

Real Free Will*

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Abstract

5 Many authors hold that we cannot have the kind of free will that we seem to have. This article spells out and defends that kind of free will. Most libertarians hold that a free action involves a probabilistic process at some stage. Like the compatibilists, I hold that this is not only required for free will but even reduces or excludes freedom. But contrary to the compatibilist and contrary to most libertarians, I claim that free will requires that we can bring about events that have no preceding cause. That is what our experience suggests, and there are no beliefs that contradict this and are justified.

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1 Introduction

15 (1.1) This article defends the theory of free will that is the elephant in the room. The kind of free will which we seem to have but which many deny. Let us first have a look at how those who deny it describe the free will that we seem to have.

20 (1.2) It began with Thomas Hobbes, who claimed in 1655 that the truth of determinism is evident. Every event is necessitated by preceding events. In his words:

[A]ll the effects that have been, or shall be produced, have their necessity in things antecedent.¹

25 According to Hobbes, our ordinary conception of action contradicts this evident truth. Therefore our ordinary conception of action is false or even nonsense:

30 [T]hat ordinary definition of a free agent, namely, that a free agent is that, which, when all things are present which are needful to produce the effect, can nevertheless not produce it, implies a contradiction, and is nonsense. (Hobbes 1654, § 32)

35 (1.3) This is a special kind of argument: instead of saying that there is no evidence for free will of a certain kind it says that such free will is impossible. Thus it claims that we know that there is no free will without considering the evidence. Hobbes, like the authors that I shall quote in what follows, even concede that our experience of acting points towards the kind of free will that he claims is impossible. The argument appeals to a claim of impossibility or incoherence and derives from this claim that

1. "[Q]uaecunque producta vel erunt vel fuerunt, necessitatem suam in rebus antecedentibus habuisse." (*De corpore*, 9.5)

there is no free will of a certain kind. It claims that we can know
40 that there are no free actions by knowing a stronger claim, namely
that the existence of free actions is impossible. The question is
whether the impossibility claim is true and sufficiently certain.

(1.4) More recently, Thomas Nagel described “our ordinary con-
ception of autonomy [...] as the belief that antecedent circum-
45 stances, including the condition of the agent, leave some of the
things we will do undetermined: they are determined only by
our choices, which are motivationally explicable but not them-
selves causally determined.” (Nagel 1986, 114) Although Nagel
recognises that it seems to us that we have such free will, he
50 assumes that we do not, because we cannot:

[M]y present opinion is that nothing that might be a solu-
tion [of the problem of free will] has yet been described.
[...] [I]t is impossible to give a coherent account of the
internal view of action [...]. When we try to explain what
55 we believe [...] we end up with something that is either
incomprehensible or clearly inadequate. (112f)

(1.5) Similarly, Galen Strawson states that “a sense of oneself
[...] as possessed of radical ‘up-to-me-ness’ seems indissociable
from the ordinary, sane and sober adult human sense of self.”
60 (Strawson 2008, 382) A “radical, absolute, buck-stopping up-to-
me-ness in choice and action”. (367) “[Compatibilism] doesn’t
give us what we want and are sure we have: ultimate, buck-
stopping responsibility for what we do, of a kind that can make
blame and punishment and praise and reward truly just and fair.”
65 (333) Although Strawson recognises that it seems to us that we
have such free will and that we can hardly rid ourselves of the
belief in such free will, he assumes that we do not, because we
cannot. Such “is impossible” (384). In another article (Strawson
2010), Strawson suggests that such freedom would involve the

70 idea of “causa sui” and quotes Friedrich Nietzsche’s verdict
against this idea, which expresses what many feel about the
ordinary notion of free will:

The causa sui is the best self-contradiction that has been
conceived so far. It is a sort of rape and perversion of logic.
75 But the extravagant pride of man has managed to entangle
itself profoundly and frightfully with just this nonsense.
The desire for “freedom of the will” in the superlative
metaphysical sense, which still holds sway, unfortunately,
in the minds of the half-educated; the desire to bear the
80 entire and ultimate responsibility for one’s actions oneself,
and to absolve God, the world, ancestors, chance, and
society involves nothing less than to be precisely this causa
sui and, with more than Baron Münchhausen’s audacity,
to pull oneself up into existence by the hair, out of the
85 swamps of nothingness. (Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*,
1886, quoted in Strawson 2010, 5)

(1.6) Also Robert Kane refers to this passage by Nietzsche to
express his rejection the ordinary conception of free will:

Libertarians about free will through the centuries have
90 tried to [. . . appeal] to various unusual and mysterious
forms of agency or causation – uncaused causes, imma-
terial minds, noumenal selves, nonevent agent causes,
prime movers unmoved, and the like [. . .]. But these famil-
iar strategies have led in turn to charges of mystery and
95 obscurity against their view. These skeptical charges were
summed up by Nietzsche (1889) in his inimitable prose
when he said that “freedom of the will” in “the superla-
tive metaphysical sense”, which seems to imply being an
undetermined causa sui, was “the best self-contradiction
100 that has been conceived so far” by the human mind. (Kane
2016, 3)

If one believes that we cannot have the free will that we seem to have, then one has to ascribe low epistemic value to our experience and to speculate how the deception arises. See how Kane does this:

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“Introspective evidence cannot give us the whole story about free will. Stay on the phenomenological surface and libertarian free will is likely to appear obscure or mysterious, as it so often has in history. What is needed is a theory about what might be going on behind the scenes when we exercise such a free will, not merely a description of what we immediately experience.” (Kane 2016, 11)

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(1.7) Another reason for ruling out the kind of free will that we seem to have is that this might require a soul. Thus Alfred Mele writes:

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Only a certain kind of mind-body (or “substance”) dualist would hold that conscious intentions do *not* “arise as a result of brain activity,” and such dualist views are rarely advocated in contemporary philosophical publications on free will. (Mele 2009, 67)

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In this article I leave open whether the proposed account of free will requires the existence of the soul. If it did, then, first, arguments against dualism would constitute arguments against the proposed account, and second, our experience of free will would constitute a reason for accepting dualism.

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(1.8) These philosophers recognise that we seem to have free will of a certain kind and deny that we have it. This is justified only if they have some belief that contradicts our ordinary belief in free will and has stronger justification. For example, if belief in determinism had stronger support (roughly speaking) than our ordinary belief in free will, then denying free will would be justified. If belief in determinism has weaker support than our

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ordinary belief in free will, then the rational move is to reject determinism.

135 (1.9) Our ordinary belief in free will is supported by a kind of
experience or seeming. It seems to us that we are free in a certain
way. My aim in this article is to describe what kind of free will
we seem to have and to spell out what kind of causation this
would involve. I assume that not only sense experience, such as
140 seeing a tree, is a source of justification, but any experience in
which something seems to present itself as being in a certain way.
If something seems to someone to be x , then he should believe
that it is x (with a strength that corresponds to the strength of
the experience), unless he has sufficiently strong reasons for dis-
145 believing this.² I assume that this applies also to our experience
of acting. Our experience of acting has epistemological weight.
If we seem to have free will of a certain kind, then we should
believe that we have such free will, unless we have good reasons
for disbelieving this.

150 2 What do our actions seem to be like?

(2.1) Let me draw your attention to six aspects of what our actions
and our will seem to be like. Six features of our actions that we
experience when we act or think about past actions or consider
how we should or could act. First, libertarians have often focused
155 on the “He could have acted differently”. In my view, it is
true of many human actions that the person really might have
acted differently, but this is not a necessary feature of being
free. Sometimes a person has an obligation, knows clearly that
he has it, and has no temptation that could distract him. For

2. This is what Swinburne (2001, ch. 5) calls “the principle of credulity” and Huemer (2001) calls “phenomenal conservatism”.

160 example, fortunately many people have no temptation to kill
other people. If Miller has no temptation to kill Jones, then it
is still true that he has the power to kill Jones in the sense that
he is strong enough to push a knife into Jones's body, but given
165 his belief that this would be evil, given a inhibition to kill other
people, and given the absence of any temptation to kill Jones, it
is not a real possibility that he would kill Jones.

Therefore I take it to be a feature of *many* human actions that
the person really might have acted differently under the very
same circumstances,³ but it is not a necessary feature of being
170 free. What we are getting at when we say that the person *could*
have acted differently is that the action is willed by the agent
and not caused by non-rational factors such as brain states. Even
if the person's seeing strong reasons for doing *x* and the absence
of counteracting inclinations made it inevitable that he would
175 do *x*, we might want to say that he could have acted differently.
Not only because he could have done *x* a little earlier or later or
in a slightly different way, but also because had he seen different
reasons, he could have and might have acted on those reasons.

(2.2) In which cases might someone under the very same circum-
180 stances have acted differently than he did? In which cases is it
open how someone will act? First, reasons for acting usually
leave open a certain range of possible ways how one can act on
the reason. If Jones has the duty to pay back the debt to Miller,
then he can fulfil the duty by paying on Tuesday or on Wednes-
185 day, in Swiss Francs or in gold. Likewise, inclinations leave open
a certain range of actions. When I am thirsty, then that does not
make me more inclined to drink out of a glass than to drink out
of a mug, or to drink apple juice rather than grape juice. Second,

3. Deery, Bedke, and Nichols 2013 provide empirical evidence that people experience the ability to do otherwise.

it is open how I will act if I believe a certain action to be best
190 but have an inclination of a certain strength against doing it that
is strong enough that I might give in. Third, it is open how I
will act if for two courses of action I have no stronger inclination
towards one rather than the other and also no belief that one
would be better than the other.

195 (2.3) Second, we experience our actions as originating in us, *in the*
person, where the person has no parts which could be separated
from it. It has no parts that could exist on their own. While the
body has parts into which the body could be split, the person has
no such parts. The various conscious events in a person are not
200 like the events in a car. They are not just connected causally and
by having parts in common. They do not involve various parts,
but only one thing which has no parts, and that is the person.
The origin of the action is in this indivisible centre.⁴

(2.4) Third, it seems to us that some or all of our actions are *not the*
205 *result of a non-probabilistic process*, they does not have a complete
preceding cause. Some libertarians say that a free action does
not have a preceding “sufficient cause”, by which they mean
a necessitating cause in the sense which Hobbes uses in his
claim that all events “have their necessity in things antecedent”
210 (Hobbes 1655, § 9.5). I mean in addition that our actions are not
the result of a non-probabilistic but stoppable process. Actions
involve things which existed before and could in this sense be
called causes of the action. My arm existed before I raised my
arm and was in this sense a partial cause of the action. But there
215 is no complete preceding cause of my action. That is, there is

4. Many have described this indivisibility and presented it as evidence for the existence of the soul, e. g. Wolff 1720, § 742, Knutzen 1744, Part I, Crusius 1753, Bolzano 1838, ch. 1. For more recent descriptions, see Bayne 2010 and Chisholm 1991.

before my action no process under way that is heading towards the action.

(2.5) To see that we experience our actions as not being the results of non-probabilistic processes, consider what it would be like to
220 experience an action as having a non-probabilistic cause. In that case there would be at some time t_1 before the action a causal process heading towards the action, which takes place at t_2 . In most or all actions we do not experience that. Rather, it seems to us, before and after an action, that there is no specific time
225 for the action pre-determined or in any way pre-programmed, but that it is open and up to us when we do it. We experience that reasons for acting leave open a certain span of time when the action is to be done, or they request me to do the action as soon as possible. Likewise, we experience that inclinations do
230 not determine the exact timing of the action.

(2.6) We also do not experience that we are being carried or pushed towards the action. We could experience that our body moves on its own so that we can only try to influence or stop it. That happens when someone has convulsions or spasms. But
235 generally we do not experience that in our actions.

(2.7) Are perhaps actions that we do out of an inclination the result of a causal process? One might think that our free will in such cases consists in the power to *veto* such processes. But this is not our experience. Even when we act following an incli-
240 nation, we do not experience the body moving on its own with us just having the option to push the brakes. Sometimes I feel a pressure, an inclination or a desire to do a certain action, but that is different from just having a veto power.

(2.8) Fourth, we experience not only that our actions are not the
245 result of non-probabilistic processes, but also that our actions are not the result of probabilistic processes. In order to make it true

about free actions that the person “could have acted differently”, many libertarian accounts of free will claim that free actions involve, at some stage, probabilistic processes. They say that they involve “quantum indeterminacy”.⁵ In that case, there would be a chance of the action occurring during a certain time span, and that chance would obtain in virtue of certain brain states.

But we experience no chance in our actions. We experience that it is not a matter of chance but up to us what we do and when we do it. Further, when we raise our arm, we experience no probabilistic process. There seems to be neither a probabilistic process of the arm rising, nor a probabilistic process towards my raising my arm.

(2.9) A probabilistic theory of agency could assume that there are certain “neuron firings” in the brain that initiate, or are a part of, the process of the rising of my arm if I raise my arm intentionally. These neuron firings, on this view, are probabilistic, like the decay of a radium atom. What would the person experience? Consider three options. First, it could be that, if the firing rate by chance rises, the person experiences that, out of nowhere, the arm begins to rise. Second, one might think that the person experiences an urge to raise his arm. Third, some want to think that the process of deliberation, if there is one, or the action occurs by chance in correlation to the firing of the neurons. All three options are contrary to our experience. First, we do not experience that the arm begins to rise, neither by chance nor probabilistically. In rare cases somebody might experience an involuntary contraction of the muscles in his arm. That would be a twitch or a cramp. But

5. Some suggest that there is indeterminacy before the decision, e. g. Clarke 2000, 21. Others suggest that, while the decision has a deterministic cause, there is indeterminacy in the process of deliberation, e. g. Fischer and Ravizza 1992 and Mele 1999.

275 normally the muscles of the arm remain relaxed unless we raise
our arm. And that is nothing that occurs to us or that occurs by
chance. Second, urges sometimes occur, but when I just raise my
arm in order to draw your attention or in order to demonstrate
to you that I can move my arm freely, then there is no urge.⁶
280 Third, if an action is preceded by a process of deliberation, then
the firing of the neurons leads to the contraction of the muscles,
and the the deliberation occurs probably before the firing of the
neurons. Furthermore, even if two options seem equally good
and equally attractive, then we experience that it is not a matter
285 of chance but it is up to us what we do when.

I conclude that it seems to us that our actions are neither the
result of non-probabilistic processes nor the result of probabilistic
processes.

(2.10) Fifth, we experience that sometimes we have inclinations
290 to act in a certain way. Often one course of action is easier than
some alternative courses of action, or one action is hard to resist.
We then have an inclination towards that first possible action.
Alternatively we can call it a desire or an impulse. When we
believe that we should not do that action for which we have a
295 desire, then we call that desire a temptation.

(2.11) Sixth, we experience that sometimes we have *reasons* to act
in one way rather than the other. Sometimes it is easy to act on
a reason that we see. But if we have a contravening inclination,
then it is hard to act on a reason. Sometimes it is so hard that we
300 have practically no chance to act on the reason. Someone who is
addicted to gambling can hardly resist the temptation to gamble
away his just received salary. But at some times he might be able
to get help and find a strategy to become free from the addiction
in the long run.

6. On urges, see my discussion of Libet's experiment in autociteWachter-a.

305 So although we experience our actions as being neither the results of non-probabilistic processes nor of probabilistic processes, we do experience these two kinds motives for a certain action: inclinations and reasons.

3 Choice events

310 (3.1) Many libertarian theories say that an action is free if it has no “sufficient cause”. They take this condition to be fulfilled if the action is the result of a probabilistic process because there is quantum indeterminacy in the brain.⁷ Compatibilists respond that this reduces control and therefore freedom. They are right,
315 in my view. The mere absence of a sufficient cause does not make an action free.

(3.2) When we raise our arm we experience that the movement of the arm depends on us continuously doing something. The arm does not rise as it would in a reflex or a convulsion. The
320 rising of the arm and the events in the nerves and muscles do not constitute a causal process that is running on its own, without us doing something. That means that one event that is causally involved in the movement is not the result of a causal process. This initiating event does not have a complete preceding cause,

7. For example, Clarke (2000) suggests that the decision is caused indeterministically. Mele (2006, § 2.2) holds that the process of deliberation is indeterministic. Searle (2001, ch. 9) is considering two hypothesis about free will. According to hypothesis 1, there is an absence of causally sufficient conditions at the psychological level, but not at the neurobiological level. That is compatibilism. According to hypothesis 1, there is also at the neurobiological level an absence of causally sufficient conditions. Searle himself does “not find either hypothesis intellectually attractive.” (296) “Perhaps some third possibility that we cannot even imagine will turn out to be right.” I suggest that this third possibility is the ordinary view that I am describing in this article.

325 that is, before it there is no process heading towards it. It may be
just a property or a property change, for example a movement or
the firing of a neuron. The property bearer may exist before, but
there is no complete preceding cause of the initiating event.

(3.3) Our experience of acting suggests that the occurrence of the
330 initiating event is up to us. It occurs through the agent but not
through a preceding event. The acting brings about this event
but not in the sense that the acting is an event which is a part of
a process which later leads to the initiating event. It is brought
about by the agent directly. The initiating event is the agent's
335 choice, therefore I call such an event a *choice event*. That is an
event that has no preceding cause but occurs through an agent's
action. It lasts roughly as long as the movement does. Through
this event the person controls the movement.

(3.4) This illustrates that there are at least three ways of how an
340 event can come about. It can be the result of a non-probabilistic
process; it can be the result of a probabilistic process; or it can
be a choice event. In my view, all actions involve choice events
and can therefore be called "free". One could call only those
agents free who can act for reasons, for example humans as
345 opposed to animals. I prefer to use the term "rational" for this
distinction. Further, one could call an action unfree in which the
agent's impulse is very strong and his will too weak to resist the
impulse, even if he tries. This would contrast with a perfectly
free agent, who is not subject to any non-rational impulses. In
350 order to describe this spectrum one could use the term "free"
with a measure of degree, but more informative it is to quantify
the strength of the impulses and the strength of the will with
which the person can control the impulses.

(3.5) One could hold that choice events are those mental events
355 which some called "volitions", "undertakings" (Chisholm 1976),

or “tryings” (Swinburne 2013, 102). But they could also be brain events of which we are not aware. When we intend to bring about a certain result through an action, then there is a hierarchy of what we do in order to achieve this result. In order to water
360 the flowers, I open the door in order to go to the flowers. And in order to open the door, I move my arm in a certain way. But I am not moving my arm by doing something else, I just move my arm. This is an intentionally basic action. When I do that, however, I am bringing about a choice event in my brain, of
365 which I am not aware. If I try to move my arm, then that brain event occurs without me knowing anything about it.

4 Agent causation

(4.1) Some claim that actions involve an uncaused event.⁸ One arrives at this view if one equates being caused with having an
370 event cause. But saying that the initiating event is uncaused suggests that it comes out of nowhere, or occurs by chance. It just happens to occur. As that is contrary to saying that the agent made it occur, we should not say the event is uncaused. It is natural to say that the agent is its cause, he caused it by acting in
375 a certain way. That is what already Thomas Reid wrote:

Whether this notion of moral liberty be conceivable or not, every man must judge for himself. To me there appears no difficulty in conceiving it. I consider the determination of the will as an effect. This effect must have a cause which
380 had power to produce it; and the cause must be either the person himself, whose will it is, or some other being. The first is as easily conceived as the last. If the person was the cause of that determination of his own will, he was free in

8. The non-causalists include Ginet 2007; Palmer 2020; Widerker 2018.

that action, and it is justly imputed to him, whether it be
good or bad. (Reid 1788, 250)

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(4.2) Surprisingly, most of those who defend agent causation today do not this view, they do not claim that the event that the agent causes has no event cause. Some are compatibilists (Nelkin 2011, ch. 4 Markosian 2012; Franklin 2016; Brent 2017; Clarke 2017). Others hold that it is a condition of the action being free that it has no preceding “sufficient cause” and thereby leave open that it is the result of a probabilistic process (Swinburne 2013, 196–198; O’Connor 2000, 98; O’Connor 2016; Clarke 1996). My objection against this view is that if an event is the result of a probabilistic process, then it is caused by preceding events and is not up to the agent, the agent does not have control over it. A choice event occurs instead of an event that would have occurred if the agent had not acted. And if an event occurs as the result of a non-probabilistic or probabilistic process, then it is not brought about by the agent directly.

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(4.3) One reason why some defenders of agent causation do not claim that an event that is caused by an agent has no event cause is that they do not mean by “agent causation” a kind of causation. They do not mean a way of an event coming to occur that is distinct from event causation. Roderich Chisholm means instead a linguistic fact:

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The philosophical question is not – or at least it shouldn’t be – the question whether or not there is “agent causation.” The philosophical question should be, rather, the question whether “agent causation” is reducible to “event causation.” Thus, for example, if we have good reason for believing that Jones did kill his uncle, then the philosophical question about Jones as cause would be: Can we express the statement “Jones killed his uncle” without loss of meaning into a set of statements in which only events

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are said to be causes and in which Jones himself is not said to be the source of any activity? (Chisholm 1978, 622 f)

420 (4.4) That we cannot express the statement “Jones killed his uncle” in a statement in which Jones is not said to be the source of activity is compatible with the action in fact being just the result of a non-probabilistic or a probabilistic process. In that case there would be no free will and no need to say that there is agent causation. Chisholm claimed that the irreducibility of action statements plus the absence of a “sufficient cause” make
425 an action free. He defined a free action as one for which there is no “sufficient causal condition”. (623) To this I object that it leaves open that the action is the result of a probabilistic process. In that case the action is not free because the action occurs by chance and the agent lacks control over it.

430 (4.5) In order to distinguish my theory from the other theories of agent causation I call it the theory of initiating agent causation or of choice events.

5 The six elements applied

435 (5.1) How does this theory correspond to the six features of our experience of acting?

First, with choice events, for many of our actions there are alternative possibilities. About an action to which there was an alternative which was equally good or towards which I had some inclination, it is true to say that I could have acted differently.
440 Not only in the sense that that sort of action was within my capacities, but in the sense that it was really possible that I would make the world go on another course than it actually did. I could

have produced another choice event instead of the one that I did produce. Or I could have produced no choice event.

445 (5.2) Second, choice events originate in the agent. If action processes involved only events which are the results of probabilistic or non-probabilistic processes, then actions would not be free and they would not be as they seem to be. They would originate entirely in these processes.

450 (5.3) Third, the choice event theory does justice to the experience that our free actions are not the result of non-probabilistic processes.

(5.4) Forth, the same is true for probabilistic processes.

(5.5) Fifth, how can the choice event theory do justice to the
455 experience of inclinations? If actions involve choice events, how can one choice be easier than an alternative? If we give in to an inclination, then we have the impression that we can resist the inclination and have control over whether and when we give in. That suggests that the action is not the result of a process,
460 because a process would determine the time of the action. Rather, physical states bring about inclinations: they make some actions easy and some alternative actions hard. If the body is in certain states, then some choice events are easy and some are hard. If I have not drunken anything for a whole day, then drinking is
465 easy and resisting is hard, but I do not have the impression that my body is moving on its own. It is not as if my body is moving like a robot and I can just counteract its movements. It is not as if I am in a car with autopilot where I just have the option to push the breaks. Even actions in which we give in to an inclination we
470 do not experience in this way.

(5.6) Sixth, sometimes we see reasons for doing a certain action, and sometimes we act on a certain reason. We have the impres-

sion that reasons tell us that we should do a certain action. Or rather, the situation requests me to act in a certain way. Seeing a
475 reason is to believe that I should do the action, or that the action
is good, or that there is something in favour of acting in this way.
Inclinations, by contrast, involve no such beliefs.

(5.7) I conclude that the theory of choice events is in accordance
with our experience of acting. The evidence leads to choice
480 events, and using Thomas Reid's words I say: "To me there ap-
pears no difficulty in conceiving it." (Reid 1788, 250). It is hard to
justify rejecting the theory of choice events. A sentiment like "No
respectable philosopher believes in that kind of view!" provides
no justification. And an impossibility claim which entails that
485 there are no choice events will also be hard to justify.

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- 560