

**A RESPONSE TO WALTER BLOCK'S "FREE WILL, DETERMINISM,
LIBERTARIANISM AND AUSTRIAN ECONOMICS"**

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Abstract: The authors respond to Walter Block's essay: "Free Will, Determinism, Libertarianism and Austrian economics." Block's thesis that human behavior is governed by Free Will and naysayers cannot be classified as libertarians is disputed. Counterarguments include the observation that humans are not exempt from the causality principle and Spencer, Mises, and Hayek are determinists.

Key words: Free will, Determinism, libertarianism

JEL: B, Z

**В ОТГОВОР НА „СВОБОДНА ВОЛЯ, ДЕТЕРМИНИЗЪМ,
ЛИБЕРТАРИАНСТВОТО И АВСТРИЙСКАТА ИКОНОМИКА" ОТ
УОЛТЪР БЛОК**

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Резюме: Авторите отговарят на есето на Уолтър Блок: "Свободна воля, детерминизъм, либертарианството и австрийската икономика." Тезата на Блок, че човешкото поведение се регулира от свободната воля и скептиците не могат да бъдат класифицирани като либертарианци се оспорва. Контрааргументите включват наблюдението, че хората не са освободени от принципа на причинно-следствената връзка и че Спенсър, Мизес и Хайек са детерминисти.

Ключови думи: свободна воля, детерминизъм, либертарианство

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I. Introduction

Professor Walter Block in his short paper, *Free Will, Determinism, Libertarianism and Austrian Economics* has taken on a herculean task.

In his attempt to resolve the ancient debate of free will versus determinism, Block (unpublished) has seemingly banished from the libertarian movement all those who disagree with his view on free will including the authors of this paper and, as we shall show, Herbert Spencer, and the great Austrian school scholars Ludwig von Mises and Friedrich Hayek.

Further, as we shall also show, Block introduces Heisenberg's uncertainty principle and does so in a manner that challenges Albert Einstein on the topic.

The authors of this paper espouse somewhat differing views on the final nature and ultimate cause of determinism, but all steadfastly hold to the idea that a determinist, regardless of the origins and details of his view, can be a libertarian, just as a person who holds a free will perspective can be a libertarian.

Since Block has professed that he is a "devout atheist", we will address his argument in favor of free will from a non-theological perspective. We assume he is not attempting to introduce the concept of free will for any theological reasons¹.

We will end by addressing what we, the authors, regard as a grave error on Block's part in declaring that a determinist cannot be a libertarian. In section II we offer some definitions. The burden of section III is to challenge Block's arguments against determinism. We conclude in section IV that both the free will position and deterministic positions are compatible with libertarian philosophy.

II. Definitions

Block defines determinism this way:

"Determinism is the view that since everything has a cause, this applies to human action as well. This implies that people are not free to choose. Their supposed

¹ We recognize that some hold their views on free will based on their religious views, however, that is not the subject of this paper.

choices are actually caused by historical events, including the makeup of their brains. In this view, free choices are a will o [sic] the wisp;; seemingly, we have them, but, actually they are a mirage. We are not really free to engage in acts other than the ones we actually undertake.”

This definition by itself is not problematic but, because of the faulty conclusions that follow it in Block (unpublished), we present the following immediate points which will be elaborated upon throughout our discussion:

1. Contrary to Block’s assertion, individuals can and do make choices in a deterministic world. If given a choice, for example, they could choose whether to drink scotch or soda. These are not “free” choices, meaning free will is not the proximate cause of the choice. They are choices in that there is no external constraint on their drink selection. People could have chosen the soda if they had, in fact, picked the scotch. But suppose their goal was to remain sober. If they actually had free will, no prior brain events could have stopped them from just saying “no” to the scotch.

2. According to free will advocates, our will floats in space somewhere outside the brain. It emanates from our brain. Consequently, in either a free will or deterministic world, if one had chosen the scotch, the antecedent brain events would have been in place to make this choice. Whether we call the proximate antecedent “free will” or “neurons firing,” there exists in both views a prior cause.

The following is the best definition of free will Block (unpublished, p. 2)² provides in his paper:

“Free will takes the diametric opposite position. It maintains that we could have acted other than we actually did. Yes, there are causal connections in life, in chemistry, in physics, and some of what occurs to us is completely causal and apart from our will, there are some that are only partially under our control, but there are at least some actions over which we have complete control.”

To clarify, free will is defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary as, “1. Voluntary choice or decision; 2. Freedom of humans to make choices that are not determined by prior causes or divine intervention.” It is the notion that individuals have the ability to make some decisions independent of their brain structure, genetics and experiences. This raises a clear problem: If you have free will, why not always do everything you want that is good for you? Why would you not: adhere to your diet, exercise regularly, avoid worry, never fly into a rage etc.? If you have free choice, you would freely choose to avoid procrastinating, worrying, and raging. Block fails to address this contradiction in his free will stance.

Block concedes a cause and effect relationship in certain aspects of human action in the aforementioned definition. Although he claims to be a free will advocate, here he adheres to compatibilism.

² Unless otherwise specified, all quotes from Block refer to this one article of his, Block (unpublished.)

He eventually also makes the following statement: “The basic premise of the determinist position is that all is caused. If you do not believe this, they charge, you are unscientific. The brain, in particular, is a physical organ, subject to all the cause and effect relationships that apply to any other bit of physical matter.”

However, Block fails to explain how the brain is a special kind of matter exempt from the laws of science. Instead, shortly following the aforementioned statement and a brief mental experiment which we will address later, Block begins to invoke some of the greatest conundrums of the universe in an attempt to support his argument that free will is true doctrine and that determinism is not. Block does this, for example, by introducing Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle and the Big Bang theory:

“What about Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle? Doe [*sic*] this not mean, particularly at the molecular or electronic level, that there is a break between cause and effect? If so, there is an exception to the cause and effect assumption. What caused the Big Bang? What caused whatever caused the Big Bang? This would appear to be yet another exception to the general rule that all events are caused. Do we not become involved in an infinite regress if we keep pushing back along this chain of supposed causes and effects? If not, if there are indeed exceptions to this rule, why cannot free will be another exception?”

Here, Block’s first error is in attributing to determinists a perspective of how the universe was formed. One can hold a determinist view as to the structure of the brain and how choices are made without examining how the world was formed. That is, in the same manner in which a determinist can hold that $2+2=4$, a determinist can certainly hold a perspective on how the brain is structured and why choices result without in either case delving into the beginnings of the universe.

But let us entertain this straw man³ a bit. Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to consider the many theories of the origins of the universe, it seems appropriate to comment on Block’s representation of the Heisenberg uncertainty principle since he calls upon this principle in particular as he tries to establish a reason to doubt cause and effect. Block tells us that the Heisenberg principle states: “at the molecular or electronic level, that there is break between cause and effect.”

This is simply a misunderstanding of the principle. The uncertainty principle, is not about cause and effect, it is about *simultaneous measurement*. Specifically, the uncertainty principle holds that precise, *simultaneous measurement* of some complementary variables ---- such as the position and momentum of a subatomic particle ---- is impossible. There is no denial of cause and effect.

³ Referring to the informal fallacy in which one gives the impression of providing a rebuttal to their opponent’s argument by replacing the initial argument with a proposition of their own, proceeding to refute their own proposition instead of the original proposition.

Many scientists -- including Albert Einstein⁴ -- do not consider the Heisenberg uncertainty principle to mean that nature is not absolute. Rather, the Heisenberg uncertainty principle simply illustrates that human knowledge about the absolute nature of the universe is limited.

Einstein believed "...quantum theory could give us only a partial description of nature. He thought that Heisenberg's discovery showed that human knowledge is limited, but he also thought that nature is absolute. That is, he thought that there is no "uncertainty" in nature, and that the uncertainty exists only in our knowledge about it."

The fact that it is necessary for Block to attempt to invoke the deepest mysteries of the universe in order to justify the plausibility of his argument is telling of the wholesale lack of evidence to support it.

III. Arguments Against Determinism

After Block defines determinism and briefly explains free will, he presents this argument:

"Scenario 1: Joe is asked to choose between an apple and a banana. He chooses the apple.

"Scenario 2: Under gunpoint, Joe is compelled to choose between these two fruits. However, if he chooses the banana he will be shot. He chooses the apple.

"For the free will advocate there is a world of difference between the two cases: one is freely chosen, the other is chosen under duress. For the determinist there is no difference: both choices are caused, albeit by different preliminary events. This is a *reductio ad absurdum*. The word 'compulsion' is shorn of its usual meaning;; Indeed, of any meaning at all. The first case is clearly an example of free will;; The second, compulsion."

It is difficult to understand how Block believes he is presenting a *reductio ad absurdum*. In scenario 2 an outside factor is introduced, a person initiating force with a gun. It is clear how this has an influence on Joe's choice and that such an influence can be called compulsion. That is, a person threatening Joe with a gun forces or coerces Joe to act in a manner he may not have otherwise. This is a perfectly legitimate use of the word compulsion and differentiates it from other acts where coercion is not involved.

Moreover Block engages in circular reasoning to bolster his free will argument. He asserts without supporting evidence "the first case is clearly an example of

4] We introduce Einstein here in an attempt not to *Argumentum ad Verecundiam* but merely to point out that the Heisenberg principle is, itself, not settled as far as science is concerned. We hold that a position on the validity of the Heisenberg principle, contra Block, has no implications for the free will--determinism debate, and that the uncertainty about the Heisenberg principle merely adds another level of concern as to the value of its introduction into this paper.

free will;”. Yet this is the premise he presumably is trying to prove in his essay.

Block then creates a strawman argument with regard to the determinist position on punishment. He writes:

“Joe shoots an innocent person to death. He is caught and sentenced to punishment. He says at his sentencing, “But, I’m a determinist. I had no choice. Given historical and biological and other such causal events, I had to shoot that person. I could not have done otherwise than I did.” The defendant’s case is invalid. But the determinist would agree with this murderer. The determinist, as a so-called libertarian, might well still support using violence to prevent him from doing so again. However, if we stipulate, *arguendo*, that this criminal will never ever murder anyone else, or, indeed, not violate any aspect of the non--aggression principle (NAP) again, the determinist’s position implies we should let this individual go; that he is not blameworthy. The determinist’s position is thus forward looking. In contrast, from the free will libertarian position, it is only pragmatic or utilitarian to be forward looking in this manner. The true libertarian is backward looking. We don’t care (except for pragmatic or utilitarian considerations) what the future will bring. As deontological libertarians, we care only about what happened previously. Joe committed murder in the past. That and that alone justifies punishing him now. From the deterministic position, there cannot even be such a thing as ‘punishment.’

“There can only be “taking murderers out of circulation” so that they don’t commit murder in the future.”

Here, Block overlooks two very strong reasons that a determinist could be in favor of punishment of a criminal, that is for reasons of restitution and for reasons of deterrence. Indeed, once an individual has committed a criminal act, to the determinist, whether he will do it again or not, does not necessarily have to be considered, since punishment will act as a deterrence to other potential criminals and there is no reason that a determinist would necessarily be against this.

But further, although holding the free will perspective, the father of modern libertarianism, Murray Rothbard, in *The Ethics of Liberty*, considered restitution of *primary importance* in punishment of criminals. He wrote:

“The first point is that emphasis in punishment must be *not* on paying one’s debt to ‘society,’ whatever that means but on paying one’s ‘debt’ to the victim...prisons would not disappear in the libertarian society, but they would undoubtedly change drastically, since their goal would be to force the criminals to provide restitution to victims.”

There is nothing in Rothbard’s view here that a determinist could not agree with. It is not about the reason a criminal does something, (determinist or otherwise) but that the primary focus in a libertarian society should be on restitution. But restitution is a topic that Block entirely ignores in his paper. It

is not only a very important primary consideration for Rothbard, but certainly for determinists.

Block then goes on to make a claim that is even more difficult to understand.

He writes: “Another difficulty for the determinist philosophy is that it runs counter to Austrian economics. One of the key elements of this school of the dismal science is methodological dualism: that a different perspective must be brought to bear in the study of human action, on the one hand, and the physical world, on the other. Since under determinism man is merely in effect a machine, contrary to Austrianism, there is no need for a separate method to study these two very different [*sic*] aspects of reality....

“What is methodological dualism? It can be defined in this way (source: http://wiki.mises.org/wiki/Methodological_dualism;; footnotes omitted):

“ ‘Methodological dualism is an epistemological position which holds that it is necessary, based on our current levels of knowledge and understanding, to utilize a different methodology in our attempts to analyze the actions of human beings than the methodology used in the physical sciences (i.e. physics, biology etc...) to study external events. This position is based on the presupposition that humans differ fundamentally from other objects in the external world in that humans act, or in other words use means to achieve ends, while other objects in nature, such as stones, planets, molecules and atoms do not. Furthermore, we do not at present know how external events affect an individual's ‘thoughts, ideas, and judgements of value’ and this ignorance forces us to adopt a dualistic approach to the two classes of phenomena.’

“ ‘This view was emphasized by Ludwig von Mises and formed the central basis of his epistemology. Methodological dualism, especially in Mises's case, was a reaction to the notion held by groups such as the logical positivists that the study of human action, and as such economics, should utilize the same experimental scientific method as the physical sciences, a view that has been referred to by Mises, Friedrich Hayek and others as scientism. The alternative methodology that Mises developed and utilized for his study of human action was praxeology, which formed the basis for his work in economics. Praxeology differs from the mainstream neoclassical approach to economics, in that the mainstream approach utilizes the same overall methodology as the physical sciences in an attempt to develop economic theories and predict future economic.’

“It is difficult to overemphasize the importance of this point.”

In this instance, Block simply fails to correctly understand Mises and Hayek. Their advocacy of methodological dualism (MD) does not put them in the free will camp. MD has nothing to do with the free will/determinism debate. MD is about the methods that must be used to study different phenomena, namely human choices (whatever their origin) versus more simple non--human, much less complex, phenomena commonly categorized as physical phenomena. But this did not cause Mises and Hayek to rule out the determinist perspective, as Block

would have us believe. Indeed, both Mises and Hayek, to varying degrees, leave the door to the possibility of determinism wide open.

IV. Is it Philosophically Consistent to be a Libertarian and Reject Free Will?

Herbert Spencer, Ludwig von Mises, and Friedrich Hayek are noted libertarians who reject free will.

In his essay, “In Defense of Herbert Spencer,” the philosopher Max Hocutt states about Spencer: “He would also have regarded as absurd the proposition that his embrace of scientific determinism undermined the personal freedom he wanted to foster”.

In his magnum opus *Human Action*, Mises makes very clear that he does not rule out the deterministic perspective (The start of Chapter VI):

“Some philosophers are prepared to explode the notion of man’s will as an illusion and self--deception because man must unwittingly behave according to the inevitable laws of causality. They may be right or wrong from the point of view of the prime mover or the cause itself. However, from the human point of view action is the ultimate thing. We do not assert that man is ‘free’ in choosing acting. We merely establish the fact that he chooses and acts and that we are at a loss to use the methods of the natural sciences for answering the question why he acts this way or not otherwise.”

And in an important paper, Gary T. Dempsey discusses Hayek’s very sophisticated concept of determinism and why it is that it appears as though individuals act with a free will when they do not:

“Hayek embraces a connectionist theory of mind that exhibits the trial--and--error strategy increasingly employed by many artificial intelligence researchers...Hayek recognizes that his epistemology undermines the idea of free will because it implies that the mind’s operation is determined by the evolutionary interaction of the matter that comprises ourselves and the world around us. I point out, however, that Hayek responds to this implied determinism by explaining that it can have no practical impact on our day--to--day lives because, as he demonstrates, the complexity of the mind’s evolution prevents us from ever knowing how we are determined to behave. Instead, we can only know our mind at the instant we experience it...”

“Hayek’s view that the mind is a complex adaptive system or ‘spontaneous order’ holds a significant implication for the age--old controversy about free will—defined as a will that is *not* the exclusive and necessary result of the interaction of physical material. As far as we have seen, the mind consists of matter and its relations, and since everything can be realized in these materialist terms, there is simply no room for freedom of will. Indeed, it is another way of saying that our choices, judgments, and decisions are *determined* by the operation of the material that constitutes ourselves and the world, or as Oxford scholar John Gray summarizes Hayek’s view, ‘our ideas are merely the visible exfoliation of

spontaneous forces' (1986, p30). But if this account is correct, why should we do anything purposeful at all? Doesn't Hayek's materialism destroy the idea of goal-directed action?

“Not so fast, responds Hayek;; we can never introspectively predict how our mind is to be determined. Instead, ‘we can know [our mind] only through directly experiencing it’ (1952, p194). With regard to the issue of goal--directed action, then, Hayek makes it clear that his materialism makes no *practical* difference in our daily lives;; we must still conduct ourselves as if we are free because we can never know how we are meant to behave. Indeed, “ ‘we may...well be able to establish that every single action of a human being is the necessary result of the inherited structure of his body (particularly of its nervous system) and of all the external influences which have acted upon it since birth. We might be able to go further and assert that if the most important of these factors were in a particular case very much the same as with most other individuals, a particular class of influences will have a certain kind of effect. But this would be an empirical generalization based on a *ceteris paribus* assumption which we could not verify in the particular instance. The chief fact would continue to be, in spite of our knowledge of the principle on which the human mind works, that we should not be able to state the full set of particular facts which brought it about that the individual did a particular thing at a particular time (1989, pp86-87).’ “Hayek thus salvages the idea of goal--directed action from the grips of materialism by maintaining that we cannot avoid acting as if we are free because we are never in a position to know how we are determined to behave. In other words, Hayek does not assert that our will is free, but that *we are incapable of knowing how to behave like our will is unfree*”

Thus, neither Spencer, Mises, nor Hayek can be, according to Block, libertarians or Austrian economists because they do not hold a free will perspective! One must ask, what is left of the Austrian school of economics and of libertarianism under Block's rigid limitations, other than Block himself? Spencer, Mises, and Hayek are removed by Block's restrictions and Rothbard seemingly is questionable as to passing muster because his view of punishment is based on restitution, something that a determinist could also hold as a justification for punishment and something that Block does not appear to consider as a proper reason for punishment.

That Block's view of libertarianism excludes many of the seminal thinkers in the history of libertarian thought rates as a fatal flaw in Block's conclusions. Libertarianism is far more inclusive than just Walter Block and other libertarians who support the free will doctrine.

Spencer, Mises, Hayek, and Rothbard are libertarians to the degree that they support the non--aggression principle, regardless of the views that led them to such support. The core of libertarianism is support of NAP, not the method by which one arrives at such support. All should be welcomed to the libertarian camp who support NAP, regardless of their views on the free will--determinism debate, including Spencer, Mises, and Hayek.

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