“Here I stand,” Luther said. “I can do no other.” Luther claimed that he could do no other, that his conscience made it impossible for him to recant. He might, of course, have been wrong, or have been deliberately overstating the truth. But even if he was—perhaps especially if he was—his declaration is testimony to the fact that we simply do not exempt someone from blame or praise for an act because we think he could do no other. Whatever Luther was doing, he was not trying to duck responsibility.

There are cases where the claim “I can do no other” is an avowal of frailty: suppose what I ought to do is get on the plane and fly to safety, but I stand rooted on the ground and confess I can do no other—because of my irrational and debilitating fear of flying. In such a case I can do no other, I claim, because my rational control faculty is impaired. But in other cases, like Luther’s, when I say I cannot do otherwise I mean I cannot because I see so clearly what the situation is and because my rational control faculty is not impaired. It is too obvious what to do; reason dictates it; I would have to be mad to do otherwise, and since I happen not to be mad, I cannot do otherwise. (Notice, by the way, that we say it was “up to” Luther whether or not to recant, and we do not feel tempted to rescind that judgment when we learn that he claimed he could do no other. Notice, too, that we often say things like this: “If it were up to me, I know for certain what I would do.”)

I hope it is true—and think it very likely is true—that it would be impossible to induce me to torture an innocent person by offering me a thousand dollars. “Ah”—comes the objection—“but what if some evil space pirates were holding the whole world ransom, and promised not to destroy the world if only you would torture an innocent person? Would that be something you would find impossible to do?” Probably not, but so what? That is a vastly different case. If what one is interested in is whether under the specified circumstances I could have done otherwise, then the other case mentioned is utterly irrelevant. I claimed it would not be possible to induce me to torture someone for a thousand dollars. Those who hold dear the principle of “could have done otherwise” are always insisting that we should look at whether one could have done otherwise in exactly the same circumstances. I claim something stronger; I claim that I could not do otherwise even in any roughly similar case. I would never agree to torture an innocent person for a thousand dollars. It
would make no difference, I claim, what tone of voice the briber used, or whether or not I was tired and hungry, or whether the proposed victim was well illuminated or partially concealed in shadow. I am, I hope, immune to all such offers.

Now why would anyone's intuitions suggest that if I am right, then if and when I ever have occasion to refuse such an offer, my refusal would not count as a responsible act? Perhaps this is what some people think: they think that if I were right when I claimed I could not do otherwise in such cases, I would be some sort of zombie, "programmed" always to refuse thousand-dollar bribes. A genuinely free agent, they think, must be more volatile somehow. If I am to be able to listen to reason, if I am to be flexible in the right way, they think, I mustn't be too dogmatic. Even in the most preposterous cases, then, I must be able to see that "there are two sides to every question." I must be able to pause, and weigh up the pros and cons of this suggested bit of lucrative torture. But the only way I could be constituted so that I can always "see both sides"—no matter how preposterous one side is—is by being constituted so that in any particular case "I could have done otherwise."

That would be fallacious reasoning. Seeing both sides of the question does not require that one not be overwhelmingly persuaded, in the end, by one side. The flexibility we want a responsible agent to have is the flexibility to recognize the one-in-a-zillion case in which, thanks to that thousand dollars, not otherwise obtainable, the world can be saved (or whatever). But the general capacity to respond flexibly in such cases does not at all require that one "could have done otherwise" in the particular case, but only that under some variations in the circumstances—the variations that matter—one would do otherwise.

It might be useful to compare two cases that seem quite different at first, but belong on a continuum.

1. Suppose I know that if I ever see the full moon, I will probably run amok and murder the first person I see. So I make careful arrangements to have myself locked up in a windowless room on several nights each month. I am thus rendered unable to do the awful things I would do otherwise. Moreover, it is thanks to my own responsible efforts that I have become unable to do these things. A fanciful case, no doubt, but consider the next case, which is somewhat more realistic.

11. Suppose I know that if I ever see a voluptuous woman walking unescorted in a deserted place I will probably be overcome by lust and rape her. So I educate myself about the horrors of rape from the woman's point of view, and enliven my sense of the brutality of the crime so dramatically that if I happen to encounter such a woman in such straits, I am unable to do the awful thing I would have done otherwise. (What may convince me that I would otherwise have done this thing is that when the
occasion arises I experience a considerable inner tumult; I discover myself shaking the bars of the cage I have built for myself.) Thanks to my earlier responsible efforts, I have become quite immune to this rather more common sort of possession; I have done what had to be done to render certain courses of action unthinkable to me. Like Luther, I now can do no other.

Suppose—to get back all the way to realism—that our parents and teachers know that if we grow up without a moral education, we will become selfish, untrustworthy and possibly dangerous people. So they arrange to educate us, and thanks to their responsible efforts, our minds recoil from thoughts of larceny, treachery and violence. We find such alternatives unthinkable under most normal circumstances, and moreover have been taught to think ahead for ourselves and to contribute to our own moral development. Doesn’t a considerable part of being a responsible person consist in making oneself unable to do the things one would be blamed for doing if one did them? Philosophers have often noted, uneasily, that the difficult moral problem cases, the decisions that “might go either way,” are not the only, or even the most frequent, sorts of decisions for which we hold people responsible. They have seldom taken the hint to heart, however, and asked whether the “could have done otherwise” principle was simply wrong.

I grant that we do indeed often ask ourselves whether an agent could have done otherwise—and in particular whether or not we ourselves could have done otherwise—in the wake of some regrettable act. But we never show any interest in trying to answer the question we have presumably just asked! Defenders of the principle suppose that there is a sense of “could have done otherwise” according to which, if determinism is true, no one ever could have done otherwise than he did. Suppose they are right that there is such a sense. Is it the sense we intend when we use the words “could he have done otherwise?” to inaugurate an inquiry into an agent’s responsibility for an act he committed? It is not. In pursuing such inquiries we manifestly ignore the sort of investigations that would have to be pursued if we really were interested in the answer to that question, the metaphysicians’ question about whether or not the agent was completely determined by the state of the universe at that instant to perform that action.

If our responsibility really did hinge, as this major philosophical tradition insists, on the question of whether we ever could do otherwise than we in fact do in exactly those circumstances, we would be faced with a most peculiar problem of ignorance: it would be unlikely in the extreme, given what now seems to be the case in physics, that anyone would ever know whether anyone has ever been responsible. For today’s orthodoxy is that indeterminism reigns at the subatomic level of quantum mechan-
ics, so in the absence of any general and accepted argument for universal
determinism, it is possible for all we know that our decisions and actions
are truly the magnified, macroscopic effects of quantum-level indeter-
minalities occurring in our brains. But it is also possible, for all we know,
that even though indeterminism reigns in our brains at the subatomic
quantum mechanical level, our macroscopic decisions and acts are all
themselves determined; the quantum effects could just as well be self-
canceling, not amplified (as if by organic Geiger counters in the neu-ns). And it is extremely unlikely, given the complexity of the brain
at even the molecular level (a complexity for which the word “astronomi-
cal” is a vast understatement), that we could ever develop good evidence
that any particular act was such a large-scale effect of a critical subatomic
indeterminacy. So if someone’s responsibility for an act did hinge on
whether, at the moment of decision, that decision was (already) deter-
mained by a prior state of the world, then barring a triumphant return of
universal determinism in microphysics (which would rule out all respon-
sibility on this view), the odds are very heavy that we will never have any
reason to believe of any particular act that it was or was not responsible.
The critical difference would be utterly inscrutable from every macro-
scopic vantage point, and practically inscrutable from the most sophis-
ticated microphysical vantage point imaginable.

Some philosophers might take comfort in this conclusion, but I
would guess that only a philosopher could take comfort in it. To say the
very least it is hard to take seriously the idea that something that could
matter so much could be so magnificently beyond our ken. (Or look at
the point another way: those who claim to know that they have per-
formed acts such that they could have done otherwise in exactly those
circumstances must admit that they proclaim this presumably empirical
fact without benefit of the slightest shred of evidence, and without the
faintest hope of ever obtaining any such evidence.)¹

Given the sheer impossibility of conducting any meaningful investi-
gation into the question of whether or not an agent could have done
otherwise, what can people think they are doing when they ask that
question in particular cases? They must take themselves to be asking
some other question. They are right; they are asking a much better
question. (If a few people have been asking the unanswerable metaphys-

¹. Raab (1955) claims that the metaphysical question about “the absence of
causality” is “untestable,” and notes the peculiarity of taking such an unanswer-
able question seriously. Raab’s reason for declaring such questions unanswerable
rests on the claim—true, no doubt—that no agent has any privileged access to
whether or not his action was caused. All this shows is that such questions ought
not to be addressed exclusively to the agent. My point is that no investigation
could shed any reliable light on this.
ical question, they were deluded into it by philosophy.) The question people are really interested in asking is a better question for two reasons: it is usually empirically answerable, and its answer matters. For not only is the traditional metaphysical question unanswerable; its answer, even if you knew it, would be useless.

What good would it do to know, about a particular agent, that on some occasion (or on every occasion) he could have done otherwise than he did? Or that he could not have done otherwise than he did? Let us take the latter case first. Suppose you knew (because God told you, presumably) that when Jones pulled the trigger and murdered his wife at time \( t \), he could not have done otherwise. That is, given Jones’ microstate at \( t \) and the complete microstate of Jones’ environment (including the gravitational effects of distant stars, and so on) at \( t \), no other Jones-trajectory was possible than the trajectory he took. If Jones were ever put back into exactly that state again, in exactly that circumstance, he would pull the trigger again. And if he were put in that state a million times, he would pull the trigger a million times.

Now if you learned this, would you have learned anything about Jones? Would you have learned anything about his character, for instance, or his likely behavior on merely similar occasions? No. Although people are physical objects which, like atoms or ball bearings or bridges, obey the laws of physics, they are not only more complicated than anything else we know in the universe, they are also designed to be so sensitive to the passing show that they never can be in the same microstate twice. One doesn’t even have to descend to the atomic level to establish this. People learn, and remember, and get bored, and shift their attention, and change their interests so incessantly, that it is as good as infinitely unlikely that any person is ever in the same (gross) psychological or cognitive state on two occasions. And this would be true even if we engineered the surrounding environment to be “utterly the same” on different occasions—if only because the second time around the agent would no doubt think something that went unthought the first time, like “Oh my, this all seems so utterly familiar; now what did I do last time?” (see chapter two, page 33)

There is some point in determining how a bridge is caused to react to some very accurately specified circumstances, since those may be circumstances it will actually encounter in its present state on a future occasion. But there would be no payoff in understanding to be gained by determining the micro-causation of the behavior of a human being in some particular circumstance, since he will certainly never confront that micro-circumstance again, and even if he did, he would certainly be in a significantly different reactive state at the time.

Learning (from God, again) that a particular agent was not thus
determined to act would be learning something equally idle, from the point of view of character assessment or planning for the future. As we saw in chapter five, the undetermined agent will be no more flexible, no more versatile, no more sensitive to nuances, no more reformable, than his deterministic cousin.

So if anyone is interested at all in the question of whether or not one could have done otherwise in exactly the same circumstances (and internal state), this will have to be a particularly pure metaphysical curiosity—that is to say, a curiosity so pure as to be utterly lacking in any ulterior motive, since the answer could not conceivably make any noticeable difference to the way the world went.²