



# Would time travellers act freely?

## A general argument against time travellers' freedom

The **past is fixed**, so whatever a time traveller (to the past) does and whatever happens around them, has – in a sense – already happened and **cannot be changed**.

In a **time travel scenario**, it is not only the time traveller's past that is fixed, but **so is their future**, simply because what lies temporally ahead of the traveller is part of the "external past" (the past of the actual world).

It follows that everything a time traveller does or experiences could not be made to happen otherwise. This gives rise to the **question of whether time travellers could ever be free, since they would never have the possibility of "doing otherwise"**.

This concern is based on the **Principle of Alternative Possibilities**, which, in its simplest form, states that an agent is morally responsible for an action only in case they could have done otherwise. Assuming that morally responsible actions correspond to free actions, *an action is free only if the agent could have done otherwise*.

If these premises are correct, it seems to follow that **time travellers are never morally responsible/free** with respect to their actions.

## Alternative Possibilities and Frankfurt-cases

Frankfurt (1969) offers some counter-examples to show that the Principle of Alternative Possibilities is false – agents' actions can be free/responsible even if they could not act otherwise than they do.

### A typical Frankfurt-style counter-example

Black wants Jones to perform action A, and is ready to intervene to bring about the desired outcome, but prefers that Jones perform action A spontaneously. Black is a *counterfactual intervener* – he would intervene, *if* Jones were about to perform an action other than A (e.g.: B).

	Jones intended	Jones performs	Black	Is Jones responsible for the performed action?
1	Action A	Action A	No intervention	YES
2	Action B	Action A	Intervention	NO

If case 1 represents the actual events, it is correct to attribute responsibility to Jones, since he did what he meant to and there was no interference from Black.

In case 2, Jones is not responsible, since it is *because of Black's interference* that he does A.

Assuming that responsible actions are free actions, **Jones is free in case 1 but not in case 2**.

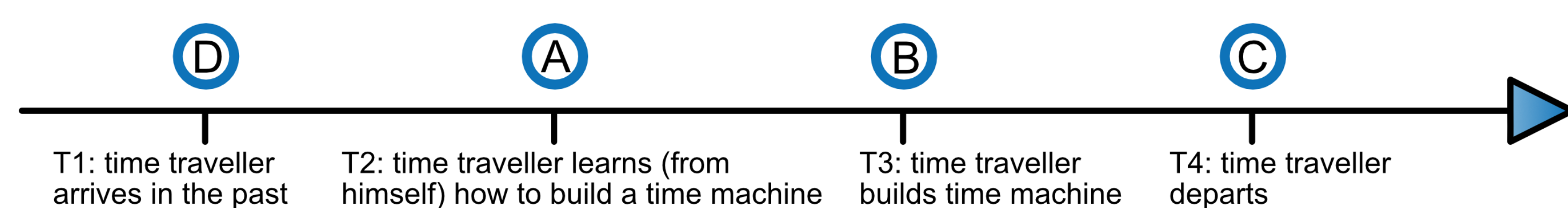
According to Frankfurt, agents are stripped of their freedom/responsibility when their intended action is "blocked" and their doing what they do **is caused by** the constraint/blockage/intervention. Nevertheless, **they can be free** with respect to a given action **if, despite the absence of alternatives** (as those would be counterfactually "blocked"), **they perform the very action they mean to**.

This suggests that evaluations of agents' freedom and responsibility in contexts effectively lacking alternative possibilities should **focus on causal relations**.

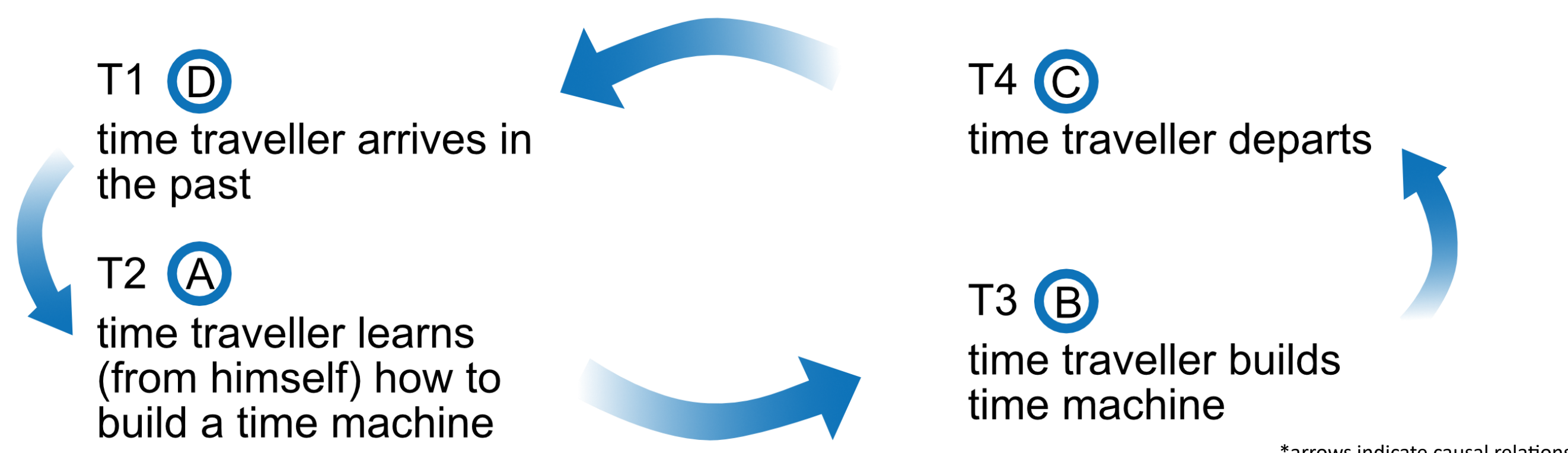
## Analysis of time travel scenarios

There are two main ways to represent the structure of a time travel story:

### 1. A time line



### 2. A causal Chain

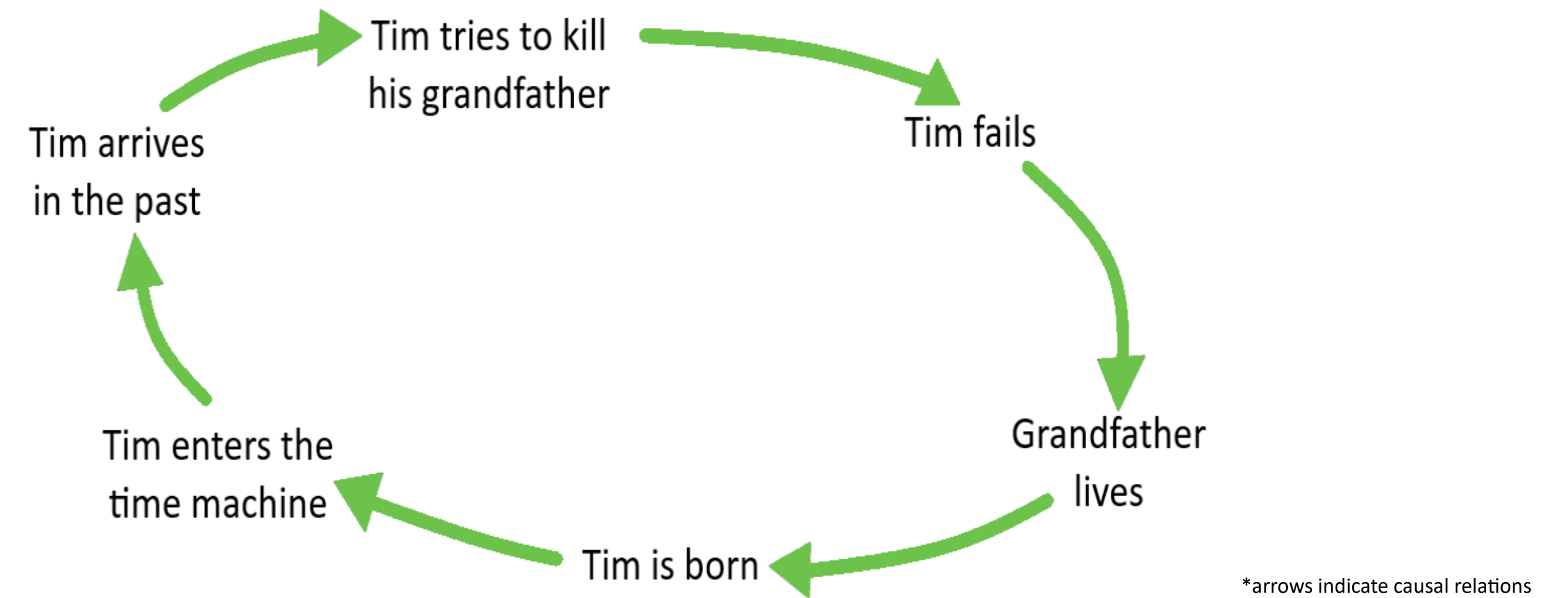


The causal chain shows that time travel involves *backward* causation.

It is possible that a *causal loop* be formed, where later events cause earlier ones which might themselves be part of the causal chain that leads to those very events.

## Defending the possibility of freedom in time travel scenarios

### An example



Tim is born and time travels *because* his Grandfather survived. If Tim had succeeded in killing his grandfather when he meant to, Tim would have never existed, which obviously implies that he could not have killed his Grandfather. This generates the famous Grandfather Paradox.

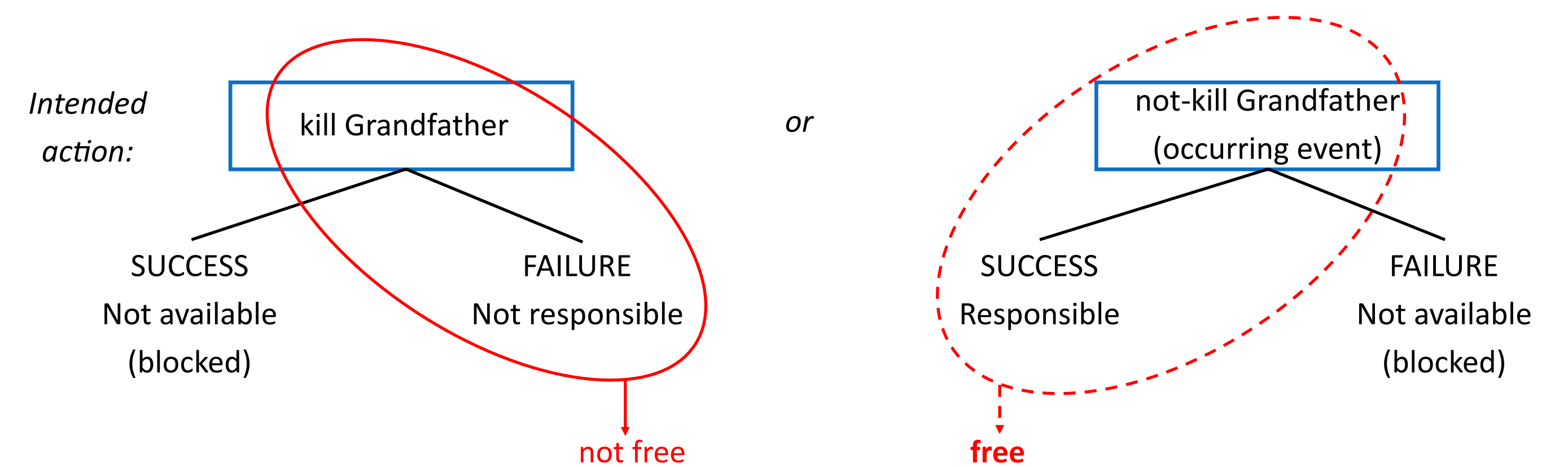
But the **fact that Tim was born is part of the past and therefore fixed**. Moreover, it is part of the causal chain that leads to the murder attempt. For these reasons, some conclude that Tim is not free (e.g.: Vihvelin (1996), Rea (2015)). In fact, it is Tim's very existence that **guarantees that he cannot do otherwise than fail to kill his grandfather**, in a way that parallels the blockage of alternative possibilities in Frankfurt-cases.

### Evaluating freedom

To establish whether there are actions a time traveller can be responsible for/free to perform and, if so, what these actions are, we must first identify the blockage and the blocked pathway in any given case. Then, we have to consider what possibilities are not blocked.

<b>Blockage</b>	Tim's existence (Tim's birth)
<b>Blocked possibility</b>	Successful murder
<b>Available possibility</b>	Failed murder

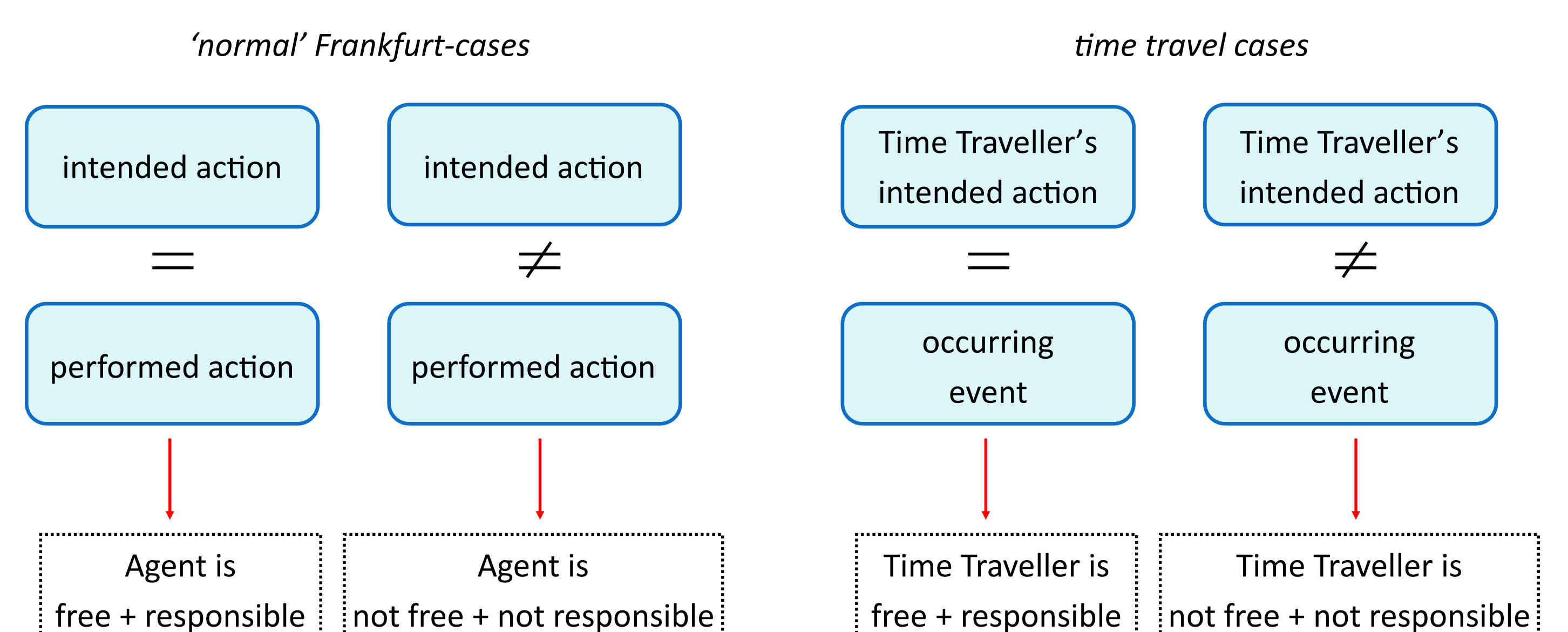
For Tim to perform an action freely, his **intended action and the performed one** (the actually occurring one) **must correspond**, like in case 1 of Black and Jones' table.



### Example—Tim's case

It might be impossible for Tim to kill his grandfather and he would not be responsible for failing to, were he to try. On the other hand, he would be **free not to kill him**, if this were his intention.

**Time travellers can be free, provided their intentions align with the actual events.**



### Bibliography

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