Free will, determinism and the "problem" of structure and agency in the social sciences

> Sociology does not need to choose between the great hypotheses which divide metaphysicians. It needs to embrace free will no more than determinism. All that it asks is that the principle of causality be applied to social phenomena (Durkheim 1966, 141).
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> Causality...is not a cab, which one can have stopped at one's pleasure; it is all or nothing (Weber 1970, 119)

1. Structure and Agency

The so-called "problem" of structure and agency has been dubbed "*the* central problem in social and political theory" (Carlsnaes 1992, 245). Charged with the task of explaining and understanding human behaviour, the social sciences are faced with the apparent dichotomy between individuals' free agency and the social-structural causation that bears upon them. Certain types of social inquiry are conventionally seen to be orientated more to one side of this dichotomy than the other. Classical social science of the Marxian and Durkheimian varieties proffer explanatory analyses in which individuals' beliefs, desires, opportunities, and actions appear to be constrained or determined by causes emanating from the social system in which they are embedded. In sharp contrast, "interpretive" or "intentionalist" forms of social inquiry present a vision in which social order emerges from open, fluid and indeterminate rules, norms and conventions that are generated and maintained through individuals' reflexive agency. In this portrayal, individuals "create society through contingent acts of freedom" (Alexander, quoted by Carlsnaes 1992, 255).

However, the default theoretical strategy nowadays is to seek to avoid both extremes. This is founded on Anthony Giddens's structuration theory (1984), and Roy Bhaskar's (1989) critical realist "transformational model of social activity".[1]

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[1] For the purpose of this paper I categorise both theories as structurationist. I am aware that critical realists may balk at their theories being classified as "structurationist". But I want to bracket the differences in order to focus on the shared ground. This consists essentially in the propositions that agents constitute and maintain social structure, and that social structure *conditions* and *influences*, but does not *determine*, agents' choices, decisions and actions. The

These theories are grounded on the metaphysical postulation that the essential property of individuals' agency is their ability to have acted differently to how they actually acted. As Giddens (1984, 9) puts it: "agency concerns events of which an individual is the perpetrator, in the sense that the individual could, at any phase in a given sequence of conduct, have acted differently".[2] This conception of agency seems to place the individual beyond the reach of social-structural causation, but structurationist theory recognises a "conditioning" and "influencing" role for social structure.

Even so, structurationists continue to argue over whether "either agency is privileged over structure, or structure over agency" (Carlsnaes 1992, 250), with critical realists insisting on the "ontological separateness" of "structure" and "agency", against Giddens's alleged "conflation" of them (Piiroinen 2014, 81-2). They also seek to know "whether or not particular social outcomes were the result of agential or structural forces" (Wight 2006, 243; Hay 2002, 113). Archer (1982, 459; also Bieler and Morton 2001, 9) even talks of "specify[ing] when there will be 'more voluntarism' or 'more determinism' ". The task of addressing these questions is conceived metaphysically, as "essentially an ontological problem" (Wight 2006, 3). To the extent that these questions make sense, I will argue that they have to be taken as empirical and interpretive, not metaphysical or ontological, questions.

The problem of structure and agency is often acknowledged by antagonists to have its roots in longstanding philosophical debates on the metaphysical question of free will ("voluntarism") and determinism (Carlsnaes 1992, 245). In this paper I seek to show that, and how, familiarisation with the philosophical debates could bring

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generic term "structurationist" that I deploy henceforth is meant to highlight the similarities, without denying the differences.

[2] Cf. Giddens (1976, 75): "it is analytical to the concept of agency…that a person 'could have acted otherwise' "; Bhaskar (1989, 114): "it is analytic to the concept of action that the agent could have acted otherwise"; Manicas (1996, 158): "it is analytic to the concept of action that the agent could have done otherwise";* Lawson (1997, 9): "any individual could always have acted otherwise"; Hay (2002, 94): "the notion of agency implies…a sense of free will, choice or autonomy – that the actor could have behaved differently"; Hays (1994, 63): "the central point that is implied in all definitions of agency: alternative courses of action are available, and the agent therefore could have acted otherwise"; Fuchs (2001, 26): "humans have free wills; they can always do otherwise".

* Giddens, Bhaskar and some other structurationists conceive the ability to act otherwise as an analytic entailment of the concept *action* or *agency*, but it evidently is not. Frankfurt (1969) famously argued, to the satisfaction of many – but by no means all - philosophers, that an agent can act freely and responsibly even when they *could not* have acted otherwise.

much-needed clarity to the problem of structure and agency. However, this clarity issues in the *dissolution* of the problem as it is typically construed. The crux of my argument is that structure and agency theorists systematically fail to distinguish the metaphysical from the empirical modality of the relation between social structure and individual agency. Once this is recognised it can be seen that the "problem" of structure and agency is not a metaphysical problem, but just an intrinsic aspect of the range of empirical and interpretive issues that it is the social sciences' raison d'être to investigate. This contention will be illustrated via a case study of the competing explanations of perpetrator behaviour in historian Christopher Browning's (2001), and political scientist Daniel Goldhagen's (1997), celebrated studies of the German Order Police in the Holocaust.

2. Free Will and Determinism / Structure and Agency

The metaphysical problem of free will and determinism arises from the difficulty of reconciling two seemingly unavoidable, but mutually contradictory, core beliefs about ourselves as human beings and the wider world of which we are a part. The first is that it is *free will* that distinguishes human beings from all others; the second is that human beings are wholly *natural* creatures, embedded in the ongoing causal order of the universe.

Free will, as conceived by the theorists cited in note 2, consists paradigmatically in the ability to choose an action from a range of possible alternatives, thence to enact the chosen alternative. This ability is phenomenologically familiar to everyone. As John Searle (2001, 15) reminds us, if one reflects on "any situation of rational decision making and acting" one will elicit the experience of facing "alternative possibilities" of action. From this first-person standpoint it certainly *seems* to be the case that, whatever action one did perform, one *could* have acted differently. However, from the third-person naturalistic standpoint it can be hard to see how this experience of freedom corresponds to something real.

Naturalism is the metaphysical assumption that the universe contains no non-natural or super-natural entities, substances, powers, forces or events. Thus human beings are creatures made up solely of physical, chemical, and biological materials and processes. Human actions are therefore natural events, occurring in space and time. Because human actions are natural events, and if every natural event has a cause, or a set of causal conditions, as most philosophers believe to be the case, then human actions must also be causally generated. Every human action is, then, preceded by a set of events and conditions (typically taken to consist in an admixture of beliefs and desires) that brought about its occurrence.

Here we come up against the fundamental problem at the core of the debate over free will and determinism: How can an action that is *caused* be free? The very

idea can seem oxymoronic. If all human actions are caused, then it seems that the actor's experience of facing genuine alternative possibilities is illusory.

It is apparent that the problem of structure and agency closely resembles the metaphysical problem of free will and determinism. The former ponders: How can individuals be subject to social-structural causation and freely- choosing and acting agents? Its resemblance to the metaphysical problem is acknowledged by those structurationists that describe the problem of structure and agency (confusedly, and question-beggingly) as the need to overcome the "dualism between voluntarism and determinism" (Archer 1982, 456; Carlsnaes 1992, 245; Lewis 2000, 250; Bieler & Morton 2001, 9).

It might be claimed that there is something specific to the problem of structure and agency in virtue of the peculiar *ontology* of social structure.[3] It is widely acknowledged that human agency is a necessary condition for the existence and functioning of social structure. "Social structures", Bhaskar (1989, 40) proclaims, "exist only in virtue of, and are exercised only in, human agency" (cf. Giddens 1976, 121; Wendt 1987, 359), and are "concept dependent", that is, operate only via people's understandings of their activities and relations with one another. Because of these features of its ontology, structurationists maintain that social structure can only *influence* or *condition* action, not *determine* it (see sections 5.I and 5.II below for further discussion).

I contend, though, that the *ontology* of social structure is irrelevant to the question of whether, and how, it impacts causally on individuals' possibilities of action. In my view, social structure could just as well exercise causal effects on individuals if it consists solely in the actions, beliefs and understandings of the individuals that constitute it, as it could if it exists at a supra-individual level of reality. No-one would think that because a crowd or mob is made up solely of individuals and their understandings that it can only behave in the way that its constituent members are motivated to act qua individuals.

There are, nevertheless, important questions to ask about the causal effects of social structure on people's possibilities of acting. I will go on to argue that, for the purposes of social science, these are empirical (and of course, interpretive), not metaphysical, questions. Addressing the empirical questions needs no concern with whether people *have* free will or how it is *possible* in relation to the wider causal order. In my view, the real questions for the social sciences concern the conditions under which people are able to *exercise* their free will and in which ways they may be susceptible to various sources and modes of social-structural causation. This

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[3] For example, Colin Hay (2009, 265) asserts: "the nature of the relationship between structure and agency is of a qualitatively different kind if the structures in question are natural/physical than if they are social/political".

contention will be substantiated after setting out the available stances in the contemporary philosophical debate over free will and determinism. The aim of this exercise is partly to show which stances on free will and determinism are metaphysically plausible from the point of view of the social sciences, but ultimately to show that no particular stance is strictly needed.

3. Is Free Will Compatible with Causal Determination?

A natural reaction to the intuition that the causal determination of actions would exclude the possibility of the agent being able to have acted other than they did is to think that free actions are not determined by antecedent causes. But on further reflection the *absence* of causation looks no more hospitable to free action than its presence. The problem is that if actions are not caused (by the actor's beliefs and desires), then they would appear to be random, capricious and irrational.

We seem, then, to be left with the conundrum that free will is incompatible with choices, decisions and actions being causally determined, yet also incompatible with them *not* being causally determined. Attempted solutions to the conundrum divide between embracement and rejection of this incompatibility.

Those philosophers that affirm the intuition that free actions cannot be causally determined are known as *incompatibilists*. Incompatibilism subdivides into *hard determinists*, who that assert that causal determination reigns universally and therefore there is no free will, and *libertarians*, who reason that because there are free human actions, causal determination does not reign universally. Both branches of incompatibilism have historically been, and still are, the minority views in philosophy, though there are more libertarians than hard determinists (Nichols 2007). The majority view, known as *compatibilism*, holds that there is no incompatibility between an action being free and it being causally determined. Robert Kane (1999, 218), a leading libertarian, describes compatibilism as "the reigning view among contemporary philosophers".

Before proceeding, a note on the meaning and use of "determinism" is in order. "Determinism" is one of those words in the vocabulary of contemporary social science that is invariably deployed pejoratively against someone else's theory or explanation. To say that a theory, explanation or interpretation is "deterministic" is typically presented as a fundamental objection to it, with no further elaboration required (Duus-Otterström 2009, 575). For example, Archer (1982, 458) presents the view of "institutions as causes of action" as having "deterministic overtones". I will argue later that the proposition that institutions are causes of action is in itself neutral between a deterministic and indeterministic conception of causation.

The reason that determinism is frequently seen to be so objectionable is probably due to the fatalistic connotations of the concept. Fatalism is the idea that what happens occurs *regardless* of the aims, desires, and intentions of the actors involved, and that what will happen in the future has already been fixed and we are

inexorably reeled in by it.[4] It is encapsulated by the thought that the exact time and mode of one's death has been fixed - *predestined* - even before one's birth (not just that there will be some particular day in the future on which one will die, from some particular set of causes, which themselves are the consequence of some prior causes, etc.). But in itself the concept *determinism* does not entail fatalism (see Hoefer 2016).

The word "determinism" can also evoke the superstition of a super-force over and above mere causation, whereby causes seem not just to yield effects, but to *force* them to occur with an iron will (see quotes from Ayer [1997] in section II below). But to say of an event Y that it was determined by X is just to say that it was caused by X, or that X featured prominently in its causation.

I proceed now to examine the metaphysics of libertarianism and compatibilism in more detail, with the aim of identifying and crystallising the points of greatest salience to the social sciences. I will not consider hard determinism any further, partly because it has so little philosophical and commonsense credence, and partly because it has little attraction for contemporary social scientists or theorists anyway.[5]

I. Libertarianism

Libertarianism seems to chime with our intuitions on free will and the phenomenology of intentional action.[6] Its basic principle is that at least some of our actions are not causally determined by antecedent states and events. This is a "*categorical*" claim about free actions, whereby the agent might have acted differently to how they did act, even with exactly "the same causal antecedents of the action" remaining in place (Searle 2001, 277). There are three main types of libertarianism:

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[4] Ruth Groff's (2014, 74) claim that determinism is the view that "the world [is] such that everything that can and will happen is, at all points in time, already fixed", is actually a statement of fatalism.

[5] Marx and Durkheim are conventionally depicted as determinists of the "hard" variety, but this is a mistake in my view. I believe that their theories cohere perfectly well with both compatibilism and the "indeterministic" version of libertarianism that I exposit below.

[6] Kane (1999, 218) contends that "most ordinary persons start out as natural [libertarian] incompatibilists" and are only "talked out" of it "by the clever arguments of philosophers".

i. ***Non-causal libertarianism*** holds that free actions are not caused at all; rather, the agent "makes it the case that [her action] occurs, not by causing it, but by simply performing it" (Ginet 1997, 88).
ii. ***Agent-causal libertarianism*** also holds that free actions are not causally determined by antecedent states and events, but insists that they are caused, *by the agent herself*. Here, the agent is conceived as a unique "substance" that acts as an un-caused causer of her actions. Thus "when an agent acts freely, she is in a strict and literal sense an originator of her action" (Clarke 2008).

iii. ***Indeterministic libertarianism***[7] is a causal theory, albeit one that postulates that at some point in the genesis of a free action some of its causes operate *indeterministically* (or non-deterministically). The core idea of indeterministic causation is that of causes which do not *necessitate* their effects. Thus an action would be indeterministically caused if the following counterfactual holds: were the circumstances leading up to that action to be repeated a number of times with every fact about the actor's psychology and external environment remaining the same, sometimes the action would occur as it originally did and sometimes it would not. This is the "categorical" conception of "could have done otherwise". As Ekstrom (2016, 4) alternatively puts it, "an indeterministic or nonnecessitating cause is one that can fail to produce its effect, even without the intervention of anything to frustrate it".

According to Alfred Mele's (1995) version of libertarianism, indeterministic causation affects which beliefs comes into the agent's consideration when they deliberate on how to act. The decision and ensuant action are then causally determined by the beliefs and desires that came to the agent's mind.

In Robert Kane's much-discussed libertarian theory, on the other hand, indeterministic causation enters deliberation immediately prior to action, when the agent is considering what to do on the basis of (deterministically given) reasons that support competing possibilities of action. But this only occurs in situations wherein the agent's flow of action is interrupted by the need to decide between competing alternatives of what to "do or become" (Kane 1999, 224). Examples include dilemmas over whether to act self-interestedly or morally, for instant or deferred gratification, or any occasion on which one finds oneself deliberating over alternative possibilities of what to do. Kane calls actions that are generated in this way "self-forming actions". It is with regard only to these actions that agents could have chosen to act otherwise (in the "categorical" sense). In such cases, up to the

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[7] This is more commonly known as "event-causal" libertarianism, but since it shares its event-causal ontology with compatibilism and hard determinism I use "indeterministic" for its prefix, because it is this feature that decisively distinguishes it.

moment of choice it is objectively open, that is, undetermined, which option the agent will choose to enact.

II. Compatibilism

The essence of the compatibilist position is simply that there is no incompatibility between an agent's action being freely performed and it being causally determined. Free actions, according to this view, are caused by the decisions and intentions of the agent; their decisions and intentions are the causal outcome of deliberation on alternatives in light of their beliefs, desires and values, the latter themselves being causally acquired through interaction with the world. In contrast to libertarians' commitment to a *categorical* reading of the "could have acted otherwise" principle, compatibilists commit only to a "*counterfactual*" rendition, such that the agent *would* have acted differently had his beliefs or desires been different in some respect to what they were. A counterfactual (compatibilist) rendition of the "could have acted otherwise" principle is consistent with its avowals cited in note 2, though I am sure that it is the categorical (libertarian) rendition that those authors had in mind.

Compatibilists maintain that incompatibilist intuitions are naively rooted in a beguiling animistic picture of causation in which all modes of causation operate in the manner of force, compulsion or constraint. Ayer (1997 118) suggests that this picture derives from "primitive experiences of pushing and striking", and fixation on "the example of one person's exercising authority over another", which conjure images of "an unhappy effect trying vainly to escape from the clutches of an overmastering cause". But if one reflects on what occurs when one acts freely, one should see that there is no *untoward* sense of coercion or compulsion exercised on one's actions by one's beliefs and desires (contrast this with obsessive beliefs and addictive desires). This sense of benign force is nicely captured in Jürgen Habermas's (2007, 87) resonant motto on "the 'non-coercive force' of the better argument".

4. A Theory of Free Will for the Social Sciences: Compatibilism or Libertarianism?

Having already excluded hard determinism, I now probe the strengths and weaknesses of the libertarian and compatibilist theories of free will outlined above, with a view to arriving at recommendations for social scientists and theorists concerned with the "metaphysical foundations" of their subject domain.

The principal problem faced by libertarian theories is that if a supposedly free action is subject to indeterministic causation, or no antecedent causation at all, then some degree of caprice, randomness and luck is involved in its performance. The problem can be illustrated by thinking about a commonplace event in social interaction. Suppose Jones sees Singh approach with hand extended in anticipation of exchanging greetings. What will Jones do? If her action is not caused by anything

antecedent to it, or if indeterminism enters into the process, is it not as likely that Jones will present her hand and then withdraw it at the last moment, or display a clenched fist, or turn around and walk away, or kiss Singh on the lips, as it is that she will shake Singh's hand in the conventional way? Moreover, how would Jones herself know what she will do prior to acting?

Non-causal and agent-causal libertarian theories fare particularly badly in the face of the "luck problem" because they depict agents as causally disconnected from the antecedent circumstances out of which they act. It is clear why this is so with non-causal libertarianism. It is also clearly so for most agent-causal theories since these regard the agent as a unique "substance" with causal powers unlike anything else in the natural world. This is a view of the agent as a noumenal or immaterial self with powers of *ex nihilo* origination. As Randolph Clarke notes, such a conception of the agent and their powers is regarded "(even by proponents) as strange or even mysterious" (1996, 20).[8] But Ruth Groff (2014; 2016) has recently advanced a critical realist inspired, naturalistic agent-causal theory that endeavours to eschew this mysteriousness.[9]

Groff (2016, 7-8) argues that both indeterministic libertarianism and compatibilism are susceptible to what Pereboom (2004, 276) calls the "disappearing agent objection". This objection targets the ontology shared by indeterministic libertarian and compatibilist theories, namely, the idea that free actions are, and are caused (either indeterministically or deterministically) by, *events*. For both kinds of theory, the latter events are reasons, that is, beliefs and desires that come to the agent's mind and upon which they deliberate when deciding how to act. But from the agent-causalist's perspective, under event-causal theories it is not *the agent* as such that chooses her action; rather, her "choice" is but the outcome of a causal process (the occurrence and effects of beliefs and desires) that just *happens*. The agent-causalist counters that a free action is one that *the agent herself causes* "on the basis of", "for", or "in response to", her reasons for acting one way or another (Groff

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[8] Some of those that have held agent-causal theories have gone on to retract them. See Goetz (1988, 303,n1) on Taylor's and Chisholm's, and Clarke (2007, 56, n6) on his own, renunciation.

[9] Giddens (1976, 85) also subscribes to agent-causal libertarianism but offers no exposition or defence of it. Bhaskar's (1989, 98) speculation that the powers of agency may be borne by a "substance that is of an immaterial kind" suggests that he was open to a traditional version of agent-causation (which would not sit well with his naturalism). The critical realist economist Tony Lawson (1997, 176), likewise, claims that "human agents" possess "specific powers and dispositions which serve to differentiate them from the rest of reality". On the other hand, Bhaskar also maintains that "human action" is (non-deterministically [1989, 90]) "caused by states of mind" (1989, 96), which suggests indeterministic libertarianism.

2014, 86; 2016, 15). But neither the reasons, nor anything else prior to her choice, causes (indeterministically or deterministically) her causing of that choice.

Groff holds that, as an irreducible “substance”, the agent is metaphysically in the same boat as everything else in the world that bears a causal power, and that therefore there is no difficulty in conceiving how the agent relates to the rest of the causal order. The exercise of a causal power by anything, according to critical realists, is always undetermined, that is, prior to its occurrence the power might, or might not, be exercised. As Groff (2016, 4) puts it, that which has causal power thereby has the capacity to generate “activity that may or may not occur, and which, if it does, may or may not issue in any given outcome”. This is a much more thoroughgoing indeterminism (or “non-determinism”, as Groff prefers) than that to which indeterministic libertarians typically subscribe, wherein indeterminism is held to exist only in certain domains. The latter is why, I think, indeterministic libertarianism is not as vulnerable to the “luck problem” as some of its critics, including Groff, charge.

Theories such as Mele’s and Kane’s are careful to limit the scope and role of indeterministic causation in the generation of free actions. Consider again the hand-shaking case. According to Mele’s account, indeterminism might affect *which* of Jones’s beliefs come to her in deliberation. For example, the belief formed a month previously that she was belittled by Singh may or may not come to the fore. But most of Jones’s relevant beliefs will be causally determined by the nature of the situation, such that she will perceive the prima facie expectation to shake the other’s hand. Likewise, on Kane’s account, if Jones’s action is not straightforwardly determined by her “will already formed” it is because she is conflicted over which action to perform. Her beliefs, desires and values are such that she contemplates reasons to perform two or more different possible actions, and which one she chooses is undetermined by those reasons until she makes her choice. But the indeterministically caused decision that Jones eventually makes arises out of conflicting reasons for action that are themselves causally determined for her (in the current example, there is the desire to express disdain for Singh and the desire to maintain public decorum).

I have been considering the metaphysical freedom of paradigmatically free actions, namely, those that issue from the agent’s reflection on, and deliberation over, alternative possibilities of acting. But the large majority of our actions do not issue from reflection or deliberation (as is acknowledged by structurationists such as Giddens [1982, 9], Bhaskar [1986, 163] and Hay [2002, 266-7 n5]). Routine, non-reflective actions are actions of the agent, but are we to say of these too that “the agent could have acted otherwise”? There is of course no difficulty in saying this in the counterfactual sense, that is, that the agent would have done something different had their beliefs or desires been different in some respect to what they were. This is what compatibilists would say, and indeterministic libertarians such as Kane can answer similarly, that such actions are causally determined by “a will already formed”, to which the counterfactual sense of “could have acted otherwise”

straightforwardly applies. Indeterministic libertarians could also say that indeterministic causation may pertain to many, most, or all routine actions too, in that they are not causally *necessitated* by the agent's antecedent beliefs and desires. Under this scenario the agent might have acted differently in the "categorical" sense, in virtue of the same set of beliefs and desires issuing in a different action. Nevertheless, the degree of indeterminism involved in the generation of routine actions must be quite small (i.e. the probabilities close to 1) or they simply would not be routine actions, and personal and social life would not be as ordered and regular as it evidently is.

I am not sure what agent-causalism of the kind propounded by Groff would say about routine actions. Groff (2014, 76) seems to say that they too are caused by the agent: "agents, rather than antecedent events plus the laws of nature, are the causes of what agents do". But they are not caused via the agent's deployment of their "second-order" "agential powers" of reflection, deliberation and choice, or they would not be routine actions. So how does the agent self-cause routine actions? One possibility would be that they issue from environmental cues that trigger first-order agential powers (i.e. essentially the same account as that of indeterministic libertarianism and compatibilism). But then it would not be the agent, exclusively, that causes these actions; antecedent events would play a causally initiating role, and it would not be the case that "the agent is not a link in a chain of events" (2016, 8).

As we have seen, all the main protagonists agree that the agent's beliefs and desires (which constitute their reasons for acting) are centrally involved in the production of their actions, whether as deterministic or indeterministic causal events, or as "the basis" upon which the agent self-causes their decisions and intentions. The means by which beliefs and desires are acquired and held is therefore of central significance to thinking about free will, and to the explanation of social action. Despite its evident significance, there is very little discussion of "doxastic voluntarism" in the free will literature. I focus on belief, but the same considerations apply to desire (see Clarke 2007, 52).

Following Bernard Williams' (1973) seminal paper on the topic, epistemologists widely agree that we cannot simply *choose* or *decide* what to believe, and that the possibility of believing otherwise is not (directly) under our control. The givenness of belief can be demonstrated by adverting to the modal contrast between action and belief: Whereas actions *can* be reflectively chosen and enacted, beliefs *cannot* (Steup 2008, 375). With regard to action, everyone (including hard determinists) will presumably agree that we often have the experience of at least *seeming* to choose our actions. But there is no experience of even *seeming* to choose our beliefs. Consider these propositions:

i. "Cats are mammals".
ii. "Cats are insects".

iii. “The number of cats is even”.
(Steup 2008, 389)

It is apparent that one cannot choose to believe that cats are not mammals, or that they are insects; and one can believe neither that the total number of cats in the world is even nor that it is odd (because one knows that one does not and cannot know which is the case) (ibid.).

We surely want our beliefs to be, and believe that most of them are, causally determined by their object, by what actually is the case. Ideally our beliefs would be causally determined by their putative objects in the way that our perceptual beliefs (usually) are: If one looks at an apple, an apple is what one sees; one cannot just choose to see an orange instead (see Searle 2001, 68-9).

I am not sure what Groff and other critical realists would say about the causation of belief, but they are opposed to the idea of determinism across the board, both in the “natural” and the “social” domain (Porpora 2015, 117). They might well hold, then, that beliefs are only ever (like everything else) indeterministically caused. Still, the agent is no more able to *choose* what to believe if her beliefs are indeterministically caused than if they are deterministically caused. Suppose there is a .99 probability that a normally socialised, cognitively competent, person will believe that they should shake hands when they perceive themselves to be in a situation that calls for hand-shaking. 1 person in 100 in such a situation will, therefore, form the deviant belief that there is no requirement to shake hands. But this person has no more *chosen* what to believe than the other 99 has. The modal contrast with action shows that actions are things we *do*, whereas beliefs are things that *happen* to us. In sum, belief in universal indeterminism does not commit one to doxastic voluntarism.

It seems to me that the “luck problem” that libertarianism faces is circumvented if doxastic involuntarism is accepted. Because our beliefs and desires are (deterministically or indeterministically) given to us, when we enter into deliberation on how to act, the alternative possibilities that we contemplate are limited by what to come to mind. Only a relatively small number of the practically feasible and desirable alternatives will do so. For example, returning again to the hand-shaking scenario, the action-situation causes Jones’s belief that normally one is expected to reciprocate the gesture. Given this belief, and given her (conflicting) desires on what to do, the range of alternatives she will consider is limited accordingly. Entering into reflection and deliberation over alternative possibilities of action is itself a caused (again, deterministically or indeterministically) response to an interruption in, or disturbance to, the ongoing stream of routine actions in which the agent is immersed. In essence, then, libertarians can acknowledge that there is a pervasive causal background that conditions the range of alternative possibilities of acting, upon which agents reflect and deliberate in the production of their free actions. This is why people do not usually behave randomly, capriciously or bizarrely in relation to their situational context.

I. Adjudication

I am now in a position to adjudicate the plausibility and suitability, for the social sciences, of libertarian and compatibilist theories of free will.

I do not think that there is much practical difference between indeterminism and determinism *per se*, especially if indeterminism is confined to specific domains (e.g. the subatomic; human decision-making [see Kane 1999]). *Universal* indeterminism, on the other hand, appears to be the polar-opposite of determinism. But there is a big difference between a universally indeterministic world in which no causal power has a high probability of occurring or producing its effect and one in which different types of phenomena have varying degrees of causal efficacy, with many behaving in regular and orderly ways. In short, it is *amounts* or *degrees* of indeterminism that matter, not whether or not it is universal.

Consequently, although there is endless disputation between compatibilists and indeterministic libertarians in the philosophical literature, I contend that for the purposes of the social sciences (at least) there is little to choose between them.[10] I have already given the principal reasons for this judgment, namely, that in virtue of sharing an event-causal ontology compatibilists and indeterministic libertarians accept that the reasons upon which agents reflect and deliberate when deciding how to act are causally given to them. Further, they agree that the agent's powers of reflection and deliberation are embedded in the stream of routine actions that constitute the agent's lifeworld. For both compatibilists and indeterministic libertarians, when an agent performs a free action at the culmination of deliberation, the action they choose is supported by some subset of the reasons upon which they have been deliberating, and thus it is not random or capricious in relation to their action-situation. As Ekstrom (2016, 13) puts it, such an act "is not an event that appears out of nowhere". In terms of the agent's capacity to act freely, I aver that it makes no substantial difference whether the reasons upon which they deliberate come to them deterministically or indeterministically, or cause their actions deterministically or indeterministically.

It is of central significance to the social sciences that indeterministic libertarianism, no less than compatibilism, is consistent with some, indeed many, actions being causally affected (deterministically or indeterministically) by social-structural sources of causation. Indeterministic libertarianism is, after all, a *causal* theory of action, making it eminently harmonious with social scientific explanation. Put another way, my contention is that it would make no appreciable difference to

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[10] Groff (2016, 9) is of a similar view, though she takes their similarity to incur a shared deficiency, whereas I see it much more positively.

the task of social scientific explanation were either compatibilism or indeterministic libertarianism to be true. This point will be illustrated in the case study to follow.

Groff's critical realist agent-causal libertarianism, does, however, stand out from compatibilism and indeterministic libertarianism. The sticky issue is not indeterminism as such, since Groff acknowledges the above point about varying degrees of causal efficacy for different types of phenomena: "powerful things vary in the regularity of their behavior" she says (2016, 4). The stand-out issue is the insistence that free (and routine) actions are caused by nothing other (that is, no preceding events or occurrences) than the agent's decision and intention, which are *originating* causes, not stages of a prior causal process. The challenge, as acknowledged by Groff (2016, 9), is to address the objection: But what was it that "*caused* the agent to cause" the particular action that they performed?

Groff says that the agent makes their decision and forms their intention to act "on the basis of", "for", or "in response to", their reasons for acting one way or another. What, then, is the relation between their reasons and their first-causing of their action? One possible answer would be that the agent's reasons indeterministically cause them to cause their action, but this would then collapse into indeterministic libertarianism. Groff herself insists that the relation between the agent's reasons and their causing of their action is not itself causal. This then invites a continuation of the objection, namely: Granted that the agent self-causes her action "on the basis of" her reasons, in virtue of *what* is it that she elects to self-cause one action rather than another? The answer cannot invoke any further reasons (beliefs and desires) of the agent in virtue of which they come to favour one particular subset of reasons from their deliberative set because these extra reasons would simply join those upon which they were deliberating in the first place. If the agent really is strictly the originating cause of their free actions there seems to be *nothing* in virtue of which they elect to act on one subset of reasons rather than another. The answer that Groff (2016, 9) gives to the objection is that it is "persisting powerful particulars [i.e. agents – Author] that do make things [i.e. agents' free actions – Author] happen". But this is not a satisfactory answer to the objection, because the objection will continue to press the question in revised formulation: In virtue of what is it that a "powerful particular" (agent) makes those things (their actions), rather than some other, happen?

It is the conception of what happens in the circumstances leading up to the point at which the agent is said to self-cause their action that makes agent-causalism an uncongenial theory of free will for the social sciences. At issue is not just how (on what grounds) the agent makes the particular action choices that they do, but how they acquire the sets of reasons that delimit the range of possible actions that they consider to be open to themselves. In short, does agent-causalism recognise that the acquisition of beliefs and desires is a causal (albeit perhaps indeterministic) process embedded in the agent's lifeworld, that reflection and deliberation are tied to the ongoing causal generation of routine action, and that the set of alternative

possibilities upon which agents deliberate are causally given to them, and may be constrained by, their social and institutional structure? These are causal processes that the social sciences are tasked with investigating, explaining and understanding. As Habermas (2007 86) nicely puts it, reasons "are not just 'something in the head' "; they are "embodied in cultural traditions, anchored in institutions".

Groff (2016, 6) does countenance that agents' engagement of their second-order agential powers (of reflection, deliberation and choice) can be "triggered" by causal powers outside the agent,[11] but even so, she says, "the triggered power is precisely a second-order power of choosing. It is the *agent* who…decides what, if anything, she will do, not the powerful thing that …had the power to spark the display of her agential powers." The problem of *on what basis* the choosing agent makes her choice of action reappears here. In response to the "disappearing agent objection", Groff's agent-causal libertarianism purports to present a more "substantial" vision of the agent than compatibilism and indeterministic libertarianism are able to do. But by insisting that *the agent herself causes* her choice of action, with nothing (deterministically or indeterministically) causing that choice, the agent now looks very *insubstantial* and cut adrift from the sources of reasons that could enter into the causation of her choice. Thus it remains unclear to me how (in what modality) agents' powers of self-causing their actions relate to and mesh with their social-structural contexts which furnish them with many of their reasons for acting. The problem with agent-causal libertarianism is that to be a plausible theory of free will for the social sciences it needs to embrace the background causal ontology of compatibilism or indeterministic libertarianism.[12] But if it did that it would forfeit its distinctiveness.

My recommendation for social scientists and theorists concerned with the metaphysics of free will echoes Durkheim's aphorism (above): there is no need to decide between determinism and indeterminism. They can proceed on the assumption that one or the other is the case, and then accept either a compatibilist or an indeterministic libertarian theory of free will, or be equanimously agnostic

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[11] One might think that these agential powers *have to be* triggered by causal powers external to the agent, because the initial engagement of these powers cannot itself be the outcome of reflective choice. As Schroeder (2007, 82) nicely puts it, "every act of reflection starts somewhere, and the first thought that begins reflection is not chosen on the basis of reflection". So with regard to reflectively chosen actions too (not just routine actions), it is hard to see how it can be, as Groff (2016, 8) maintains, that the agent is not "a link in a chain of events".

[12] I thus concur with Clarke's contention, as noted by Groff (2016, 15), that "a viable agent-causal theory would have to be augmented by an event-causal account of acting for reasons". Groff rejects the proposal.

between them (as I myself am). This contention will be illustrated and justified via the following case study.

5. Structure and Agency in the Holocaust

Questions of moral responsibility are frequently raised under the structure and agency debate, but I think this is a distracting conflation, so in this paper focus purely on the explanatory and interpretive issues.

The case that I examine here is brutal and stark, but selected for the clarity with which it poses questions on individual choice, agency, and social-structural causation. It features opposed explanations of central events of the Holocaust proffered by Browning (2001) and Goldhagen (1997). The events in question consisted of massacres and deportations perpetrated by the 500-strong *Reserve Police Battalion 101*, the members of which directly killed 38000 Jews (by small arms gunfire) and sent a further 45000 to the Treblinka death camp during its sixteen-month posting to Poland in 1942-3. Browning and Goldhagen draw on the same body of evidence and largely agree on the basic facts of what took place. They agree that the policemen of Battalion 101 were ordinary German citizens who were not specially selected for genocide and had no advance preparation for their genocidal tasks. Most pertinently, they agree that the policemen were not coerced by threats of dire consequence for non-participation in killing operations and *knew* that they could decline with official impunity (Browning estimates that 10-20% did), because they were told so by their commanding officer.

Notwithstanding these central points of agreement, Browning and Goldhagen disagree over whether the policemen's actions were the product of social-structural causes or "voluntarisitically" (Goldhagen 1997, 252) performed, and their explanations are commonly seen to provide "divergent answers to the question of the relationship between structure and agency…in the causation of the Holocaust" (Moses 1998, 199; Cf. Roth 2002, 319; Hay 2002, 96-101).

Browning's explanation centres on the claim that social-structural, situational, and group-dynamic forces, pressures and constraints exercised powerful effects on the policemen's behaviour. He argues that the majority did what they did not because they were infused with genocidal beliefs and desires, but because they found themselves in stressful circumstances that confronted them with normative pressures to obey, comply and conform which were hard to resist. The policemen were, he claims, in a situation analogous to that of the subjects in Milgram's (1974) infamous "obedience experiment" (Browning 2001, 173-4).

For some of Milgram's reluctantly obedient subjects the speed and transformation of events had the effect of disabling or distracting them from engaging in deliberation on how they should act. Other reluctantly obedient subjects did engage in deliberation, but experienced acute conflict between wanting to follow their conscience (by refusing to deliver the "electric shocks") and wanting to discharge

their duty to the experiment. Likewise, some of the policemen were so caught up in the radical turn of events (having been deployed on policing operations, they are suddenly one day assigned to killing operations) that they just “got on with it”, without reflecting on what they ought to do. Others were torn in deliberation between “the demands of conscience” and “the norms of the battalion” (ibid. 185).

Goldhagen takes the opposite stance. He (1997, 477) argues that the “impersonal institutions and abstract structures” invoked by Browning (and many other Holocaust scholars in the explanation of kindred events) cannot explain the events. The policemen must be recognised, he maintains, as “responsible actors” who “were ultimately the authors of their own actions” (ibid., 482). As such, “they were people who had beliefs and values about the wisdom of the regime’s policies which informed the choices that they made” (ibid., 477), including the choice of whether or not to participate in mass-killing operations. Goldhagen marshals evidence purporting to show that the vast majority of policemen believed, in concordance with most of the German population, that Jews constituted an evil, corrosive, subversive “race” that posed a mortal threat to their own conditions of existence. These “eliminationist” beliefs, which were the commonsense “cultural cognitive” currency of the society in which the policemen lived, motivated the policemen to participate willingly and enthusiastically in genocidal killing “in good conscience”, believing it to be a “just and necessary” cause (ibid., 15, 394).

Browning’s and Goldhagen’s explanations clearly sit on opposite sides of the structure and agency dichotomy. Browning argues that the events of the genocidal killing issued from social-structural causes. Thus, counterfactually: absent these external forces, pressures and constraints, the (majority of) men would not have participated in the massacres. Goldhagen, though, argues that the policemen’s actions issued freely from their own autonomous wills, given what they believed. Thus, counterfactually: absent the men’s eliminationist beliefs, the social causes that Browning invokes would not be sufficient to make the men do what they would then have believed to be seriously morally wrong. Nevertheless, according to the argument of this paper, the disagreement between Browning and Goldhagen is over structure and agency in the *empirical* sense; the question of free will and determinism (structure and agency in the metaphysical sense) is irrelevant to it.

I. Structure and agency in the empirical sense

With regard to Browning’s explanation, one might think that its emphasis on social-structural causation makes it “deterministic” and agency-denying. In the “ordinary language” sense of “determined”, it is deterministic in that it attributes an overriding causal role to the social-structural conditions of the men’s choices and actions. But the explanation does not entail that the policemen lacked agency or free will. The explanation claims that social-structural causes obstructed or distracted some policemen from engaging in deliberation, and made it hard for those who did

deliberate to choose the option that they preferred. So the explanation in fact *assumes* that the men had a free will, upon which social causes impinged.[13] But it presupposes no particular metaphysical *theory* of free will, and is indifferent to whether the world is universally deterministic or indeterministic to some degree.

Whether or not determinism is true is irrelevant to Browning's explanation of the policemen's actions. There being a large majority of policemen that, ex hypothesi, succumbed to social causes impacting on their decision-making capacities is no evidence for determinism (though obviously is consistent with it). After all, a small minority of policemen resisted the pressures of those social causes by declining or desisting participation in killing operations. Thus the social causes could be conceived as operating either indeterministically or deterministically (the latter by invoking other countervailing causally determining factors, such as features of the character or personal experience of these particular individuals). In short, Browning's explanation is an empirical claim about the effects of certain social causes, and is consistent with both determinism and indeterminism.

Goldhagen's explanation, with its emphasis on the policemen willingly acting in the way that they believed right and just, and its rejection of the idea that they were induced to commit genocide by external social causes of the kind that Browning invokes, clearly prioritises individual agency. Goldhagen continually tells the reader that the policemen acted "voluntarisitically" and autonomously. Indeed, Goldhagen takes a universalist stance on the structure–agency dichotomy, asserting that it is "erroneous" to think "that 'structures' cause action". For "the structures", he says, "are always interpreted by the actors" (1997, 20) [Goldhagen (1997, p. 493, n47) refers the reader to Giddens's structuration theory, where Giddens (1984, p. 181) denounces the "implacable causal forms' given to the idea of "structural constraint" by "structural sociologists'.]. That is, whilst structures can "provide inducements to act", such inducements are only ever *considered* by the agent in *deciding* what to do.[14]

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[13] Browning (2001, 221) makes the assumption explicit, asserting that the policemen "not only had the capacity to choose but exercised that choice in various ways".

[14] This is similar to the critical realist conception of the relation between social structure and individual agency. Porpora (2015, 117), for example, contends that "whatever causal effects material phenomena [social structure – Author] may exert, no laws govern the human, agential response, which will always exhibit degrees of creativity". Goldhagen though does not go so far as to contend that the agential response to social causes is inevitably lawless and creative, just that the response is necessarily mediated by agents' interpretations. As we have seen, he does not think that such responses are inevitably idiosyncratic; on the contrary, his explanation of the policemen's behaviour is that most of them automatically applied the *same* interpretation to the social cues.

Despite taking a strong stance on the explanatory priority of individual agency over social structure, and despite being diametrically opposed to Browning's explanation, Goldhagen's explanation of the policemen's actions is nonetheless a *causal* explanation. It claims that the policemen's beliefs, desires and values were the "motivational cause" of their (free) actions (1997, 416). Moreover, the acquisition and holding of these beliefs is explained as the social-structurally caused effects of the policemen's societal location. Whilst the latter explanation does not contradict his claim that social structure cannot directly cause agents' actions, it does accord a primary causal role to the acquisition and holding of those mental states upon which agents' interpretations, choices and decisions are based when deciding how to act.

It is because Goldhagen's explanation is causal that it, like Browning's, coheres equally well with compatibilism and indeterministic libertarianism. So, whilst Goldhagen's explanation falls on the "agency" side of the structure-agency dichotomy, it takes no stance on whether compatibilism or indeterministic libertarianism makes best metaphysical sense of personal agency. Goldhagen evidently thinks that *all* social explanations must likewise fall on the "agency" side of the structure-agency dichotomy. If that is so then of course an adequate explanation of the policemen's actions would have to be grounded in their personal agency. But Goldhagen's reason for according *universal* priority to individual agency, namely, that social-structural causes "are always interpreted by the actors" seems demonstrably false. To take a simple counterexample, when a driver stops at a red traffic light they have (usually) acted purely responsively, without reflection or interpretation.

Goldhagen's claim that the policemen's actions were the product of their reflective, interpretive agency must therefore also be taken as an empirical claim. His explanation then has the same epistemic status as Browning's, and either explanation could be true. Which one, if either, is true is, I contend, an empirical matter. The opposition between Browning's and Goldhagen's explanations exhibits as clear a bifurcation over structure and agency as there could be, and yet the truth of either determinism or indeterminism, and compatibilism or indeterministic libertarianism, is irrelevant to the adjudication of their explanations.

II. Adjudicating the dispute over structure and agency empirically

In order to adjudicate Browning's and Goldhagen's contrasting explanations we need answers to the following empirical questions:

i. What alternative possibilities of acting did the policemen believe were available to them, and what degree of desirability, difficulty, costliness or repugnance did they attach to these options?

ii. What were the contents of the policemen's beliefs, desires and values in relation to their victims? In particular, what did they believe about the existential and moral status of their victims? Did they believe that Jews presented a mortal threat to their way of life? Did they have an intense fear, hatred and loathing of Jews (Goldhagen 1997, *passim*), or was their attitude one of indifference and apathy (Browning 2001, 200)?

iii. Can social structures, of the kind in which the policemen were embedded, exercise causal effects that impede the engagement of agents' reflective capacities or make agents' preferred choices hard to select and act upon?

Whatever the difficulty attached to these questions, they are, I maintain, *empirical* questions, the answers to which are not derivable from metaphysical theories of free will and determinism.

With regard to the first question, there is uncontested empirical evidence that the policemen *knew* they could decline participation, or discontinue, with impunity. How difficult these options were experienced as being depends on answers to the questions posed in (ii) and (iii).

For the second question, I acknowledge that it can be very hard to establish definitively the contents of historical actors' intentional states. But this difficulty does not *ipso facto* make it a *metaphysical* question. For example, it may be impossible now to find out what I ate for dinner on April 1st 1981. Nevertheless, there is a fact of the matter as to what I ate then, making it an *empirical*, not a *metaphysical*, question. There are interesting metaphysical questions to ask about intentional states per se, such as whether representationalist, dispositionalist, functionalist, internalist, externalist, etc. theories best capture their nature. But however interesting these questions are qua metaphysical inquiry, they are irrelevant to *what* it was that the policemen (or anyone else) actually believed, desired, intended, etc.

The third question, on the possible effects of social structure on the policemen's actions, requires some reflection on how social-structural causation operates. Structurationists (and Goldhagen) maintain that social-structural causation is *necessarily* mediated by agents' interpretations. Giddens (1984, 181) draws a distinction between the causal effects of the "forces of nature" ("an earthquake", for example), and the effects of social structure which, he says, "do not operate independently of the motives and reasons the agents have for what they do" (cf. Carlsnaes 1992, 255). I reject the categoricalness of this distinction. Some types of social-structural causation do, I counter, exercise coercive or constraining effects in a manner directly analogous to the "forces of nature".

For example, a system of penal rules exercises effects that are "brute" constraints on the wills of the individuals subjected to it, regardless of what they think about it and whatever their motives and reasons are. The same holds for the network of institutional structures (through which Reich policy was generated and

implemented) that brought the policemen of *Battalion 101* to Polish towns and villages and confronted them with a choice to make on participation in genocidal killing. This source of social-structural causation, which is presupposed by Goldhagen's as well as Browning's explanation, exercises causal effects on individuals independently of their interpretations, motives and reasons for action. By setting limits and impediments to, and constraints on, agents' alternative possibilities of action, this mode of social-structural causation constitutes the conditions in which individuals are situated, thereby impacting on them in a way that *is* closely analogous to the effects of the "forces of nature".

Other modes of social-structural causation do exercise their effects via the beliefs and desires (and sometimes interpretations) of the individuals subject to them, principally by causing the acquisition and sustenance of those beliefs and desires. Because agents' actions are caused (deterministically or indeterministically) by their beliefs and desires, social-structural causation here plays a strongly conditioning, constraining and impelling role. For example, coming under the sway of bureaucratic organisation, formal role occupancy, authority relations, or group conformity pressure, may cause the formation of action-causing beliefs, desires and attitudes, such as: One should concentrate on doing one's job to the best of one's ability; one should respond dutifully to a legitimate order; it is best to do what everyone else similarly situated is doing. If such beliefs, desires and attitudes are induced they will shape the scope and contents of the alternative possibilities of action upon which agents deliberate, and will make some options seem more or less desirable or costly than others. This type of social-structural causation does not cause people's actions *immediately*, without resort to their motives and reasons. Rather, it causes, or contributes to the causation of, what those motives and reasons *are*, by causing (some of) the agent's beliefs and desires.

The extent to which forms of social organisation such as bureaucracy, authority relations, formal role occupancy, peer pressure, and group dynamics are capable of exercising coercive or impellent effects on individuals under their dominion is amenable to empirical investigation and observation. Finding out how people respond to, and behave in the face of, these forms of social and institutional organisation is in principle no different to investigating the effects on people of "forces of nature" such as radiation (the force of which is not diminished if it exercises its effects indeterministically). Social scientific experimentation and observation has shown that social structure does indeed induce such beliefs and desires, and that many people do decide to act, or just act, in a largely uniform and

compliant way, as the policemen of *Battalion 101* did according to Browning's account.[15]

If the policemen did not have the eliminationist beliefs and desires that Goldhagen attributes to them it can reasonably be concluded that the prime mover of their actions was external social causes. Conversely, if the policemen did hold such eliminationist beliefs and desires then he is justified in concluding that the prime mover of their actions was their own autonomous agency.

I have argued that both Browning's and Goldhagen's explanations of the events are consistent with the most plausible metaphysical theories of free will and causation (as surveyed in section 4). Thus both of their opposed (in terms of "structure" and "agency") explanations are empirically possible, and also, I believe (though I have not been able to provide adequate justification here), empirically plausible. It has not been my aim to adjudicate which is in fact the best explanation.

6. Conclusion

The so-called problem of structure and agency is, I contend, misconceived as a metaphysical, or ontological, problem. The problem of structure and agency is *part* of the metaphysical question on the compatibility of free will and determinism, in that free will is the species-specific attribute of human agency, and social structure is the paramount source of causal determination that impacts on it. But this metaphysical question is best addressed in the round via engagement with the leading philosophical theories on free will, which I have done. The specifically social theoretical problem should then be reconceived in broadly empirical and interpretive terms of how, in which ways, and under which circumstances, the social-structural conditions of individuals' action impinge on their ability to act freely. Therefore, what is typically taken to be "the problem of structure and agency" simply *dissolves*. There is no one, general, empirical problem to solve either. There are, rather, a manifold variety of social conditions, forces, pressures, influences etc. that can and do present obstacles to agents engaging their deliberative faculties, set the kind and range of possible actions from which they choose, and affect the difficulty of exercising their preferred choices. It is precisely the raison d'être of the social sciences to investigate these sources and modes of social-structural causation.

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[15] The classic source is Milgram (1974). See Doris (2002) for a philosophically driven assessment of the ecological validity of landmark studies in the "situationist" paradigm that is founded on Milgram's and other pioneering social psychologists' work.

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