free and morally responsible for it.

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