

T. J. Mawson

Free Will: A Guide for the Perplexed.

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Tim Mawson is a philosopher of religion at Oxford. This is his first substantive foray into the topic of free will, but he is clearly well versed in the relevant literature. Like a disproportionate number of theists, he is a libertarian about free will. He believes that agents have the freedom necessary for moral responsibility only if they are the ultimate authors of their actions, and being the ultimate author of one's actions requires that determinism be false. The emphasis Mawson places on ultimate authorship categorizes him as what has come to be called a source incompatibilist, but unlike most other source incompatibilists, Mawson is also a leeway incompatibilist: he believes that alternative possibilities are necessary for free will because agents are the ultimate authors of their actions only when they have alternative possibilities (most libertarians are convinced by Frankfurt-style cases that alternative possibilities are not necessary for freedom). Though the book styles itself as an introductory text, it is quite demanding. In this review, I will sketch some of Mawson's claims and note points at which they seem to me to be implausible. The problems I will point out, as well as the density of the text, should not be taken to render it unsuitable as a teaching text: with the aid of a knowledgeable instructor, the book would serve as well as any presently available for an upper-level undergraduate course on free will.

Libertarianism, Mawson argues, is the common sense view of free will. In deliberating, we take ourselves to have metaphysically open alternative possibilities, and in holding ourselves and one another morally responsible we assume that we could have done otherwise. Mawson is aware that the experimental literature on the topic of free will tends to suggest otherwise; at least when the question is framed in certain ways, ordinary people report compatibilist intuitions (though there is a lively debate about how to interpret these results). Mawson is unimpressed, arguing that subjects might have misinterpreted the description of determinism in the scenarios with which they were presented. This ignores the fact that manipulation checks are routinely included in such experiments. In any case, not much turns on whether he is right; his arguments do not depend on burden of proof claims. Rather, his arguments for incompatibilism are taken by him to be powerful enough to move anyone to reject compatibilism, (almost) no matter what their prior views.

Unsurprisingly, the heart of Mawson's argument for incompatibilism is the Consequence Argument, associated most especially with Peter Van Inwagen. Informally (Mawson himself uses an informal version), the Consequence Argument holds that we have no choice about the past or the laws of nature, but if determinism is true then what we do is the inevitable consequence of the past and the laws and the laws of nature, so we have no choice about what we do. (Mawson persists throughout the discussion in arguing that if determinism is true then we cannot change the *present*. Not everyone will share this position, since some hold that we cannot change the present on any view; in the absence of time machines it is too late to change the present.) Classical compatibilists respond to the Consequence Argument by holding that even though what we do is the inevitable consequence of the past and the laws of nature, and even though we cannot change the past or the laws of nature, we do have a choice about what we do. These compatibilists offer a conditional analysis of 'could have done otherwise': an agent could have done otherwise than she did just in case had she wanted to do otherwise she would have. Mawson sketches a dilemma for these compatibilists. The counterfactual the classical compatibilist offers is true just in case there is a very nearby world in which she actually did otherwise. But there

are such worlds nearby only if either compatibilist agents do have the power to alter the laws or the past or if worlds are clustered in such a fashion that though the actual world is deterministic, nearby worlds are not. The first disjunct is true if the counterfactual holds because in nearby worlds which differ from the actual world in only trivial respects, the agent acted in a way that constituted or caused a law-breaking or past-altering event; the second disjunct holds only if nearby worlds don't differ trivially from the actual world but differ very substantially, in that the laws that pertain in that world enable the agent to act otherwise. Why cannot worlds be clustered such that counterfactuals are true because the actual world differs only trivially from nearby deterministic worlds? Mawson argues that the fine-tuning of the physical constants for life entails that deterministic worlds have no near neighbours that support life: assuming determinism, our near neighbours are lifeless since the trivial differences between us and them (in the conditions which prevailed at the time of the big bang or the laws of nature) are incompatible with the existence of life.

So far as I can tell, this argument fails badly. The same dilemma seems to hold for ordinary events: if Mawson is right, claims like 'the cat might have caught the mouse' or 'the branch might have broken earlier' can be true only if determinism is false, if worlds are clustered such that indeterministic worlds are nearby to the actual world or cats and branches (somehow) have the power to alter the past or the laws of nature. This seems to me a *reductio* of the argument. Mawson's second disjunct seems to depend on a strong kind of modal realism, because it requires us to cluster worlds in a manner dictated by physics for the purposes of understanding counterfactuals. Abandon this particular modal realism and there seems to be no reason to accept that the worlds that count as our near neighbours for the purpose of counterfactuals must be worlds that have a history that diverges from ours all the way back to the big bang. Rather, they might be worlds that diverge from ours in some trivial respect at some very recent point in time, regardless of whether such worlds are physically possible.

Most compatibilists today are not classical compatibilists. Rather, they hold that whether or not we are able to do otherwise, we have enough in the way of free will to be morally responsible. These compatibilists are convinced by Frankfurt-style cases, cases in which agents perform an action on their own, and therefore seem morally responsible for the action, despite lacking alternative possibilities because a powerful agent stands ready to intervene to cause them to perform the very same action should they show any sign of acting otherwise. Mawson rejects these cases, on the familiar grounds that agents in these cases can always do something else (for instance, they might give the involuntary sign that they have started to contemplate something that is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition of their deciding to do otherwise). As he knows, these alternatives are widely rejected as irrelevant on the grounds that they are not robust enough to ground moral responsibility: no one can be morally responsible for acting because they might instead have given an involuntary sign that they were starting to contemplate something, contemplation of which might just have led to them deciding to do otherwise. He rejects the claim that such alternatives are insufficiently robust, on the grounds that they have momentous consequences: they settle whether the agent performs the act by themselves or whether instead the intervener steps in. However, this response misses the point of the lack of robustness charge. Showing that giving the involuntary sign has momentous consequences does not go any way toward showing that agents can be morally responsible for their actions in virtue of failing to give the involuntary sign. Given that agents in Frankfurt-style cases are not aware that by giving the sign they would get themselves off the hook and cannot deliberately give the sign, it is hard to see how their failure to give it grounds their moral responsibility.

In the final substantive chapter, Mawson sketches his own view of libertarian free will. He defends agent causation, the view that agents are substances who are able (as he

puts it) to impart causal oomph to events. Agent causation is widely taken to be mysterious, on a variety of grounds. Mawson points out that some philosophers think that event causation can be reduced to substance causation, thereby helping to mitigate the charge that substance causation is unparsimonious. But other common charges against agent causation he does not even mention. It is difficult to see how the agent-causal power can be exercised for reasons. Other philosophers like Timothy O'Connor and Randolph Clarke who have attempted to sketch accounts of agent-causation recognize this and attempt to explain how causation by reasons, which is apparently a species of event causation, interacts with agent causation. Mawson does not even broach the topic. Instead he defends agent causation by appeal to our experience of freedom which is, he alleges, of ourselves as substances causing our actions. Somewhat oddly, he concedes that were event causation the case, our experience would be exactly as it is. The argument seems to be that in that case our experience would not be veridical, but if our experience were identical were event causation the case, it is hard to see how our experience has an agent-causal phenomenology.

This is a rich and engaging book, which covers a great deal of ground in relatively few pages, while avoiding too many sacrifices of depth. In this review I have focused (as is traditional) on my disagreements with Mawson's view. Despite my reservations, I judge it to be a worthwhile contribution to the literature, one which will be read with profit not only by newcomers to the debate but also by specialists.

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