

Responses to Chappell and Watson

Paul Hoffman

I would like to express my gratitude to Gary Watson and Vere Chappell for their comments on my paper. They are very thoughtful, illuminating and stimulating.

In the hope of providing some structure and clarity to my replies, I thought it would be useful to group them under four headings. First I would like to discuss Albritton's views, then Descartes's, then Locke's, and finally I'll say a little about how I understand weakness of will and about how I understand the slave analogy.

Albritton

Gary Watson raises at least three objections to my interpretation of Albritton.[\[1\]](#) First, he says that I intimate, he thinks, that Albritton overlooks the distinction between the input side and output side of will, whereas Albritton clearly is thinking of strength and weakness of will on the input side. I didn't mean to intimate that Albritton overlooks the distinction, but I can see how my remarks might easily be read that way. In any case, it is certainly true that I couldn't figure out how Albritton understood weakness of will and I am grateful to Watson for pointing out which now that he has pointed it out seems perfectly obvious that Albritton does think of weakness of will as pertaining to the input side. This is significant because it reveals that Albritton's views about the relation of weakness of will to freedom of will are in direct opposition to Descartes's.

Second, Watson objects that I misread Albritton when I ascribe to him the view that when we act out of passion we are not doing anything. I still think that I have got Albritton right on this point. Watson and I are in fundamental agreement, although I confess that it goes by quickly in my paper, that Albritton distinguishes two sorts of relations that desire and other passions have to choice. First, they can serve as reasons for choosing. Second, they can bypass choice. When a desire gives us reasons for choosing, Albritton says that we act in view of desire. But Albritton distinguishes acting in view of desire from acting from desire, out of fear, and on impulse. And Albritton suggests that it is when these latter locutions are appropriate that will is bypassed and we are not doing anything. Moreover, Albritton holds that these cases are more common than those in which we act in view of desire.[\[2\]](#)

So the dispute between Descartes and Albritton, as I see it, concerns what is going on when we act from or out of desire or other such passions. Descartes wants to say that in at least some such cases the passions operate through choice so that we can be said to be doing something, even though our choice might not be free since it is not up to us. Albritton wants to avoid saying that passions operate through choice: either we act in view of them, in which case they don't operate on us at all, or they bypass choice, in which case we are not acting.

Third, Watson calls into question my claim that Albritton identifies freedom of will with the liberty of indifference. I don't think Watson wants to go so far as to deny that Albritton makes that identification. I think he wants merely to claim that I have not established that Albritton makes the identification. I concede that the evidence is not conclusive, but I don't see Albritton as a conditionalist, nor do I believe does Watson, and I am inclined to stick to my reading unless I am presented with a rival positive account that seems more plausible.

But let me present an additional reason for thinking of Albritton as subscribing to the liberty of indifference. One of Watson's points that I find especially illuminating is that the key to understanding Albritton's view is understanding why he thinks unfreedom of the will is incomprehensible. But Watson thinks that it becomes harder to understand how Albritton could think unfreedom of the will is incomprehensible if we take him to subscribe to the liberty of indifference, because "the conditions for liberty of indifference ...do not look like conditions that necessarily obtain." My own view is just the opposite. I am inclined to think that the incomprehensibility of unfreedom of the will might make sense if freedom of the will were identified with the liberty of indifference. Here is one line of argument that moves me in that direction: If it could be shown that even a weak will is necessarily indifferent, then it would follow, assuming that freedom of will is identified with the liberty of indifference, that even a weak will is necessarily free. Certainly it does not follow from the conception of freedom as indifference that even a weak will is necessarily indifferent. But Albritton seems to think that it is of the very nature of the will that it is always indifferent. His view seems to be, first, that willing is choosing or deciding, and that choosing or deciding requires indifference; and second, that limiting or removing choices is different from removing the freedom of those choices.

Vere Chappell also raises an objection to my interpretation of Albritton. He objects that I cannot consistently maintain that Albritton thinks it is sufficient for freedom of will that what we propose to do is up to us, given that I also think that the liberty of indifference is a second component of Albritton's conception of freedom of the will. In reply to this objection let me say that I don't regard Albritton's conception of freedom of will as having two components β in the sense of having two necessary conditions. Rather I claim to see in Albritton an implicit analysis of the up-to condition in terms of the liberty of indifference. So I think that Descartes and Albritton are in agreement, and furthermore are correct, in maintaining that the up-to condition is necessary and sufficient for freedom of will. But they offer incompatible analyses of the up-to condition. Both analyses are problematic. If we follow Albritton in understanding the up-to condition in terms of liberty of indifference, then the unacceptable consequence, I claim, is that our choices are fundamentally inexplicable. If we follow Descartes in understanding the up-to condition in terms of being compelled by the clear and distinct ideas of reason, then it follows that our choices are up to us only if we identify the self with reason.

Gary Watson objects to my main criticism of Albritton's view, namely, that if the will is always indifferent, then we are mysterious in a way I find unsatisfactory. Watson points out that Albritton holds that such questions as why someone does or does not choose in accordance with reason are "not answerable by appealing to reasons. And this must be conceded. But it is only if we assume that any non-rational explanations will somehow threaten free will that Albritton can't allow for such further explanations as there might be. But this assumption is not obviously correct."[\[3\]](#)

I agree fully with this diagnosis. So let me try to take up the challenge and say something in defense of the assumption that the non-rational explanations would threaten free will. It seems to me that the further candidate explanations would have to be causal (because what

other explanations do we have besides rational and causal?). And I think causal explanations of choosing or proposing do threaten free will on what I take to be Albritton's conception of free will. Why do I think that? I think that Albritton is an incompatibilist. One important piece of evidence for that is found, I think, in his discussion of the relation of belief to choice that I went over in some detail in my paper. Albritton seems to think that if trying to walk could be contingently blocked by belief, then our wills wouldn't be absolutely free. I take this to imply that he thinks contingent explanations, that is, causal explanations, of our proposals or choices or our tryings would undermine our freedom. More fundamentally, I think that Albritton is an incompatibilist because it seems to me that if one is a libertarian, as Watson agrees Albritton very much seems to be, and if one subscribes to the liberty of indifference, then to be consistent one must be an incompatibilist.

Descartes

In his closing remarks Watson asks me how the idea that freedom requires that something be up to us and the idea of freedom as rational self-realization fit together in the Cartesian view.

I think that Descartes's view is that those two distinct ideas of freedom amount to the same thing. Something is up to us so long as it follows from our nature β but since our nature is reason β freedom amounts to rational self-realization.

Watson raises the objection that if Descartes's conception of what it is to be up to us does not require that our nature, our practical core, be in our power, then the requirement that what we do must be completely up to us cannot be used as an argument against rival views such as Watson's own that hold that our actions (or our choices) are up to us just in case they are dependent on our evaluational system.

I agree with Watson that Descartes's account of what it is to be up to us is weaker than we might like. On Descartes's account, what we are β our nature β is not up to us. But I don't think it follows from that important admission that one can't use the requirement in question β that we are free so long as something is up to us β to criticize rival accounts. No matter whether one thinks that Descartes is right or wrong in holding that it is a sufficient condition for something to be up to us that it follows from our nature, one might agree with him that it is a necessary condition for something to be up to us that it follows from our nature and use that as a basis for criticizing the view that a sufficient condition for free agency (or free will) is acting or choosing in accordance with those courses of action we identify with. The objection would be that our identification with a certain course of action might not be something that follows from our nature (if, for example, our identification with a course of action results from our being overcome by a passion).

In appealing to the Cartesian view that it is a necessary condition for something's being up to us that it follow from our nature to make this criticism of Watson, I was assuming that Watson views the self as distinct from the person's evaluational system, that is, from the courses of action that the person identifies with. Such a distinction between the self and the person's evaluational system would make room for the possibility that it is not up to the self whether it identifies with a particular evaluational system.

But in his comments Watson makes it clear, which I did not realize before, that instead of distinguishing the self from the person's evaluational system, he wants to identify the self with the person's evaluational system. Given that he makes this identification, then I agree

with him that the crucial issue in choosing between his account of freedom and Descartes's account is whether it is preferable to identify the self with intellect or reason or with the person's evaluational system. I have already expressed dissatisfaction with the Cartesian identification of the self with reason. And I have been tempted to suppose that the self is something we ourselves construct by internalizing or failing to internalize various social roles such as those of parent, teacher, researcher, neighbor, citizen, and so on. So I do have sympathies with Watson's view. But other times I am enough of a Cartesian to think that Descartes is correct in holding that the self is a subject and that it has a nature that is not up to us, which I take to preclude identification of the self with the person's evaluational system.

Still a further claim Watson makes about my interpretation of Descartes's account of free will is this: unless the individual's choice to adopt or not adopt the regimen by which we subdue our passionate natures is free, then the realization of complete freedom will not necessarily be within our power. This is correct. While Descartes believes that even the weakest souls have the capacity to gain absolute control over their passions, he does not think that it is entirely up to them whether that capacity will be developed. On the contrary, he suggests that they will need training and guidance from other people (I 50). [\[4\]](#) Moreover, a person with absolute control over the passions is not necessarily completely free. Complete freedom for Descartes requires that all our judgments and choices follow from clear and distinct ideas. This is an unattainable ideal. Our intellectual limitations together with the fact that we cannot avoid making judgments pertaining to action entail that some of our judgments will not be compelled by clear and distinct ideas. Such judgments will not be fully free. So even if our choices always follow our firm and decisive judgments concerning good and evil and never follow a present passion, not all of our choices will be fully free, since not all of those judgments will be fully free.

Locke

Vere Chappell sets out in his comment to understand the Hoffman-Albritton up-to condition. He endorses a Lockean interpretation of that condition: our choices are free, they are up to us, so long as we have the ability not to make them. I see this Lockean analysis of the up-to condition as a third rival to Albritton's account of the up-to condition and to Descartes's account of the up-to condition. On my interpretation of Albritton, the up-to condition is analyzed in terms of the liberty of indifference. On my interpretation of Descartes, the up-to condition is analyzed in terms of following from our nature. On the Lockean account of the up-to condition, a choice is up to us if we have the ability not to make it.

I'll say something about the merits of the Lockean analysis when I turn to my own views, but let me first raise a historical objection to Chappell's use of that Lockean analysis to defend Albritton, against me, for holding that the freedom of the will is absolute. Chappell endorses the view that "it is always possible for an agent who is facing a choice to suspend or put off making that choice." I agree with Chappell that Locke believes that the crucial determinant in settling the question whether our freedom is absolute is (and here I paraphrase Locke) whether we can suspend our desires and stop them from determining our wills to any action, until we have duly and fairly examined the good and evil of it. [\[5\]](#) But Locke himself, in contrast to Chappell, denies that it is always possible for an agent to suspend or put off making a choice, so that in fact his views more nearly resemble Descartes's than they do Albritton's. So Locke says,

in most cases we are able to suspend the present satisfaction of any desire.

§53 But if any extreme disturbance (as sometimes it happens) possesses our whole Mind, as when the pain of the Rack, an impetuous *uneasiness*, as of Love, Anger, or any other violent Passion, running away with us, allows us not the liberty of thought, and we are not Masters enough of our own Minds to consider thoroughly, and examine fairly; God, who knows our frailty, pities our weakness, and requires of us no more than we are able to do, and sees what was, and was not in our power, will judge as a kind and merciful Father. [\[6\]](#)

I take this passage as decisive evidence, in spite of some passages that point in the other direction, that Locke, in contrast to Chappell and Albritton, does not think it is a conceptual truth that our wills cannot be constrained on the input side by the passions. On the contrary, he agrees with Descartes that the passions can deprive us of liberty.

Hoffman

At one point Watson raises the question whether I conceive of weakness of will as involving an inability to choose the good or just an unwillingness to choose the good. On the basis of my discussion of the slave analogy, he infers that I mean an unwillingness.

My discussion of the slave is confusing in various respects, and I will try in a minute to say something to clarify that aspect of my paper. But my proposal about weakness of will, advanced on Descartes's behalf, is that it is neither an inability or an unwillingness, but something intermediate.

I want to focus on cases in which we have the ability, and we try our best, and yet we still fail. That is, we have the ability to resist the passions, we try to resist them, and yet they still overcome us and we choose contrary to our better judgment. I think this sort of thing happens with respect to other kinds of failure \wp that we fail even though we have the ability and try our best \wp and I don't see why it can't also happen with choice.

It seems to me that these kinds of failures regarding choice result in a loss of freedom of the will. This is the main reason why I don't think the Lockean account provides a sufficient condition for freedom of will. I think that there are plenty of cases in which we have the ability to do or to choose otherwise than we do, but in which it is not fully within our control whether we exercise that ability. Another way to make this point is this: we might have the power to do something, but it might not be fully within our control whether that power is actualized. So if an external force prevents us from exercising our ability to choose in accordance with our better judgment, then I want to say that the resulting choice is not free \wp it is not under our control.

There might be other sorts of cases, the sorts of cases Watson has in mind, in which we choose contrary to our better judgment even when there is nothing opposing that judgment. We are just unwilling. If there are such cases I would prefer to describe them by saying not that our will is weak, but that our will is lazy. But if there are such cases they pose a problem for me. I am not sure how laziness, that is, mere unwillingness to choose in accordance with our better judgment in the absence of competing desires, can be explained. And this conflicts with my fundamental intuition that a satisfactory account of choice must render our choices explicable, at least in principle.

Let me conclude with a few remarks about the slave analogy. And here I have been greatly helped by a series of e-mail exchanges with Vere Chappell. My reason for examining the slave analogy is that it is one of Descartes's primary analogies to help us understand how the will's choices might not be free. My strategy is to say what seems natural about the

slave, independently of the positions I have already adopted, and then to use these insights to help evaluate those positions. It turns out that conflicts are generated with what seems natural to say about the slave and what I have already claimed about the relation between strength of will and freedom of will.

The cases of the obedient slave and the disobedient slave are importantly different. The obedient slave counts as an Aristotelian mixed case in which the constraint β namely, the master's threat β operates through the will. [7] But in the disobedient slave case it is the external action that is constrained β that is, the slave starts to act in one way and is physically forced to "act" in another way. The physically forced "action" of the disobedient slave is not really an action of his.

It seems right that the free will of the disobedient slave has not been diminished. But it also seems right that had the disobedient slave been physically stronger, thereby enabling his will to be more efficacious, his freedom of action would therefore not be diminished either. This is what generates the problem β if the slave analogy helps us understand how our choices might not be free, and if the disobedient slave's lack of freedom arises from a lack of strength on the output side of his will, then why can't the will's lack of freedom also arise from a lack of strength on its output side?

As for the obedient slave, I remain puzzled. I do think there is some important sense in which his choice is not free, even supposing that he could choose to disobey. But I keep wavering on whether to say that the freedom of will of the obedient slave has been diminished. Albritton thinks that it has not, since the obedient slave is similar to a case he considers. Albritton maintains that even with a gun pointed at me, it is up to me whether to do what the gunman says. And there seems something importantly right about that. It is fully up to the slave, it is fully within his power, to choose to obey or to disobey, moreover, it is fully within his control whether he exercises that power, and so his choice is free in that sense. And maybe that is all we mean by talking about free will β we are talking about the control over the exercise of the power to choose. At the same time, there seems to me to be another notion of freedom, one I can't put my finger on, according to which it seems true that the obedient slave's choice is not free.

NOTES

1. Some of Gary Watson's objections to which I am responding because I find them important and illuminating do not appear in the final version of his comments but only in an earlier draft.
2. Rogers Albritton, "Freedom of the Will and Freedom of Action," *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, (59) 1985, p. 248.
3. This quotation is from the draft, not the final version.
4. References to Descartes's *The Passions of the Soul* are cited in parentheses in the text by part and article.
5. John Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, edited with a forward by Peter A. Niddich (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), II, xxi, 52.

6. *ibid.*, II, xxi, 52-53.

7. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk. III, Ch. 1, 1110a5- 19.

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