

Unease About Certainty: Further Thought on Action  
By David Gordon  
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Gene Callahan's incisive article "The Implications of Human Action" draws attention to an important point Mises makes about human action. Someone who acts must think that he has a chance of achieving his goal. If you think that nothing you can do will affect an outcome in which you are interested, you will not act. (You may be mistaken. If you think you have a chance to influence the outcome but in fact do not, your attempt to act will not work. If you think you cannot affect the outcome but really could, you have missed a chance to achieve one of your goals.) You need not think that your action is guaranteed to secure your goal: it isn't senseless, although it may be unwise, to buy a ticket in a lottery in which you have only a remote chance to win. But if you thought that the lottery was fixed, and not in your favor, it would be pointless to buy a ticket in order to win the lottery.

Mises, as it seems to me, has failed to set forward this point in a perspicuous way. He contrasts cases in which someone thinks the future is open to his action with others in which the future is certain. By "certainty", Callahan contends, Mises means "inevitability with no possibility of alteration." Callahan is right---certainly right---that if you think that an outcome is in this sense certain, you will not try to produce a different result. To attempt to block the inevitable is futile.

But cases in which you think you cannot influence the outcome are by no means confined to what you deem inevitable. Suppose you think that an asteroid has a slight chance of hitting the earth in a few minutes. You do nothing to avert the possible catastrophe because, so far as you know, nothing you could do would have any effect. Here the outcome you do not want is by hypothesis uncertain, yet action is still futile. The distinction between open and certain outcomes, in Mises and Callahan's sense, does not "cut nature at its joints", since many uncertain outcomes offer us no foothold for action.

Further, an *ad hominem* argument may be raised against Mises and Callahan's distinction. According to Mises, whom Callahan quotes with apparent approval, human beings cannot attain certainty in their sense, so far as events in nature are concerned. "As Mises puts it, 'The most that can be attained with regard to reality is probability.'" If this is right, the distinction between open and certain outcomes does no work, since human beings lack access to the certain. On their view, a distinction between cases where action is very probably futile and cases where it is not so would be much more useful.

In my review of Callahan's *Economics for Real People*, I suggested another case, in which, as it seemed to me, Mises's distinction between open and certain outcomes does not correspond to what he "really" wants, a distinction between outcomes an actor can influence and those he cannot. Suppose I am sure that I shall have toast for breakfast tomorrow. Does this stop me from actually having toast tomorrow?

In my review I expressed what I meant very badly, and I fear that my wording has misled Callahan. He says that if I were really certain that I shall have toast tomorrow, then there would be toast in my mouth tomorrow, regardless of what I did. In that case, why should I bother to act? If, on the other hand, I were certain that I would not have

toast, then of course action to obtain it is futile. Does not my acting then presuppose that I am uncertain whether I shall have toast?

But the situation I had in mind was not that toast would find its way into my mouth, somehow or other. Rather, I imagined being certain that I shall act to get the toast. Callahan will respond, I am certain, that I cannot be certain that I shall act in this way. What if I change my mind before tomorrow comes? Callahan gives several examples of possibilities that will block me from acting, should any of them come to pass. At most, he suggests, I can judge it highly probable that I shall have toast tomorrow; I cannot be certain.

Callahan is entirely right that it is not "inevitable with no possibility of alteration" that I have toast tomorrow. Thus, as he has characterized certainty, his claim against me is correct. Further, if he is right, and I think he is, that his characterization is true to Mises's meaning, my case is not a counterexample to Mises.

But I think that Mises and Callahan have in mind also a further claim. Unless I thought my having toast inevitable, then I could not rightly claim to know that I shall have toast tomorrow. If it is possible that I change my mind before tomorrow, then how can I now *know* that I am going to have toast tomorrow? My planned action is "risky speculation" that refers to an "unknown future", according to Mises.

I would very much like it if Bill Gates signed over his entire fortune to me. But, I know that he is not going to do this. Should I rather say that it is only highly probable that he will not? After all, it is logically possible that he give me his money---perhaps he has seen a copy of *The Mises Review* and wishes to do everything he can to encourage writing that kicks below the belt.

I cannot see that the mere logical possibility that Gates gives me his money prevents me from knowing that he will not. An example that does not involve reference to a future action will clarify my position. Suppose I claim to know that Gene Callahan wrote *Economics for Real People*. My claim is not that he must have written the book, but rather that he did write it. If he had never heard of Austrian economics, or if his parents had never met, then "Gene Callahan wrote *Economics for Real People*" would have turned out to be false. Since the statement is in fact true, then any conditions required for it to be true have been fulfilled. But it hardly follows that they *had* to be fulfilled, i.e., that Callahan must have become acquainted with Austrian economics, etc.

In like fashion, my claim to know that Gates will not give me his money does not entail that he cannot do so, only that he will not. I have not shown that my view is the correct analysis of knowledge. For what it is worth, it is at any rate a standard view in philosophy, as Roderick Long notes in his penetrating article "Acts of God". (Long himself thinks that truth requires necessity. His discussion is available at <http://praxeology.net/unblog.htm><sup>1</sup>) More than a stipulative definition that connects certainty and inevitability is required to refute it.

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<sup>1</sup> If I understand Long's view, he holds that "Gene Callahan wrote *Economics for Real People*" is now necessarily true. Before Callahan wrote the book, "Gene Callahan will write *Economics*. . ." lacked a truth value. I look forward to studying Long's arguments, but I am now inclined to accept the common view that what is necessary is only the conditional, (If Gene Callahan wrote *Economics*. . ., then Gene Callahan wrote *Economics*. . .). There is on this view no asymmetry between past and future, since (If Gene Callahan will write *Economics*. . ., then Gene Callahan will write *Economics*. . .) is also necessary.

One source of resistance to my view, so far as knowledge of future actions is concerned, emerges in a quotation from Mises in Callahan's article. Suppose I know that I shall eat toast tomorrow. Then, when tomorrow comes, will I not be acting "like an automaton"? How can I be free to refuse the toast, if it is certain that I shall eat it?

This contention rests on a misleading picture. My knowledge that I shall eat toast is not a constraint that compels me to act. When tomorrow comes, I am free to eat or not, as I choose. If I choose not to eat the toast tomorrow, then my claim to know today that I would eat the toast tomorrow has turned out to be false. Suppose God, who is necessarily omniscient, predicts today that I shall have toast tomorrow. Then of course his prediction will come true. But not even this constrains me tomorrow. If tomorrow I freely choose not to eat toast, then God would never have predicted that I would eat it.<sup>2</sup>

The issue of certainty plays a minor role in the other issue that divides Callahan and me. Callahan rightly says that "the target of action is always the future." It is too late to alter the present. If, suffering from a headache, I take an aspirin, I aim to relieve the pain that I think will afflict me a few moments from now, not to assuage my present agony.

Action, then, entails a preference for one possible future state over another. Since I now take aspirin, I now prefer being free from pain a few minutes from the present to remaining in pain. In this case, since I now have a headache, I am also dissatisfied now; but why need this hold for the general case? Is not the preference for one future state of affairs over another enough?

Callahan does not think so. Suppose, to return to our by now stale example, I am about to eat a slice of toast. I now prefer eating toast in a few seconds to not eating toast. But what is involved in this preference? I cannot be "completely at ease" with not having toast. Otherwise, what would induce me to avoid this possible state of affairs? I must now be dissatisfied when I contemplate the possibility of a toastless self.

To this, Long objects that this is dissatisfaction with a future state of affairs: I am not dissatisfied with anything about my present circumstances. As Long anticipates, Callahan responds that thinking about the possibility I do not want will make me, at least to some degree, dissatisfied now. Long wonders whether someone who can easily prevent the undesired outcome would be dissatisfied; what is there to be upset about?

Long seems to me entirely in the right, but I venture to add a few details to his account. Callahan imagines someone at ease with some possible outcome; why, he asks, would he act to prevent it from happening? How about the fact that the outcome is inconsistent with a different outcome that he wants? Is it not enough to be attracted by what one wants? Why must one also be repelled by what one rejects?

Further, what is meant by "dissatisfaction"? Is this not a term entirely relative to the situation of choice, in this sense: you will be dissatisfied if you get the alternative you do not want, instead of what you do want. But it by no means follows that you must "feel bad" about the less preferred alternative. Suppose you are offered a choice between two envelopes, one that contains \$100,000 and the other \$1,000,000. You hope that you will pick the envelope with the larger amount, but it hardly seems likely that you will, contemplating the chance of getting "only" \$100,000, feel even mildly distressed.

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<sup>2</sup> I also do not accept the so-called prediction paradox. Suppose you predict that someone will do something. Then, it is sometimes held, if the person learns of your prediction, your prediction is invalidated, since he can now act deliberately to make the prediction turn out false. He can; but if your prediction is correct, he won't.

In like fashion, "satisfaction" is also a relative term. One can anticipate a favored outcome with feelings of dismay, choosing it only because the alternatives seem worse. When King David chose a three-day plague in Israel as his punishment for taking a census, over three months of military defeat or three years of famine, (1 Chronicles 21:12), he no doubt viewed the outcome he chose with apprehension.

I shall end with a more controversial point. If you choose A over B, then you must desire A, relative to B. But I do not see why you need to have any felt emotions about the choices at all.<sup>3</sup> If you buy bread today because you want to eat in a few days, you need not experience either anxiety about possibly not eating or joy as you imagine the taste of the bread. Praxeology requires no more than the bare judgment that you prefer one future state to another. The desire for A is imputed to the actor just because of his judgment; it brings with it no phenomenological baggage. The relevance of this consideration to the question whether a perfect being can act is I trust obvious.

Callahan has, to my mind, taken "dissatisfaction" in an overly literal way. But he has convinced me that Mises holds that present dissatisfaction is required for action. Before, I thought that Mises wavered between this view and what I take to be the correct position, viz., that the actor would be dissatisfied if he did not get what he wants. Callahan has shown how Mises could hold both positions at the same time.

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David Gordon edits The Mises Review. [DGordon@mises.org](mailto:DGordon@mises.org)

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<sup>3</sup> The discussion in Thomas Nagel, *The Possibility of Altruism*, (Oxford, 1970), pp.29-30, is of fundamental importance for this point.