

UNDERDETERMINATION AND THE WILL

A dissertation
submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate School of Arts and Sciences
of Georgetown University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in Philosophy.

By

Kelly Whelan Heuer, M.A.

Washington, DC
September 27, 2013

UMI Number: 3599530

All rights reserved

INFORMATION TO ALL USERS

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.



UMI 3599530

Published by ProQuest LLC (2013). Copyright in the Dissertation held by the Author.

Microform Edition © ProQuest LLC.

All rights reserved. This work is protected against unauthorized copying under Title 17, United States Code



ProQuest LLC.
789 East Eisenhower Parkway
P.O. Box 1346
Ann Arbor, MI 48106 - 1346

Copyright 2013 by Kelly Whelan Heuer
All Rights Reserved

PREVIEW

UNDERDETERMINATION AND THE WILL

Kelly W. Heuer, M.A.

Thesis Advisor: Maggie O. Little, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

Good choices are guided by the balance of reasons for and against the options at hand; bad ones made in defiance of it. This suggests a comparative standard of practical reasoning: do what you have most reason to do, on pain of irrationality. Yet many decisions are rationally underdetermined. When there is no favored alternative, we must choose by sheer will—the force of reasons cannot guide us. What does underdetermination mean for us as agents? Some see it as a threat to self-intelligibility; others as an opportunity for identity-forging choice. This dissertation analyzes both perspectives, finds them important but flawed, and thematizes the basic truths about human agency each highlights to generate a deeper understanding of the connection between agency and choice.

Acknowledgments

“It’s only six years,” Mark says, leaning forward in his chair. “But it’s not like those six years *don’t matter!*”

It’s 2007, and I’m sitting in Mark Murphy’s office clenching a stack of notes and a campus map, a prospective student overwhelmed by options, scrambling to balance a thousand factors to choose a graduate program. We are talking how a school’s reputation is often treated as the single weightiest consideration in such deliberations, to the exclusion of all others. *But this is nonsense*, Mark tells me, and the second he says it I am shattered by its obviousness. *This is six years of your life.*

I love this moment, which has since become a favorite bit of Heuer family lore.

First, there is poetic justice in the fact that my time at Georgetown begins with underdetermined deliberation and ends with deliberation (so to speak) about underdetermination. This dissertation is a meditation on several themes crystallized in that 2007 conversation: that rational decision-making is complex; that underdetermination can take a variety of forms; that our choices inform our lives in ways that can’t be undone; that underdetermined choices somehow *matter* in spite of their uncertainty—or maybe because of it.

More importantly, that moment perfectly manifests the value of the choice I did make. Six years is far too short a time to spend in a place like Georgetown, an academic community I chose because the people who comprise it are models not just for philosophical acumen but for the way that philosophy can enrich, inform, and find a place within a full human life. Among such role models, I was each year flooded with fresh reasons for humility and gratitude.

Chief among these reasons are Maggie Little, Henry Richardson, and Mark Murphy. It’s a poorly-kept secret that I was doodling this dream team in the margins long before it was time to settle on a topic; I’m pleased that the fates spared me the ordeal of having to choose between that lineup and a personally compelling topic by providentially aligning them. My committee has astonished me time and again with their generosity, warmth, and brilliance. Working with three scholars I admire so much as human beings—whose strengths complimented one another so perfectly, and whose friendship enlivened not just the dissertation process, but this entire six years—was a privilege beyond all others.

For additional encouragement along the way, I have to thank big brothers Selim Berker, Dave Plunkett, Jeff Sebo, and Marcus Hedahl, who adopted me into the broader world of philosophy and showed me what it might mean to find a home there, as well as Wayne Davis, who has as department chair been unflaggingly supportive in matters large and small. The Woodrow Wilson Foundation generously funded my last year of writing with the Charlotte W. Newcombe dissertation completion fellowship, a vote of confidence I'll always treasure. (The money was nice, too.)

Most of all I am grateful to my family. My parents, Richard and Teresa Heuer, supported my love of ideas and dreams of the academy from the very beginning. I could not ask for more perfect models of temperance, discipline, hard work, and unconditional love than they have given me through the quiet example of their own lives. Amy Heuer cheered on this work from across the sea with wit, editorial prowess, sloth bear photos, and (above all) a sisterly mix of exasperation and pride in the feather-brained older sister she always knew would carry it off.

I turn at last to thank Arjun Dhillon, my found family. You never doubted it a moment, but I am not sure this could have been finished without you. It certainly wouldn't be half what it has become since you happened to it, nor would its author. Know that you are, in this as in so much else, the *sine qua non*.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

I	Introduction.....	I
	I.1 Reasons & intelligibility.....	2
	I.2 Varieties of underdetermination.....	4
	I.3 A preview of the argument.....	I4
2	Classical rationalism.....	I7
	2.1 The classical model.....	I9
	2.2 Dogmatic rationalism.....	29
	2.3 Problems for the view.....	36
	2.4 The missing agent.....	45
	2.5 Conclusion.....	47
3	Hybrid voluntarism.....	50
	3.1 The voluntarist turn.....	53
	3.2 Sheer voluntarism.....	55
	3.3 Problems for the view.....	6I
	3.4 Normative voluntarism.....	64
	3.5 Problems for the view.....	7I
	3.6 Conclusion.....	92
4	Radical voluntarism.....	95
	4.1 Radicalization.....	97
	4.2 Heroic existentialism.....	I00
	4.3 Problems for the view.....	I09
	4.4 Existentialist constructivism.....	I26
	4.5 Problems for the view.....	I35
	4.6 Conclusion.....	I42
5	Conclusion.....	I45
	5.1 Assumption one: methodological.....	I48
	5.2 Redeeming the assumption.....	I62
	5.3 Assumption two: conceptual.....	I67
	5.4 Redeeming the assumption.....	I70
	5.5 Conclusion.....	I85
6	Bibliography.....	I89

I Introduction

The most widely accepted understanding of rational choice—so widely accepted as to be virtually a truism—holds that we ought to do what we have most reason to do. Rational choice aims at what is favored by the balance of reasons. As a metric of choiceworthiness, reasons have an essentially *comparative* function, weighing against one another for the purpose of determining what to do. Paradigmatically rational choice is guided by the principle ‘do what you have most reason to do, relative to available alternatives.’

The comparative conception of rational choice has a fine philosophical pedigree as well as intuitive heft. After all, it is hard to understand what the calculus of favoring and disfavoring considerations in practical reasoning is *for* except to select the ‘best’ option. Yet there are cases where comparison stalls. You might face a set of options where two or more of the best alternatives are supported by equally strong, or equally good, (sets of) reasons. The balance zeroes out. Or perhaps you face incomparable options: the

alternatives cannot be rank-ordered, but neither is it true that two or more are exactly equal, perhaps because they realize incommensurable values. Or perhaps there is no stable fact of the matter about which option is most supported by the balance of reasons, because of some shifty variable in the calculus. Call these instances of *rational underdetermination*: there is no option univocally favored by the balance of reasons.

In each case, the comparative principle runs into trouble. Understood formally, as a criterion of rational choice, it gives no answer to the question of whether someone ought to have chosen otherwise than she did. Paradigmatically rational choice is impossible. Understood substantively, as describing what guides ideal rational deliberation, it gives no concrete guidance, since ‘do what you have most reason to do’ no longer admits of a *de re* reading. The merits of the options make each worth doing, in some sense, but they do not make any single option ‘the thing to do’ when comparison cannot find a victor.

1.1 Reasons & intelligibility

Theses about the standards for rational choice, the nature of rational deliberation, the value of rational action, and so on, often co-travel—linked by the power of reasons to confer *intelligibility* in choice. A reason makes sense of the option it favors by giving some explanation or justification for its selection. Rational comparison offers forward-looking rational guidance as well as *ex post facto* justification, secures self-intelligibility and features in the explanations we give others for why we acted as we did. Reasons—prospective and retrospective, introspective and interpersonal—are base currency in the economy of meaning that makes our lives comprehensible and (if we are lucky) valuable. Our responses

to the balance of reasons as we saw it anchor the stories we tell about how and why we moved in the world as we did. When comparison fails, we lose the coin that buys the meaning from which our lives are built.

Or so one venerable tradition in philosophy would have us believe. The **classical** conception of agency unites the comparative principle with thoroughgoing rationalism about human agency: agency is manifested in all and only those choices that select an option favored by the balance of reasons. Irrational or arational action is, on some level, a failure of agency.¹ Without rational comparison, there can be no intelligible choice; if most or even many of our choices fail to meet the comparativist standard, life verges on the absurd.

The classical view is predominate in the history of Western philosophy, and continues to loom large in contemporary theories of ethics, action, and practical reason. But it has not arrived on the contemporary scene unchallenged. As an account of meaningful human agency, it has so far withstood a series of **voluntarist** challenges, which identify acts of the *will* as the locus of meaning and value in human action. On this view, willful choice may be unconstrained by the balance of reasons, and so the voluntarist treatment of underdetermination must find some notion of intelligibility outside the parameters of comparative justification. On this view, to be an agent is, sometimes, to act arationally or even irrationally: for whims, for no reason, even for bad reasons.² Rather than a threat to

¹ Davidson 1970 is a canonical modern statement of the view; see also Hare 1952, 1963; Mele 1995, 2003; Audi 1990, 1993; Bratman 1979.

² Frankfurt 1987, 1998a, 1998b, 2004; Slote 1989, 2001; Velleman 1992; Buss 1999; Millgram 1997; Taylor 1997; Tenenbaum 1999; Arpaly 2003, Chang 2004, 2009. See also Schroeder 2009, pp. 189–91.

self-governance or self-understanding, the voluntarist sees underdetermination as a site of identity-forging choice and the source of a valuable form of human freedom. Only when our choices fly free from rational constraint do our choices (and our lives) take a form that is truly ‘up to us.’

Members of these groups are not often explicit about the commitments that motivate them, especially contemporary theorists. But notice how dramatically these conceptions of what rational underdetermination *means* differ from one another: is it a threat to meaningful human agency or a condition on its very possibility? I take this philosophical disagreement to be the best evidence that the phenomenon of underdetermination is worth our attention. We turn in the next section to a catalogue of the ways in which reasons can underdetermine choice, not with an eye to showing that underdetermination is a common phenomenon—though I happen to think it is—but rather as a first step toward understanding the ways that theories of rational agency might be upset by it.

1.2 Varieties of underdetermination

Underdetermination occurs when the normative pressures of some domain fail to deliver a definitive answer to the question of what ought to be done or believed, from the perspective of that domain. For some domain **D**, there is no answer to the question: ‘what do I have most **d**-reason to do?’ There are, I suggest, four major varieties of domain-specific normative underdetermination. Each has bearing on the question that interests us here: the summed-domain underdetermination of the all-things-considered rational perspective.

Inapplicability

When a domain **D** does not extend to cover the choice one faces, there can be no **d**-reasons for or against the options at hand. Plausibly, for instance, the choice of which toothpaste I use to brush my teeth this morning is underdetermined by legal normativity: there simply are no legal reasons for or against the options at hand. If I want guidance in my choice, I must turn elsewhere: to prudential reasons, say, which tell me to use the one that makes my mouth feel freshest, or perhaps to moral reasons, which tell me to use the tube that belongs to me and not the tube that belongs to my sister.

Inapplicability is an historically important form of underdetermination because of the straightforward way it seems to secure freedom of meaningful choice: when the reasons of some normative domain of a higher lexicographic order fall silent (legal, moral, religious), those from less ‘important’ domains (social, prudential, aesthetic) are permitted to have their say.³ One way of understanding political freedom is as widespread legal underdetermination—there are matters in one’s life about which government institutions simply have nothing to say—and many contemporary arguments against ‘totalizing’ moral views like consequentialism, which purport *always* to be in the business of offering you moral reasons for choice, use precisely this analogy to argue that such views obviate the

³ This grouping of ‘important’ versus ‘less-important’ classes of reasons for action is just meant to gesture at a rough consensus view; if you disagree that, e.g., there are such things as distinctly religious reasons, or that moral reasons are in some sense structurally distinct from other sorts of reasons, simply omit or reshuffle the given categorizations.

possibility of acting for reasons “of one’s own,” pursuing plans and projects whose choiceworthiness is not moral but personal.⁴

Can there be cases where *all* normative systems fall silent? If one takes the view that reasons only get to be called reasons when they achieve a certain threshold of favoring force, many trivial choices—which side of my mouth to begin brushing first, to return to our example above, or to exercise 0.0001 psi of pressure more or less when I start brushing—are underdetermined because there are quite literally no reasons at all bearing on the choice. Whatever considerations might advocate right over left, or harder over softer, are so inconsequential they do not deserve the title ‘reason.’ If so, then inapplicability is a kind of underdetermination that can characterize the all-things-considered perspective of practical reasoning.

Actually, I think the threshold view is a theoretical mistake, which fashions a theory of what considerations must do to qualify for their status as ‘reasons’ out of the standards for what a reason must be if it is to be worthwhile for us, in ordinary circumstances, to expend deliberative resources on considering its weight in our choice-making.⁵ Considerations that are suited to play a role in explaining, guiding, or justifying *even very trivial* choices have the same structural features as more robust reasons, even if they do not actually play that role in the deliberative economy of healthy agents, since only the obsessive and the neurotic are likely to fixate on such minutia when there are other matters to attend to.

⁴ See, e.g., Williams 1993, Rawls 1971; but *cf.* Herman 1993, who argues for moral choice as a form of self-expression and, blurring the moral–social distinction in the other direction, Stohr 2006.

⁵ This is a view shared by, among others, Schroeder 2008.

But laying this debate aside, there is a more interesting form of inapplicability that looms at the very other end of the spectrum: the idea that it is not our most trivial but our most consequential or foundational choices that might fall outside the bounds of rational assessment from any domain. This is a prospect famously explored in Soren Kierkegaard's *Either/Or*, which describes two fundamentally different approaches to life: the 'aesthetic' and the 'ethical,' each of which provides an internally self-consistent set of normative standards and ideals to guide choice. The normative systems are, moreover, self-ratifying: the ethicist (B) can offer no reason for the aesthete (A) to switch teams that will be accepted unless A has already committed himself to an ethical way of life, and vice versa.⁶ The choice between normative systems, obliquely presented to the reader by Kierkegaard's pseudonymous editor, Victor Eremita, is fundamentally arbitrary:

kierkegaard's editor You must choose between competing, self-ratifying normative systems.

There can be no reasons that do not come from within one of these systems for adoption or rejection of either. It is a unique kind of inapplicability: no reasons apply to your choice because the choice itself, by definition, places you outside the bounds of any of the normative domains which might otherwise speak to the choice. Any considerations in

⁶ Kierkegaard 1843/1998. Actually, Kierkegaard followed the publication of *Either/Or* just a few months later with a work in his own name, *Two Upbuilding Discourses* (1843), which seems to offer a resolution to the aporetic ending to A & B's dialogue: the adoption of a religious perspective, which supersedes both the aesthetic and the ethical as a normative framework, but must be adopted on the grounds of faith not reason.

favor of one option over the other speak with a force that cannot touch you until you endorse their validity: but that is precisely what the choice is meant to settle.⁷

Indifference

A more familiar sort of rational underdetermination—perhaps the most familiar of all—is the strict “indifference of alternatives” faced by Buridan’s ass in the famous paradox.⁸

buridan’s ass Standing equidistant between two identical bales of hay, you are hungry and want a bite to eat.

Traditionally, the donkey’s dilemma is that withholding choice is both the route dictated by the standard conception of rational justification and clearly a foolish thing to do, all things considered. Either your action, when you succumb to hunger and simply ‘pick’ (rather than ‘choose’) one bale of hay over the other, lacks rational determination; or you stand between the bales until your legs give out beneath you from hunger, never having acted against reason but much worse off than the donkey who just flipped a coin (so to speak) and started munching. Like inapplicability, this form of underdetermination can occur both within and across domains: the donkey’s difficulty might seem to stem either from an equivalence of normative forces in the prudential domain, or in the summed-domain perspective of practical reason.

⁷ This is, of course, the existentialist interpretation of Kierkegaard’s work—not all commentators agree that the message of *Either/Or*’s aporia has to do with the radical rational underdetermination of our choice of life values. See, e.g., Hannay and Marino 1997; Davenport and Rudd 2001.

⁸ Although this nomenclature appears to attribute authorship of the paradox to 14th century philosopher Jean Buridan, we have no record of his authoring the example. Indeed, it seems likely that the ass bears Buridan’s name because it generates a *reductio ad absurdum* of Buridan’s own theory of the will, though it’s also been conjectured that he used the example in oral disputation. More on this in §2.

A variant on this dilemma predicates indifference not on the indistinguishability of alternatives, but instead on the equality of preference an agent has for them. This paradox makes an appearance as early as 350 B.C.E., in Aristotle's *De Caelo*.⁹

aristotle's dog Standing equidistant between equal volumes of food and water, you are as hungry as you are thirsty, and darn thirsty at that.

The plight of Aristotle's dog¹⁰ is typically taken to mirror that of Buridan's ass: the donkey has no reason to choose one bale of hay over the other, but good reason to eat either rather than remain hungry; the dog has no reason to eat rather than drink, but good reason to do each, since she's equally hungry and thirsty.

The case is interesting because it opens up a new range of considerations. Some of those who've tackled the traditional ass's paradox have actually denied that such cases are possible since the world will nearly always present us with some empirical difference between alternatives that could, in theory, serve to justify choice.¹¹ Modern incarnations of the ass's problem, such as the shopper facing a row of identical cans of soup needing to select only one for dinner, might also be susceptible to this treatment—probably one can is closer to hand than all the others, if nothing else—though §2 will suggest that this dogmatic treatment of indifferent choice is often unsuccessful.

⁹ Aristotle, *De Caelo*, II 13 295 b 24.

¹⁰ The original text clearly identifies the protagonist as a man, but Jean Buridan himself (in an unpublished commentary on *De Caelo*) makes the protagonist a dog instead, and I've adopted his version on grounds of cuteness.

¹¹ Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz is perhaps best known for this claim, but see also the storied history of disputes over rational indifference surveyed in §2 of this work, in which many (including Thomas Aquinas, Moses Maimonides, and al-Ghazâlî, to name just three) endorse a similar position.

The dog's situation moves past the comparison of identical alternatives to ones which are qualitatively distinct, with preference alone contributing the equalizing force. Any hungry donkey or shopper will face the challenge above; only someone with both hunger and thirst will even be in a position of needing to compare the hunger-satisfying and thirst-slaking properties of two options. Put another way, the case of Aristotle's dog presupposes the comparability of different alternatives. In this case, it seems fairly straightforward to find some unit of commensuration—degrees of physical satisfaction, perhaps—that enables comparison of food and drink. But an entire literature on incommensurability and comparative choice challenges precisely this presupposition, and opens up a new way in which guidance by the balance of reasons might be blocked.

Incomparability

A choice may be rationally underdetermined if the options at hand are incomparable: if it cannot be said of two alternatives *a* and *b* that [i] *a* is more choiceworthy than *b*, [ii] *b* is more choiceworthy than *a*, or [iii] *a* and *b* are equally choiceworthy. Guidance by the balance of reasons is impossible here because there is no balance, properly speaking. It has sometimes been said of such choices that they manifest incommensurable values: values that cannot be measured on a common scale.¹² An alternative explanation of the phenomenon focuses less on the absence of a suitable *comensurans* and instead diagnoses the problem as one of vagueness, whether of the values exhibited in each alternative¹³ or of the

¹² For an overview of the state of debate over incommensurability, incomparability, and practical reasoning, see Chang 1997.

¹³ This is the explanation favored by, e.g., Raz, 1988, 1997.

“better than” relation itself.¹⁴ As a domain-specific phenomenon, incomparability has often been thought to characterize moral or aesthetic choices, where the considerations that favor various options either are or are closely related to concrete or distinct kinds of value: the expressiveness versus technical acuity of a cello solo, the moral value of friendship against the impartial demands of justice, the haecceity of this individual whose life I can save by sacrificing the life of another.¹⁵

Whatever metaphysics of value underwrites the phenomenon, incomparability is thought to be manifested in cases like the one described by Jean-Paul Sartre in “Existentialism is a Humanism,”¹⁶ of a young student in Nazi-occupied France torn between two courses of action:

sartre’s student You must decide whether to join the French Resistance or to stay home to take care of your ailing mother.

¹⁴ Broome 1997. Griffin (1997) also argues that incomparability involves vagueness, but his account differs in some details.

¹⁵ Aristotle, for instance, remarks in *Nicomachean Ethics* that “[t]he spheres of what is noble and what is just ... admit of a good deal of diversity and variation” and because “goods vary in this way as well,” “we should be content ... to demonstrate the truth sketchily and in outline,” since after all “the same degree of precision is not to be sought in all discussions, any more than in works of craftsmanship” (1094b, 12–18). For contemporary discussion of this idea see Railton 1992, esp. pp. 704ff; Sainsbury 1989; Rosen and Smith 2004; Hyde 2008; Schiffer 2010. For an example of domain-specific (aesthetic) underdetermination percolating up to the level of rational underdetermination, see Chang 1997, pp. 14ff.

¹⁶ Sartre 1946.

Whether we understand this incomparability in terms of vagueness or in terms of incommensurability,¹⁷ the thought is that it seems impossible to find a determinate all-things-considered judgment about what it is best to do. The options are so dissimilar that a useful comparison is beyond reach. To put it somewhat fancifully, the reasons that speak in favor of each options cannot speak to one another—or at least speak over one another to the person deliberating. The normative outcome is not so much silence as it is white noise.

Indeterminacy

I shall have more to say about incomparability in subsequent chapters. For now, though, let's consider a different kind of underdetermination, which characterizes choices that involve infinite values or vague predicates. The cases of **buridan's ass**, **aristotle's dog**, and **sartre's student** all involve temporally-bounded choice: one must choose, at time t , from some finite set of options. But what if one's choice set were infinite? No problem, so long as the set contains some maximal element: the infinity of inferior options need not trouble you. Issues only arise when a choice set presents more than one optimal element, but no maximal element—as is the case with a series of paradoxes regarding choice over time.

A paradigm instance is the following, taken up by, inter alia, Gottfreid Wilhelm Leibniz:

¹⁷ Sartre himself appears to endorse both and neither: “If values are uncertain, if they are still too abstract to determine the particular, concrete case under consideration, nothing remains but to trust in our instincts. That is what this young man tried to do... But how does one estimate the strength of a feeling? [...] I can only estimate the strength of this affection if I have performed an action by which it is defined and ratified.” (1946). And so the deeper explanation on offer—explored in §4, and foreshadowed in §I.2.4 of this section—has to do with the fundamental impossibility of understanding our choices prospectively rather than retrospectively. Only choice itself can fix the value of some inputs.

leibniz's god

You have an infinite number of possible worlds you might choose to create, and an infinite number of instants in which to create them.

Famously, Leibniz held the existence of a world to demonstrate not just that there must have been an optimal time for the world to have been created, but also that the world that was created—the one in which we live—is the best of all possible worlds, since God's "supreme wisdom...cannot but have chosen the best" and "if there were not the best (*optimum*) among all possible worlds, God would not have produced any" at all.¹⁸ Others, however, have argued for a resolution to the problem that appeals to the power of God's will to create a normative truth of the matter about when and how to create the world, or to God's omnipotence as extending to a kind of freedom even from the principles of rational choice themselves.¹⁹

At any rate, the paradox is recapitulated in non-theological examples like that of an eternally-maturing charitable trust (at any time t you could help a great number of people by terminating the trust and giving the balance to charity, yet you could help more people by terminating it at $t + 1$, when still more interest has been generated) or, more fancifully, an ever-improving bottle of wine (given an infinite lifespan and a bottle of ever-improving wine, it will be irrational at any t to open the bottle rather than waiting until later to open

¹⁸ Leibniz *Theodicy* §8, p. 128.

¹⁹ This paradox dates at least to theological debates of early antiquity, e.g. the work of al-Ghazâlî and Averroes, and others among the Arab and Jewish theologians who wanted to defend the Abrahamic notion that the world was created rather than eternal against the Greek philosophers. For more see Averroes 1954, which contains extensive quotation of and commentary on Ghazâlî's challenge. Related paradoxes in which the unique features of God-as-rational-choice-maker also cause some trouble can be found in Rowe 1994, Adams 1999, Wielenberg 2004.

it, yet more irrational still not to savor such extraordinary wine at some point).²⁰ In such cases, the choice involves some constantly shifting variable in the rational calculus. Though finite beings are perhaps rarely presented with infinite choice sets, vague, variant, or unfixed inputs to the rational calculus might render a normative verdict indeterminate for mere mortals as well.

1.3 A preview of the argument

So the kind of normative silence that underdetermination presents us with is multiform: it can arise from substantive or merely formal features of the case at hand, can terminate or simply block deliberation altogether, can involve a normative void or a kind of cacophony. The practical problem that underdetermination presents—what to do when there’s no ‘thing to do’—exists in all cases, but the variability of the normative materials at hand in different cases might help explain the radically different roles granted to arational volition in the theories of human agency canvassed in §1.1. If the **classicists** tend to concern themselves with the structural underdetermination of indifference and indeterminacy, as I suggest, while certain **voluntarists** look to the normatively complex phenomena of incomparability and inapplicability, we are some part of the way to understanding the classical rejection of arbitrariness and the voluntarist embrace of it.

However, the roots of this divide run deeper than any superficial treatment of underdetermination, to the notion of *intelligibility* that seems so naturally to tie what is meaningful and valuable in human choice with a comparative rational standard. The

²⁰ Pollock 1983 is the author of the ever-better wine paradox; Landesman 1995 the key contemporary discussion of the charitable trust paradox.

dialectic centers around an apparently inescapable tension between the classical notion that intelligible choice requires comparative justification, and the voluntarist idea that comparative rational constraint may blot out the spontaneity, creativity, or—most crucially—self-determination which are the *true* heart of agency. If all or even only the most important exercises of our agency involve acting as a conduit for the translation of rational pressure into action, human life seems grimly mechanistic, protests the voluntarist. Yet against this we can hear the classical bewilderment: why suppose that our most valuable exercises of agency take place precisely where our ways of understanding action run out?

Much theoretical disagreement in the contemporary literature about rational underdetermination is, I will suggest, driven by largely unspoken allegiances to one of these two orientations. Contemporary theorizing about underdetermination will go better if we are clearer, in the first instance, about what forms of underdetermination are really under discussion, a clarification with which the typology in §1.2 should help. But it will also go better if we are more honest—or perhaps just more self-aware—about the implicit models of meaningful choice that shape many of our downstream judgments about when underdetermined choice is possible. This awareness can be inculcated by exploring key themes that emerge from the historical dialectic between classicism and voluntarism, and by increasing our sensitivity to what I will suggest is the essential intractability of the debate.

This dissertation is, above all else, a map. The next three chapters sketch divergent positions in conceptual space, rendered contiguous by their commitment to a comparativist rational standard and differentiated by their account of the centrality of

willing to meaningful human choice. The map itself is not an argument, though there will be many arguments about the plausibility or stability of certain claims along the way. (We are philosophers, after all, and not explorers only.) What the map offers is information about the cost of taking up residence in any of the regions under exploration: how much can be gained, and how much must be given up, when we commit to one theory of rational agency over another?

Our exploration is driven by the conviction that responsible philosophizing about rational agency involves facing our own implicit allegiance to some territory on the map. It ventures through some creative attempts to carve out a habitable space between **classical rationalism** and **radical voluntarism**—a class of views I call **hybrid voluntarism**—but finds them either unstable or untenable. The hybrid views are found to tumble back into classicism, slip toward full radicalization, or disintegrate under the force of these equal and opposite gravitational pulls. There are, in fact, uninhabitable regions of the map. And with a twist of something like irony, we find that the habitable but inhospitable regions—the classical and radical theories of rational agency—can in the end do no more than offer themselves for adoption in what is perhaps the ultimate underdetermined choice.

2 Classical rationalism

Perhaps the most remarkable thing about underdetermination is that for much of the history of Western philosophy, the general view was that there is in fact no such thing. This is not because the phenomenon was overlooked: as §1 makes clear, discussions of indifference in choice date back at least to the dilemma of **aristotle's dog**, and **buridan's ass** was a matter of no little theological debate in the medieval, Renaissance, and early modern periods.²¹ Rather, the bare possibility of normative uncertainty was ruled out by classical theses about the rational organization of a teleologically- or divinely-ordered world, and the resultant nature of the choices made by rational agents within them.

In this chapter, I explore what I call the 'classical model' of rational choice, which links the evaluative standards for reasoned choice with the constitutive standards for rational human

²¹ Indeed, quite possibly discussion begins earlier than that, depending on how you draw your lines—see Rescher 1960 for discussion of pre-Socratic discussions of indifference and indeterminacy in the balance of physical rather than rational forces.