

Introductory remarks about the Vargas chapter

In order to see what Vargas is doing, it is essential to see what he is assuming about the work of the other authors we have talked about:

Vargas assumes that the libertarians and the compatibilists (including Fischer) and even Pereboom are all trying to analyze and debate about “our” shared concepts of free will and MR. The disputes between these various camps are seen as being disputes about the conditions that must be satisfied by an agent in order to be MR according to the common conception of MR.

So, for example, Pereboom would be seen as arguing that no one can reasonably be thought to be MR, ever, with any degree of confidence, because the conditions required for being MR are probably not satisfiable. Pereboom’s arguments for this conclusion are supposedly based on the common conception of MR.

Vargas will argue that there are indeed some elements of our common conception of MR that imply incompatibilism between MR and DET and between free will and DET. To establish this point, though, Vargas is not going to argue for libertarianism or incompatibilism. Rather, he is going to look at cultural evidence of libertarian or incompatibilist ideas built into the way we think about MR. This is thus not an attempt to argue for the correctness of libertarianism, but rather an attempt to establish that our common conceptions are somewhat libertarian.

In fact, after doing what he can to establish the above point, Vargas turns against libertarianism, in the sense that he then argues that there is not any solid empirical evidence in its favor, and there is some reason to think that the libertarian views of free choice are not about choice-making that actually occurs in the real world.

You might then think that he is like Pereboom in arguing that we should give up on MR. But that is not where Vargas is headed. Instead, he wants to convince us that the best course for human society today would be to adopt a revised conception of MR that does not require libertarian free will. He will try to sketch out a version of that conception and convince us that society would be better off if that conception were adopted in place of the current conception of MR, and he will argue that the revisions needed to pull this off will result in a conception of MR that does the jobs we want done by the current conception. In other words, we don’t have anything to lose by switching to the new conception.