

Study guide II for the Ross chapter (with questions to be answered)

The issue

The main issue in the Ross chapter that seems to me to be of interest to us right now is this key question:

Is there any empirical evidence in favor of, or against, the existence of libertarian-style free will in human beings? That is, what empirical evidence might tell us whether or not we can make choices that are not causally determined by prior events or states?

(Ross says he's worried about the evidence for or against our having "control" of our actions. But I think the arguments he presents are really about whether our choice-makings are caused. He just assumes a version of the consequence argument that says if our choice-making processes are causally determined, then we lack control. This assumption appears on the very first page. This leads him to use the word "control" throughout the rest of the paper whenever he wonders whether our choice-making results from a causally-determined process. I would rather not assume the validity of that version of the consequence argument, since I think it is invalid, and so I suggest that we just understand that when Ross talks about "control" of our choice-making, he really means to be talking about whether our choice-making is causally determined. I think this helps us get Ross' points without having to assume anything about the relationship between causation and loss of control.)

Ross focuses only on the possibility that our choice-makings are brought about by our own prior mental states or mental events (rather than by our genetics, or what we ate for breakfast, for example) or by our own brain states or brain events. Thus, the main issue that Ross actually talks about in the chapter is not as broad as the one given above. Here is what I think he actually talks about:

Is there any empirical evidence in favor of, or against, the hypothesis that an agent's brain states or events, or the agent's mental states or events, cause the agent to make the choices he/she makes?

Brain states/events as causes

Ross discusses only one group of arguments specifically about brain states/events as possible causes of our choice-makings – arguments based on quantum theory. Probably Ross limits the discussion in that way because the only pro-libertarian-choice empirical arguments rely on quantum theory. Kane's arguments are used by Ross as the example of such arguments.

Quantum theory is empirically-based, but there is debate within physics about how to interpret it. The standard interpretation holds that quantum theory implies that the activity of subatomic particles is not completely causally determined. (For example, there simply is no causal explanation for why a particular bit of radioactive material emits a particular particle at a particular time; such events have measurable probabilities, but no sufficient causes.) Ross makes the point that even if the standard interpretation of quantum theory is accepted, there is no empirical evidence that quantum indeterminacy plays the role in brain activity that Kane speculates it might. At this point there is no empirical evidence that the brain is a quantum magnifier that makes the indeterminacy of subatomic events into macro events such as the firing of a neuron.

So, at this point, quantum theory doesn't really provide any empirical evidence in favor of the existence of libertarian free will. (Kane, of course, never claimed otherwise. He only claimed to be making libertarian free will "intelligible".) Nor does quantum theory rule out libertarian free will.

This means we are still searching for an answer to the question: Is there any empirical evidence for or against the idea that our mental states/events or brain states/events cause us to make the choices we make (so that libertarian free will is ruled out)?

The only claimed source of empirical evidence: introspection

Ross believes that the widespread belief in libertarian free will rests on just one type of empirical evidence: introspection. (Introspection is a very tricky sort of evidence to rely on, since it is not open to public inspection. Some psychologists completely reject its use, but in practice it is very difficult if not impossible to get along without it.) Ross may well be right in claiming that introspective evidence is the only type of empirical evidence that might help support the belief in libertarian free will.

Suppose we allow that introspection can provide legitimate evidence of what is going on in a person's mental life. What specific sort of introspective content would be relevant to supporting the idea of libertarian free will? Here I think Ross should have been much cleaner and more thoughtful.

Let me lead up to my point by using the example of pain. Suppose you say that you are in pain – perhaps you say you have a headache. Since I'm an obnoxious philosopher with no sense of propriety, I ask you what evidence you have for your claim that you have a headache. Because you are polite and know that I'm just weird, you play along and give me a serious answer: you say your knowledge is based on your experiencing the pain, and the character of the experience is such that it feels as though the pain is located in your head. In other words, your evidence for your belief that you have a headache is your feeling the headache, your experiencing the headache, and you are able to verify that you have that feeling by introspection.

Notice that the empirical evidence in this case is your own experience. Your belief that you have a headache is NOT the evidence. Rather, the evidence is the conscious experience of feeling the headache. This is a private experience, it seems; I don't feel your headache; no one else does either.

So, by the same token, if I say that I have introspective empirical evidence in favor of my belief that my choice-making is not caused by anything, then I should be saying that I have some sort of personal experiences, accessible to me by introspection, that are experiences of not being caused by anything to make my choices. Ross talks about people introspecting and finding that they experience their choice-making as free (i.e., uncaused). I think that way of putting it is fine.

It is crucially important to recognize that what is needed here in the way of evidence for libertarian freedom is an *experience*, not just a *belief*. My *belief* that the choice-making process I just went through is uncaused is only a belief. It is not evidence for the uncaused character of my choice. The fact that I believe something is not evidence that the thing I believe is true. After all, if I say I believe in ghosts, and you ask me for evidence of the existence of ghosts, it is not acceptable to say that my evidence is that I believe in ghosts.

So, even if it were true that every human being on the face of the earth believes that he/she has libertarian free will, that is not empirical evidence that people really do have libertarian free will. Beliefs are not what we are looking for. Experiences are what we are looking for – something about the introspected character of our choice-making processes as we experience them. We need that character to have an “uncaused” feel to it. It's not enough that we *believe* it to be uncaused; the experience of making a choice must “feel” uncaused. It's not enough that I believe I could have chosen otherwise; I have to experience something in my mental life that has a “could have chosen otherwise” character to it.

Ross and I part company

Ross seems willing to accept that people everywhere do have the requisite introspected experiences – that is, that people really do experience their choice-making as uncaused. This then sets the stage for Ross to ask whether it is possible that these experiences of freedom are illusory. He goes on to discuss some of the psychological experiments that might raise doubts about the reliability of our introspections of being uncaused when making choices.

In contrast, I do not at the point accept the accuracy of the claim that people experience their choice-making processes as uncaused. I agree that many people believe their choice-making processes are sometimes uncaused, but, again, it is important to remember that belief isn't the issue. I'm not sure what it would even be like to experience a choice-making as uncaused.

Try the following experiment for yourself. Seriously. Try paying very close attention when you make a conscious decision about something when there is at least a little deliberation going on. What actually happens in your consciousness as the process begins, proceeds, and finally ends with a decision? Step-by-step, does it seem to follow a pattern like this:

- a. One or two relevant considerations pop into mind
- b. Maybe a couple more considerations pop into mind, perhaps triggered by some association with one of the considerations above.
- c. Maybe a quick review of the considerations, making them more vivid or clearer.
- d. The choice of which way to go then simply occurs. In some cases, the choice is preceded by a conscious weighting of some of the considerations. In other cases, this doesn't seem to happen.

The above seems to me to be the best I can do to introspect how I make everyday choices. Does it work this way for you as well?

I don't see anything about my experience of choice-making that is an experience of its not being caused. Nor do I experience it as being caused. Rather, my experience seems to me to be of things just happening. I don't take the fact that ideas just pop into my head as evidence of their appearance's being uncaused. In fact, I assume that there are associations in my brain that I am not aware of that trigger ideas to pop like that. But these are beliefs about the origins of my ideas. Beliefs are not evidence of their own truth.

The thing that I'm talking about now is similar to a point made centuries ago by David Hume. In discussing our experiences of cause and effect in the physical world, Hume asks the question whether we ever experience a causal connection, and concludes that we do not. I'm asking about our introspection of cause and effect in the mental world. What would it be like to experience a choice as caused? As uncaused?

What this means: Ross is willing to say that people do experience their choices as uncaused, while I am not willing to say that. If I am right, then there are no experiences accessible to introspection that support or deny libertarian accounts of free will.

So what?

Suppose I'm right. Does that mean we can skip the rest of Ross' arguments about the possible limitations of introspection? I don't think so. I think that there are still ideas in Ross' discussion that are worth thinking about. And, of course, there is also the possibility that I'm wrong about the irrelevance of introspection.

Take a look at his discussion of Type I and Type II errors. Write a brief summary of what you think about the following questions:

1. Why, according to Ross' way of setting this up, why can we ignore empirical evidence that Type IIa errors occur? (That is, why are these errors supposedly irrelevant to the issue?)

2. Why, according to Ross' way of setting this up, are Type IIb errors relevant, if they are systematic enough?
3. What are Ross' reasons for saying that there is at present no empirical evidence for the existence of systematic Type IIb errors, in spite of the work of Wegner and others?
4. Is Ross right that only Type IIb errors are relevant to the discussion of introspective evidence for free will?
5. If I am right that there really is no empirical evidence in favor of the existence of libertarian free will, then is there any way to explain why so many people seem to believe in libertarian free will?