

**Kadri Vihvelin**

*Causes, Laws, and Free Will.*

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Reviewing Kadri Vihvelin's new book leaves me in a quandary. On the one hand, I sympathise with Vihvelin's approach to the free will problem. She focuses upon the question of whether, if causal determinism is true, a person can ever have the ability to act differently from the way in which he does in fact act, rather than upon the compatibility of determinism with moral responsibility (3). Her answer, presented in chapters 6 and 7, is that any apparent incompatibility is due to an inadequate understanding of the nature of ability. Vihvelin presents a powerful case for concluding that determinism is irrelevant to whether a person has the ability and opportunity to act otherwise. Furthermore, chapter 4 discusses Frankfurt's argument that a person can be morally responsible for what he does even if he was unable to act otherwise. Vihvelin's counterargument is not merely plausible; amongst a vast literature on the subject, she alone has formulated the definitive response to Frankfurt.

On the other hand, however, this book has some faults. It is not always easy to follow Vihvelin's train of argument, partially due to poor organization. Discussions of thought-experiments and arguments break off, sometimes without resolution, to be raised again later, necessitating the reader to jump backwards and forwards between chapters. Occasionally, important lines of enquiry are ignored while Vihvelin concentrates on issues of questionable relevance or worth. Indeed, chapter 2 (most notably its detour discussing time travel) could have been omitted altogether. One of Vihvelin's subsidiary goals is 'to defend the claim...that moral responsibility is compatible with determinism' (19). But she never explains in detail why and how having free will is relevant to moral responsibility. With less space taken up by extraneous material, this issue might have been tackled.

In summary, Vihvelin has written an important book and researchers working on free will could gain a great deal from reading it. But they need not read it all. For the rest of this review, I will focus on three of Vihvelin's best arguments.

**Agent-Causation**

In chapter 3, Vihvelin examines the view that when a person acts freely, 'the agent—the temporally persisting person—was, literally, the cause of [an event]', and further that this implies that 'no event...caused [the agent] to cause it' (57-8). The following argument can be extracted from the chapter:

- (P1) It is possible coherently to describe a situation in which an object causes an event.
- (P2) There is no reason to think that this kind of agent-causation is incompatible with determinism (81-2, 137).
- (C) Consequently, showing that free agency involves agent-causation does not *by itself* show that free agency is incompatible with determinism.

This argument may well be sound and it is certainly worthy of attention.

However, in establishing premise P1, Vihvelin presents an unnecessarily complicated argument. First, she accepts without argument Davidson's view that when I say, for example, that the stone broke the window, this statement is elliptical (57). What I really mean is that the movement of the stone caused the window to break. But, even if an object cannot cause an event unless it is subject to some change, this does not show that causation is a relation between events. It might be a relation between objects insofar as they are the subjects of changes. The canonical form of a causal ascription would be: object O1, by exhibiting change C1, brings about change C2 in object O2.

Secondly, Vihvelin worries that it is unclear how there can be a pattern of counterfactual dependence between an object and an event (77). But we often explain why a particular effect has been produced by reference to the features of an object. It was the sharpness of the knife that enabled it to cut my finger and sharpness is a property of objects not of events.

Thirdly, Vihvelin illustration of agent-causation concerns a unique magic wand with the power to turn princes into frogs (79-80). Not even an atom for atom duplicate of this wand would possess the same power. Yet if any wizard was to wave the wand correctly, the metamorphosis would ensue. Although the wand can be deterministically caused to transform a prince, this transformation is not explained solely by the waving of the wand. One must make reference to the wand's intrinsic powers. It is hard to see, however, why this wand must be unique. Even if one thinks that, when an object causes an event, one must be unable to explain this causing by reference to the object's inner structure or processes, it is conceivable that there could be a *species* of wands with powers that do not derive from their inner constitutions. After all, wands are *magic*.

### **Frankfurt's Argument**

In chapter 4, Vihvelin defends against Frankfurt's attack the principle that a person can be morally responsible for what he has done only if he could have done otherwise. As I find Vihvelin's reasoning difficult to fault, I will simply summarise her argument.

Frankfurt presents a counterexample to the principle. Jones decides, for reasons of his own, to kill Smith and does so. However, unknown to Jones, he was being monitored by an unseen figure, Black, who would have forced Jones to kill Smith if he had not been independently willing to do this. Vihvelin points out that there are two different roles that Black may play in this scenario. He may be a Bodyguard or a Preemptor (or both) (97-8).

As a Bodyguard, Black monitors Jones and, should Jones begin to act contrary to Black's plan, Black intervenes and forces Jones to kill Smith. As Jones kills Smith of his own volition, that shows that Jones can be responsible for this outcome even though it was inevitable that he would kill Smith. But Jones was able to do otherwise. Because Black's intervention is triggered by Jones' attempt to do otherwise, Jones retains the ability to try to refrain (or to avoid) killing Smith.

As a Preemptor, Black watches for a prior, utterly reliable sign that Jones is going to kill Smith. If he sees the sign, Black does nothing. If he does not see the sign, Black intervenes. But suppose that Jones does display the sign and so Black does not intervene. Why think that Jones is therefore unable to do otherwise? As the sign is reliable, we know that Jones *will* kill Smith. Vihvelin's objection is that this does not show that Jones *must* kill Smith.

## **Abilities and Dispositions**

Finally, in chapter 6, Vihvelin presents an analysis of free will and free action. She starts by defining ‘Moorean Choice’: ‘A person is in a Moorean Choice situation just in case she deliberates, decides, and acts successfully on the basis of her decision and has, at some time before she decides, the *wide* as well as the *narrow* ability to decide and to act otherwise’ (169). Roughly, a person has the narrow ability to do something if he has the physical and psychological capacity and skill to do it, and he has the wide ability if his situation also affords him the opportunity to do it (11-12).

Vihvelin’s theory is that to have the narrow abilities necessary for freedom is to have ‘some intrinsic disposition or bundle of intrinsic dispositions’, where an intrinsic disposition is one ‘necessarily shared by intrinsic duplicates governed by the same laws’ (175). Regarding freedom to perform an overt action X, the necessary disposition is the disposition successfully to X in response to the stimulus of one’s trying to X (172, 175). For moral responsibility, one must possess ‘the *narrow* ability to choose on the basis of reasons’, which is constituted by a bundle of psychological dispositions concerning the formation of beliefs and intentions (189-90). Just as the truth of determinism would not imply that vases are not fragile, it would obviously not imply that we lack the dispositions required for free will or that we never have the opportunity to manifest them (169, 193).

There is, however, at least one flaw in this theory. If the freedom to perform action X is to be given a dispositional analysis, the stimulus condition of the disposition cannot be the person’s trying to X. The problem is that, contrary to Vihvelin’s view (176), trying to X does not usually cause a person’s action of X-ing. Suppose the Queen tried to kill the King by pouring poison in his ear. This is *how* she goes about trying. But while the pouring of the poison may cause the King’s death, it does not cause her action of killing the King. Vihvelin claims that, when one tries, a desire or intention causes the beginning of the action process (176). But the beginning of the process of action does not cause the entire process; rather, it partially *constitutes* that process. In trying to X, one is often already exercising one’s ability to X. So trying to X cannot be a trigger for the manifestation of this ability. Something akin to Vihvelin’s dispositional theory of freedom may well be true, but her theory cannot be wholly correct.

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