

Freedom in a Physical World

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Abstract: Making room for agency in a physical world is no easy task. Can it be done at all? In this article, I consider and reject an argument in the negative.

Introduction

Making room for agency in a physical world is no easy task. Can it be done at all?

David Widerker has discovered a *Supervenience Argument* that promises to shed light on this question. Widerker claims that the argument shows that the freedom to do otherwise—an important component, one might think, of our agency—is incompatible with the conjunction of the supervenience of the mental on the physical and the distinctness of mental and physical properties.¹

The Supervenience Argument draws from elements in both the metaphysics of agency and the philosophy of mind. In this article, I will, in turn, contest Widerker’s main claims in both arenas.

On What Can Be Brought About

An extended family of controversial closure principles have figured prominently in debates over the compatibility of freedom to do otherwise and determinism.² In arguing for the incompatibility of freedom to do otherwise and *physicalism*, David Widerker has identified yet another member of the family, claiming that this one is ‘beyond reproach’:

1 Widerker 2016, 297.

2 For citations, see most of the papers in Widerker 2016 (296, fn1) and the discussion of Richard Taylor’s argument for fatalism and its crucial ‘necessary condition’ principle in van Inwagen 1983 (44–50).

If [a] q is a necessary condition for A^* , and [b] relative to time t' , A^* and q have not occurred yet, and [c] q is not guaranteed to occur anyhow (e.g., q is not guaranteed to occur either nomologically or logically), then [d] it is within S 's power to perform A^* only if [e] it is within S 's power at t' to bring about q .³

I propose to reproach the principle. I'll make a few clarifying points then give a counterexample. First, note the phrase 'power ... to bring about'. The meaning of this phrase is not obvious. For now, though, assume it is something like this: the power to *efficiently cause*. Below I'll give supporting arguments for this assumption. Second, note that Widerker's principle is quite general in its scope. It claims a necessary condition—not just on *free* action, but on any action at all.

Consider the following case: There is a bomb with two triggers. Green and Blue stand near at hand, each with a finger on a trigger. Blue is—for her own reasons—prepared to pull her trigger and will take notice of Green only if Green stands down. Green is not quite so sure about what to do. Were Green and Blue to both pull their triggers (simultaneously and independently), Blue's trigger (and not Green's) would make the bomb go off; it is a little closer to the detonation mechanism than Green's. Were Green to pull her trigger, Blue would pull her own trigger—again, for her own reasons, on her own, and without noticing Green—and make the bomb go off. Were Green to stand down (an option within her power), Blue would stand down too, and the bomb would not go off.

Note the following features of the case, each mapped to an element in Widerker's principle:

- (a) Green's pulling of the trigger *suffices* for the bomb to go off; in any relevant scenario in which Green pulls the trigger, the bomb goes off. In other words, a *necessary* condition of Green's pulling her trigger is that the bomb goes off (after all, if x is a sufficient condition for y , then y is a necessary condition for x).
- (b) The bomb has not yet exploded, nor has Green yet pulled her trigger.
- (c) It is not, furthermore, guaranteed either logically or nomologically that the bomb will go off. Green can, after all, stand down, in which

³ Widerker 2016, 299.

case Blue stands down as well and the bomb does not go off. (d) It is indeed within Green's power to pull the trigger; pulling the trigger is something she can do. (~e) Despite all that, Green cannot *bring about* the explosion. The best Green can do on that front is to pull her trigger. But doing that would not *bring about* the exploding of the bomb. Sure, were Green to pull her trigger, the bomb would go off all right, but not because of anything Green did. It would go off, rather because Blue has *independently*—on her own and for her own reasons—executed her plan; Blue would take notice of Green, recall, only if Green were to stand down.

But then we have a counterexample to Widerker's principle. For ours is a case in which the antecedent is true—conditions (a)–(d) are satisfied—but its consequent false—(e) is not satisfied.⁴

On What Green Can Bring About

I think my claims about what Green can bring about are plausible on their face. But they can be defended and developed a bit more. I will do so in this section. Let us, in the usual way, distinguish two senses of *bringing about*:⁵

S non-causally brings it about that *x* iff *S* does something *A* such that, were *S* to *A*, *x* would happen.

S causally brings it about that *x* iff *S* does something *A* such that, were *A* to happen, *x* would happen (at least in part) because *S* did *A*.

These two senses can plainly come apart (this observation is, again, standard). I can bring it about—in the non-causal sense—that the sun rises tomorrow by

4 Widerker 2016 (299–300, fn7) claims, that cases in which 'someone else' might bring about *q* are cases in which someone 'can perform *A** *provided (or given that)* *q* will obtain'. If, on the one hand, 'provided (or given that) *q* will obtain' just means that *q* is a necessary condition for *A**, then I grant that this condition holds in my case. But my case is still a counterexample to Widerker's principle. For it is a case in which each conjunct of his antecedent holds but in which the consequent does not. If, on the other hand, Widerker means something else—I cannot quite tell what that would be—by 'provided (or given that)', then his claim is not obviously true of my example. For it's not as though Green can only pull her trigger *provided or given that the bomb goes off*. Rather, Green can pull her trigger.

5 For a helpful and standard treatment of 'bringing about', see Fischer 1989, 18–23. See also Swenson 2016, Section 3.

raising my hand. After all, were I to raise my hand, the sun would rise tomorrow. But I am not obviously at liberty to bring it about—in the causal sense—that the sun rises tomorrow. Certainly, were I to raise my hand, the sun would rise tomorrow; but it would not rise (even in part) *because* I raised my hand.

It is clear from Widerker's discussion that he has the causal sense of *bringing about* in mind.⁶ And it is this causal sense that *must* be at play in his principle for other elements of his argument to stand. Widerker claims that, given physicalism, it is not within your power to bring about a physical event subvening some directly free action.⁷ For on physicalism, says Widerker, every action must occur *because of* some subvening physical event (and not the other way around). So even if you could perform that action, and even if, were you to do so, there would be a subvening physical event, you would perform the action *because of* the subvening event and not the other way around. Though you could bring about the presence of the subvening event in the non-causal sense (were you to act, the event would be present), you could not do so in the causal sense (the presence of the event would not be explained by your action; quite the contrary—the event would explain your action). Widerker's argument requires us to interpret 'bringing about' in the causal sense, then.

With all this in mind, I'll now argue that, in the relevant causal sense, Green cannot bring about the detonation of the bomb. I say:

- A. It is within Green's power to (in the relevant sense) bring about the bomb's detonation only if: there is something Green can do such that, were she to do it, the bomb would detonate (at least partly) *because* Green did that thing.
- B. There is not anything Green can do such that, were she to do it, the bomb would detonate (at least partly) *because* Green did that thing.
- C. Therefore, Green does not have the power to (in the relevant sense) bring about the bomb's detonation (from A and B).

6 See Widerker 2016, 299, fn6.

7 Widerker 2016, 300.

Claim A applies previously noted conditions governing a causal sense of bringing about to the case at hand. I have already explained Claim A and shown why it is relevant. Claim B adds this: there is no explanatory connection between what Green can do and the bomb's detonation. This is quite plausible. For were Green to pull the trigger, her pulling of the trigger would not in any way cause, account for, or explain either Blue's triggering of the bomb or the bomb's detonation. Blue doesn't so much as notice Green in that case; it is only in the case where Green stands down that Blue even notices what Green is up to and reacts accordingly. Even were Green to pull the trigger, the bomb would not detonate (even in part) *because* she did so.⁸

I conclude, then, that $(\sim e)$ holds in the case, and that Widerker's principle is reproachable; indeed, it is false.

On the Dependence of Mind on Matter

I have advanced one substantive criticism of Widerker's argument. I shall now advance another. The two are independent.

⁸ In the case at hand, these counterfactuals are both true:

Were Green to not pull her trigger, the bomb wouldn't go off.

Were Green to pull her trigger, the bomb would go off.

A reviewer wonders whether this kind of two-way counterfactual dependence entails that, in the case where Green pulls the trigger, her doing so *causes* the bomb to detonate (thus endowing Green with the power to causally bring about the detonation). I do not think so. For there is no plain sense in the bomb would detonate *because* Green pulled her trigger. No complete explanation of why the bomb went off, for example, need make any reference to Green at all. But instead of litigating those points in any detail—doing so would require a detour into the rich and difficult literature on causation, counterfactuals, explanation, and so on—I'll point this out instead. Widerker's principle is supposed to be 'beyond reproach'. That its defence requires substantive commitments about the connection between counterfactuals and causation counts against both the principle (it comes at a theoretical price) and its claim to theoretical innocence. One reasonable reaction here, I think, is to suspend judgement; causation is as difficult a subject matter within metaphysics as any other. But then one should also suspend judgement about Widerker's principle and the argument on which it rests.

Another reviewer points out that my case is perhaps an instance of double-prevention: in pulling her trigger, Green prevents Blue's noticing Green, which noticing would have otherwise prevented the detonation. For convincing arguments that double-prevention of this kind does *not* suffice for a causal connection, see Mumford and Anjum 2009.

A crucial step in the argument moves from supervenience to a stronger claim of ‘ontological grounding’ by way of this conditional:

Dependence: If a mental event supervenes on a physical event, then the mental event occurs *because of*, or *in virtue of* the physical event, and not vice versa.

I contest Dependence for three reasons.

First, if Dependence is not plausible as a strict conditional; its antecedent does not entail its consequent. Suppose there is an infallible predictor of horse races. There could be no difference in race events without a difference in prediction events. The race events therefore *supervene* on the prediction events; and yet the race events do not occur *because of* or *in virtue of* the prediction events.

Second, Widerker’s case for Dependence is unconvincing. It consists of a quotation from Jaegwon Kim according to which the ‘serious physicalist’ will accept that the mental depends on the physical.⁹ Kim points out that supervenience *without* Dependence is a doctrine that can be accepted by non-physicalists, including even substance dualists. I agree with Kim that supervenience without Dependence does not cut much ice as a definition of minimal physicalism. A good definition of minimal physicalism should rule out substance dualism. But adding Dependence to the mix—as the *dependence physicalist*, to coin a term, does—is not the only way to do this.

One could, instead, define physicalism about a given domain as the thesis that the domain is, at *some* level of decomposition, exhausted by the *narrowly physical*. *Exhausted*: composed without remainder. *Narrowly physical*: items treated by fundamental physics but not themselves enjoying any mentality.¹⁰ Physicalism in this sense is true of rocks, for example, since they are composed without remainder (at some level of decomposition) by items treated by

9 Widerker 2016, 300. Widerker is relying here on Kim (2005).

10 Exhaustive physicalism is, note, compatible with the reality of mentality at *some* level of decomposition; even if all of the subatomic particles that compose you are treated by fundamental physics and do not themselves enjoy any mentality, it might still be that *you*—i.e., an item at a much higher level of decomposition—exhibit mentality.

fundamental physics (electrons and such), which items do not themselves have mental lives. Let us call this sense of physicalism *exhaustive*.¹¹

Exhaustive physicalism rules out substance dualism; if it is true of a domain (of us, for example), that domain includes no souls or spirits or ghosts (souls would, we suppose, either exhibit mentality or not be treated by fundamental physics). Exhaustive physicalism is surely a form of physicalism, then. But exhaustive physicalism does not obviously entail dependence physicalism; it says nothing at all about what happens *in virtue of* or *because of* what.

Third, Dependence has potentially unattractive (or, at any rate, controversial) consequences. It crucially deploys the locutions ‘because of’ and ‘in virtue of’. Whether Dependence is plausible will turn in part on whether those locutions are meaningful and on what they mean. *Must* the physicalist take a stand on such questions? I think not. I think physicalists could be agnostic—or even suspicious—about those locutions without abandoning physicalism. Physicalism need not hinge on abstruse disputes over the nature of dependence.

Widerker frames the Supervenience Argument as standing against libertarianism (the thesis that we have the freedom to do otherwise, which freedom is incompatible with determinism). It takes this broad form:

Supervenience
Other premises
Dependence
~ Libertarianism

But it could be ‘flipped’ and thus turned into an argument against dependence physicalism:

Supervenience
Other premises
Libertarianism
~ Dependence

11 For extensive exposition and defence of exhaustive physicalism, see Bailey (manuscript).

Physicalists can find insight in Widerker's argument, then. A moral they may draw is, not that physicalism is incompatible with libertarianism but rather, that *dependence* physicalism is incompatible with libertarianism. It remains open to the physicalist to embrace exhaustive physicalism without dependence physicalism. As I see things, then, Widerker's argument is not an argument against either physicalism, libertarianism, or their conjunction. It is, rather, evidence that physicalists who wish to embrace libertarianism should look for alternative formulations of physicalism.

One theoretical option here is that, in cases of agency, the physical depends on the mental; perhaps the physical world really does bend to—and thus depend on—the will. Another is that there is no dependence relation at all between the physical and the mental. Perhaps the world is more flat than talk of foundations and superstructures (ordered by dependence relations) would suggest.¹² Both theoretical options promise to reconcile physicalism of a certain sort with freedom to do otherwise; both deserve further investigation.

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¹² On which, see Fiocco, Forthcoming.

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