CHAPTER 18

Free Will and the Perspectival Asymmetry

A rock rolls downhill because gravity pulls it. It strikes another rock and drops into a river. The outcome at each stage is fixed by pushes and pulls: gravity, friction, the current. Nothing inside that chain weighs anything up.

Now picture a woman choosing between two careers. One is secure and dull, the other risky and absorbing. She deliberates, and picks the risky one. Here too the outcome is fixed by pushes and pulls: the draw of the work, money worries, the weight of what other people expect. These forces are emotional and the first set were physical. The shape of the chain is the same.

Chapter 18 argues that the likeness matters. For centuries the free will debate has asked whether determinism leaves any room for freedom. Determinism is the view that earlier causes fix every event. This chapter does not argue on those terms. It asks instead how a conscious mind stands to the content it works on. Its answer is bounded authorship. You are a real author of your choices at the level of experience, and no author of the ordering of values you choose by. It builds on Chapters 13 to 15.

A chain you did not start

The first finding is called the unified causal model. All behaviour comes out of a chain of attractions and repulsions. For rocks and stars the forces are physical. For a feeling creature there are emotional forces as well. Emotion changes what the chain can produce, since it brings evaluation and choice with it. It leaves the chain’s architecture alone: a run of causes delivering an outcome the last link did not write.

The chapter does not borrow its key term from physics. It defines it. An evaluative force is an oriented response with a direction and a size. The direction is its valence, the toward or the away. The size is how intense the response is. Chapter 15 supplies the rule for combining them, and the strongest total carries the choice. The chapter also says where the comparison with physics ends.

Where do the responses come from? Try to recall a name you have forgotten. The name may surface suddenly, or never. Either way, its arrival was not something you chose. The chapter calls that crossing into awareness the subconscious jump. It is involuntary, it supplies the very material you evaluate with, and it comes before the choosing.

Consciousness is the control centre, where deliberate weighing happens. It is bounded on every side. Coercion limits your options from outside. Drugs, illness and hormones alter the field from within. Deliberation is real, and it works on material it did not make.

Why freedom feels real

If all this holds, why does freedom feel so vivid? The chapter's answer turns on an identity. In the present moment of choosing, the chooser and the choice are one thing. You cannot disagree with the orientation you are choosing by. Disagreeing would take some other preference, and that preference would then be your current one. The choice you are making now is the current state of your field of values, and you are that field. The self here is the field's own awareness of itself, which Chapter 13 placed at its fourth level.

That picture of the self is contested, and the chapter says so. Christine Korsgaard has the reflective agent standing above her desires and endorsing some of them. The chapter asks what the endorsing is. Either it is a felt pull, and so one more item in the field, or it moves nothing. The chapter grants that this only sets a challenge. Meet it, and the model falls.

Harry Frankfurt's unwilling addict is carried to the drug by a craving he condemns. The chapter replies that the choice is the net result of the whole field, and never one pull inside it. His condemnation is real, and had it been stronger it would have been the choice.

That identity underlies the second finding, the perspectival asymmetry. Any self-conscious system has two views of its own choices. From the first-person present it really is evaluating, and the choice is its own. Looking back, or watching another system, the chain stands out plainly. Neither report is wrong, and neither is complete.

This does not leave the old question open. The chapter says the asymmetry explains why the debate drags on, and locates its one metaphysical answer. Is the agent the ultimate author of her choices? She is not, and the third-person view is where that shows.

The chain is also invisible from inside, and that is a further claim. What arrives in awareness is the pull or the aversion, never the making of it. A making that appeared would be one more delivered item.

There is laboratory support as well, entered as corroboration and no proof. In choice blindness studies, people chose the more attractive of two faces, then were secretly handed the rejected one. Most did not notice, and gave reasons for a choice they never made.

The same result for any mind

In the third finding, the ethereal mind argument, the chapter grants its opponent everything. Suppose the mind is an immaterial substance in a dimension of its own. Suppose it can start causal chains outright, as Timothy O'Connor argues. The constraint still holds.

Choosing is a second-order operation, since it needs content already in place. Before the first thought and feeling, there is nothing to choose with or between. So the first content to fill any mind cannot itself be chosen. The

argument is structural, and it makes no claim about physical causes. Adding chance does not help, since a random emotional response is no more freely chosen than a determined one.

Bounded authorship and what survives of responsibility

The three findings together produce bounded authorship. A musician improvising in a key she did not choose is a real author of her melody.

What survives is forward-looking practical responsibility, and that alone. It asks only that a choice express the agent's own ordering of values, whatever the origins of that ordering. The desert-grounding kind goes with the absolute responsibility the chapter rejects. In excusing and mitigating, legal systems already work this way, whatever desert language their sentencing keeps. Courts hold people to choices that reflect their character, while allowing duress, mental illness and diminished capacity as mitigation. Mitigation is no blanket excuse, because the ordering belongs to the agent.

What the chapter denies is absolute responsibility: accountability complete enough to make infinite consequences proportionate. No philosopher in the secular debate explicitly defends that standard. Its target is the doctrine of divine retribution. The chapter lends the retributivist an omniscient judge for the sake of argument. Such a judge, seeing the whole chain, would find no desert at any magnitude for retribution to answer.

The objections the chapter answers

The first objection is that all this relabels compatibilism. The sophisticated compatibilist already calls the agent fully determined. The chapter makes that correction itself, and grants that two levels alone do not set its view apart. The real quarrel is desert. The compatibilist finds desert in a determined agent's responsiveness to reasons. The chapter denies it, using a premise the Premise Register carries as contested: deserving to suffer for a choice takes having made the self the choice came from. Reject that premise and Chapter 20 loses one of its two routes. The verdict survives by the other, through Chapter 14.

The second comes from Derk Pereboom, who calls free will an illusion whether or not determinism is true. On the metaphysics the chapter stands with him. It calls its own position hard incompatibilism about basic desert, so it is neither compatibilism nor libertarianism. If the ordering is involuntary all the way down, why call authorship bounded instead of absent? The chapter answers that the first-person report is accurate as far as it reaches. The melody is yours from where you are making it, and the key is unchosen from where the constraints are visible. The quarrel is mostly about how to describe the feeling. On the metaphysics of desert the two views agree.

The third comes from meditation. Contemplatives trained over thousands of hours report watching intentions arise. The chapter grants the training and the gains. Practice buys earlier and finer notice of arrivals, and an arrival noticed sooner is still an arrival. The chapter then stakes the asymmetry on a test. A

report that tracked a preference's formation before it arrived, checked against independent measures, would tell against the asymmetry.

What the chapter claims

All three results are graded *constructed*, which is two rungs below the book's top mark. The grade means each is the best positive account on offer, coherent and well motivated, and not forced. Live rivals remain. All three rest on Chapters 13 to 15.

The first result is the unified causal model, holding for any possible substrate. The second is the perspectival asymmetry, which separates two sources of felt openness: ignorance of how you will decide, and one that survives full information. The third is bounded authorship, with basic desert and absolute responsibility denied for any agent in any possible world. In the Register, the second is staked on the meditation test. The premise behind the third's denial of desert is listed as contested.

The chapter claims no priority on the shared ground, and records that earlier writers reached its destination. Galen Strawson arrived by a regress on self-creation. What the chapter claims as its own is the mechanism and the account of how choosing feels.

Chapter 19 takes up the question this one leaves hanging: if you did not author your values, what becomes of purpose?