

ALTERNATIVE POSSIBILITIES

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WHY IS THE PHOTOGRAPH, overleaf, titled “Alternative Possibilities”? Well, there is a variety of possible answers. And the world might be full of possibilities. Or it might not.

Musings on what is possible, particularly on what kind of choices are possible, nudge us towards the free will problem. Are we determined by genes and environments and left with just one possible future? Are our feelings of control over our choices illusory? Is anyone ever responsible for what they do?

One way of thinking about free will is that it eliminates possibilities. Prior to a free choice, two or more options are available. But once you have chosen and acted, then some possibilities are gone. Gone forever.

Sorry if that sounds a bit downbeat. Maybe a glass-half-full approach to free will might have it that it is the very thing that grants you possibilities. It gives you control so that life isn't just something that happens to you. Instead, your free choices enable you to have your own role, a role that you write for yourself.

But what is the right way of thinking about free will? Thinkers of all stripes have tried their hand at answering this question. Rather bearishly, Jalalu'ddin Rumi, the twelfth-century Persian poet, pronounced that the debate would “continue till mankind is raised from the



Allan McCay, *Alternative Possibilities* (2009).

dead.” A similarly pessimistic assessment of the current state of play was given by Emeritus Professor Thomas Nagel of New York University, who had this to say:

I change my mind about the problem of free will every time I think about it, and therefore cannot offer any view with even moderate confidence; but my present opinion is that nothing that might be a solution has yet been described.

This is not a case where there are several possible candidate solutions and we don't know which is correct. It is a case where nothing believable has (to my knowledge) been proposed by anyone in the extensive public discussion of the subject.

The perennial, and apparently intractable, nature of the issue made me wonder if there was something wrong with the way people go about trying to solve it. With this in mind, I started to think of ways of illustrating aspects of the free will problem in one image. But there seemed to be something fundamentally temporal about choosing: a before-choice and an after-choice situation. This urged for a temporal, or at least sequential, medium rather than a static one. For this reason, it seemed to make sense to me that explorations of the free will problem in creative works were often surveyed by way of books and films.

So, the question of whether violent little Alex's free will was undermined by a pacifying medical intervention was explored by Anthony Burgess in the novel *A Clockwork Orange*. Stanley Kubrick also addressed the question in a film based on the book. Books and films clearly work best for posing questions about free will. Or that was what I thought, prior to considering the potential of pinhole photography.

One day, I was walking through Darlinghurst in Sydney and I saw an advertisement for a pinhole camera competition, run by the Tap Gallery. I entered the competition and, to my great excitement, one of my pictures was commended by the judges. Of course, I would have been even more excited to win, but this commendation served to underscore one of the themes in the free will debate: luck.

It was lucky that I saw the notice. Perhaps I was lucky to be motivated to enter (by my interest in free will). I was a pinhole camera novice and it was undoubtedly somewhat lucky that the photos came out at all.

The judges' commendation was a form of praise and, in truth, it wasn't clear that it was deserved. But the free will debate raises questions about whether any form of praise (or blame) is ever deserved. Are the talented or morally good just lucky in the way they have been shaped by genes and environments? Does the same go for the inept or the wicked?

Humankind hasn't been raised from the dead yet, so all of this is still up for discussion.

It's easy, albeit perhaps futile, to get distracted by the twists and turns of the free will problem, so I must try to get back to my story if I can.

I wondered if the long and fruitless wait for an answer to the problem resulted from the overuse of a particular form of discourse: philosophical discussion in written and verbal form. While poets, novelists, and filmmakers have participated in the exploration of the problem, much of the work has come from philosophers using their traditional methods of thinking, writing, and talking. I wondered if these methods were somewhat limiting. In any case, there seemed to be something appealing about using a single image or at least focusing on one.

Pinhole photography seemed to enhance the power of an image with its static temporality. So, rather ambitiously, I used my rudimentary pinhole camera (it was made from an old VHS cassette box) to both prove Jalalu'ddin Rumi wrong and outdo the many great thinkers who preceded and followed him by solving the free will problem.

Unsurprisingly, I failed to solve it. But at least I now have a self-portrait on my wall—or perhaps I should say two self-portraits.

In "Alternative Possibilities," I am the figure in each of the phone booths, and I was also the pinhole photographer. Although this was not the photograph that

was commended by the judges, I like it a lot and it certainly took more effort to create than other photos I have taken.

No doubt to the puzzlement of the people in the cafe opposite the phone booths, I was able to exploit the pinhole camera's temporal feature, together with some nimble footwork on my part, to create this double self-portrait. As the camera has a long exposure time, I set it up, ran to the first booth, stayed there for a few seconds, quickly moved to second booth and stayed there for another few seconds, thereby creating a faint photographic clone of myself. Then I ran back and closed the camera's shutter, thus capturing both moments, and both of me in two different places, but in one image. Matt Zonca, one of the organisers of the competition at Sydney's Tap Gallery (and now a friend) developed the photograph.

In keeping with the theme of time and possibility, I later learned that Matt is a fortune teller, which provides a nice segue back to the free will problem: Can a person be free if their future is already in the cards?

But I can't pursue that line of thought, or else I'll never finish. I need to get to the point and I need to stay on track to get there. So why this double phone booth image?

The reason I wanted this particular image was that I hoped to try to illustrate one of the issues in the free will debate, the one that contemporary philosophers—and I, as photographer, refer to as “alternative possibilities.”

The following passage from the late-nineteenth century psychologist and philosopher, William James contains a conception of alternative possibilities. It's what philosophers call a “thought experiment.”

Imagine that I first walk through Divinity Avenue, and then imagine that the powers governing the universe annihilate ten minutes of time with all that it contained, and set me back at

the door of this hall just as I was before the choice was made. Imagine then that, everything else being the same, I now make a different choice and traverse Oxford Street. You, as passive spectators, look on and see the two alternative universes, —one of them with me walking through Divinity Avenue in it, the other with the same me walking through Oxford Street.

One way of thinking about my photograph is that it illustrates both of these possibilities, except instead of Divinity Avenue and Oxford Street, the possibilities relate to two rather similar Australian phone booths. The faint images of me in the photograph represent options that are truly open to me as a chooser, and I have free will in a robust sense. The image blends two different ways the universe might be after my choice with me in one phone box or the other.

Another interpretation of my photograph (is it a bit presumptuous to call it my photograph in the context of describing the free will problem?) is that the faintness of the images of my figure are suggestive of illusion. On this interpretation, the photograph illustrates my illusory belief prior to my choice that two options are open to me.

Perhaps my choice is predetermined and, if that is accepted, some—but certainly not all, nor even most—philosophers have argued that I cannot have alternative possibilities. Thus, the faintness of the two images denotes unreality. The laws of nature or God only leave me with one possibility, and I naively believe I have two. And thus the title of the image, “Alternative Possibilities,” just mocks my asinine metaphysics.

Yet another possible interpretation of the photo (yes, possibilities still seem to be insinuating their way into my thinking) focuses on fatalism. I am presented with a choice between two phone boxes but, no matter which way I choose, left or right, I will always just end up making a phone call. It’s fated and the title mocks me yet again! Who is responsible for such a cruel title?

I am going to stop going on about possibilities in a minute. But, before I do, here's another one. I am no longer just asinine. I now become Buridan's Ass. Buridan's Ass (now, the fourteenth-century philosopher was talking about a hoofed animal, in case you were wondering) is presented with two equally appealing bales of hay and dies of hunger because there is no reason to prefer one bale (or phone box) over the other. So, the photo depicts my stalled deliberation. Because I am frozen in indecision, just like that poor starving medieval beast, I will never make the call. Come on, just pick one! But which?

I seem to keep going off on tangents, but it is interesting to note that the phone booths were in the Darlinghurst area of Sydney, an area that has sometimes attracted drug users. After I had taken the photo, it dawned on me that the two booths may have been used by drug users to contact their dealers (better than mobile phones for that sort of thing). Perhaps the faintness of the image might now evoke the desire of a desperate person who wishes to leave no trace of their failure to rein in illicit desire.

Or perhaps the photograph might depict the psychological state of the drug user at that moment: a sort of unfreedom in the hands of a relentless craving—a dearth of possibilities rather than a range of alternative possibilities. More optimistically, the picture might denote the freedom of a turning point (both literally and metaphorically). For in the picture, nothing is set in stone (except the phone boxes) and the user might turn away from options that are too faint to clutch the will and hold on.

I can't claim that I intended to impart that drug connotation (but who knows, whether my subconscious did?). Perhaps it was just chance.

Who's in charge here? I must say: I still don't know.
One day, someone might solve the free will problem.
Nothing is impossible. On the other hand, maybe there's
only one possible future. (Here we go again.)

I think I'll just go back to using a normal camera
and wait for someone else to get their head around all of this.

Maybe.