

Deliberation, Action and Freedom

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In this article, I try to present a cumulative argument for libertarianism concerning free will and mainly from a theistic perspective. First, I present and develop further an argument from Pećnjak (2018) that if we have “actish phenomenal feeling” (Ginet 1990) that in a certain situation we can genuinely decide between action A and action B, and that God is not a deceiver, then we have a good reason to believe in libertarianism. I connect this line of reasoning with St Anselm’s view on freedom of the will, namely that we have genuinely open possibilities and that we can persevere in what is good, on our own, and that this perseverance is a choice we make from ourselves. In the last part, I present certain experimental evidence (Schulze-Craft et al. 2016) that agents can voluntarily stop an action which started as an unconscious brain process. A certain congeniality of these three ways gives us firm ground to believe in libertarianism.

Keywords: God; freedom of the will; deliberation; libertarianism; determinism; St Anselm of Canterbury.

1. Introduction

In this article, I shall examine a few important notions in the free will debate and I shall argue for the libertarian position from a theistic perspective.¹ The free will debate has many sides and it is not possible to embrace all of them in one article, but it is in order to explicate just some fundamentals before we go into specifics here. When I say that I shall take a theistic stance, it means that I take for granted that the universe and human beings are created by God, and that I shall use, in argumentation, certain facts about God’s attribute of benevolence. I shall not discuss the problem of God’s foreknowledge and human free-

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dom here, because it is in fact a problem different in nature from the problem I discuss here.

2. *Libertarianism and determinism*

Libertarian position, in general, is an incompatibilist one which means that libertarians think, first, that concepts of “determinism“ and “freedom“ (“freedom of the will“, “freedom of action“) are in no way reconcilable – if there is any kind of freedom, then determinism could not be the case, and this is a libertarian position. Those who are also incompatibilists, but hold that determinism is the case, think that there is no kind of freedom and so are hard determinists. It is clear that compatibilist think that determinism and freedom are compatible so, that even if we embrace determinism, there could be a reconciliatory notion of freedom, and so freedom could exist even in a deterministic world. I shall leave a discussion of compatibilism, and I shall say only that I think that neither version of compatibilism is in the slightest a tenable theory.

Determinism can be defined in various ways. One of the standard definitions is that if we take any instant of the universe and have a complete description of it (all the positions of particles, entities, their velocities, momentum, charge etc), together with the laws of that universe, all other states in the development of the universe are uniquely determined – only one history of the universe is possible.

It means, if determinism is true, that we can take any instant we would like, and all other instants uniquely follow, no matter whether they are past or future relative to the instant we have chosen. But, usually, we take determinism in the way that proceeds from the past to the future – we may take the very first instant of the universe and, if determinism is the case, then each and every future instant of the universe uniquely follows – it is completely determined what they will be. The unfolding of the universe is nomologically necessary if determinism is the case.

We can interpret what is said as a logical thesis – an instant with the laws *entail all other states and instants in a unique way; we can interpret it as a causal thesis - an instant of the universe, with the laws causes all other states and instants in a unique way*. More precisely, if causal determinism holds, then, according to laws of nature that obtain, each event is causally necessitated by a previous event. I shall rely more on determinism as a logical thesis here, but nothing special depends on it.

There are several versions of libertarianism. The main versions are event-causal libertarianism, agent-causal libertarianism and non-causal libertarianism. I shall not argue here for any of these specific versions, but for libertarianism in general. It will be enough, for present purposes, that it can be shown that under the same conditions, a

subject or an agent can do otherwise than in fact he did, and that we can have persuasive reasons which show that an agent is in control over what he does, and that what he does is not necessitated in any way, especially not by the factors on which an agent does not have a control.

In recent articles (Pećnjak 2018, Pećnjak and Anić, forthcoming), it is argued that if determinism is the case, then there is no deliberation, and that this result is unacceptable; so it tells against determinism. It is also argued (Pećnjak 2018) that if we have what Ginet (1990) calls *actish phenomenal feeling* and God exists, then we have free will in a libertarian sense. I do not provide specific or additional arguments for God's existence, as I did not provide them in a previous text. I assume the existence of God. If this is not enough for some of the readers, I plead here, as I pleaded in Pećnjak (2018), that the reader insert here her or his favourite argument(s) for the existence of God.

I shall first give a summary of these two arguments (for more details, see Pećnjak 2018) and then, on the basis of them, we may proceed to the further main points of this article, which will consist of connecting these previous arguments with the free will theory of St Anselm, and certain recent empirical research about free will.

3. *Thoughts about deliberation*

Deliberation is a process through which we come to a solution on what to do in a certain situation when we are faced with, at least seemingly, various different possible outcomes. This process is a complex process and can extend in time and may be interrupted. However, we shall treat it here as a one continuous process for the ease of exposition because I think that nothing crucially depends on treating it as such in order to explicate philosophically relevant matters concerning deliberation in connection with free will. When we deliberate, we examine various beliefs we have, various desires, inclinations, reasons, values we hold, we mentally simulate various outcomes and their implications, we imagine, simulate and evaluate possible future situations. We try to follow the basic laws of logic in these processes, where applicable, and we try to care about the contents of those mental states we process (and according to them, to infer further steps in deliberation).

So, we may say that deliberation is a complex mental process involving various mental items – so it is a species of a more broadly conceived category of action. Deliberation is action – mental action. Furthermore, as an action, it is an event. Again, deliberation typically consists, in fact, of many mental events that are bound together under the same agenda, so we may say that deliberation is a complex mental action, i.e., a complex mental event. It seems that the subject who deliberates is in full control of this complex mental event of his.

But now, suppose that determinism is the case. What becomes of deliberation? If determinism is the case, then it overarches the so-called

process of deliberation as well (Pećnjak and Anić, forthcoming). But this overarching is then so disastrous that nothing of our deliberation will remain. How is it so? Since deliberation is a process that develops in time, each step of this mental process is then fully determined. It is fully and uniquely determined by some initial state and the laws of nature. We may also say that every step in our thinking would then be necessitated by previous states and laws of nature – it would be nomologically necessitated.

Any mental process that happens in a deterministic world is itself determined, so it is not possible, nomologically, for any mental process not to occur in such a world; moreover, it is not possible, nomologically, for any part or any step of that process to be different from what it is. The subject which has this process does not have even the possibility to start or to refrain from this mental process at time t when this process in fact starts (nor at any moment t before or after). So, nothing in this mental process is under the control of the subject. It's the other way around: the process controls the subject. Since the process is a consequence of the initial state of the universe and the laws which obtain there, no one can do, even in thinking, otherwise than he in fact did.

Action that would stem from this kind of mental process would not be a free action because it would stem from the (mental) process which is itself fully determined and, secondly, the action itself, (as well as the mental process from which it stems) is also fully and uniquely determined (already) by the initial state of the universe and the laws which obtain there. So I conclude, there would be no deliberation in a deterministic world, nor would there be agents in the usual meaning of the concept "agent". Why?

Because we can explain what seems to be deliberation – that mental process which occurs for the subjects in a deterministic worlds - by the factors which are evidently and fully outside the control of the subject who "deliberates"; each and every step in the process is a unique consequence or is entailed by factors which are beyond the grasp and control of the subject. So, "deliberation" and its sequence and content are in "control" of the initial state and the laws of nature and not of the subject – the subject is, in fact, only a passive observer of what happens to him. Likewise for his physical activities ("actions") that stem from these mental processes: – the actions which occur by subjects in a deterministic world are due only to the factors which are evidently and fully outside the control of the subject who "acts"; each and every step in the process is a unique consequence or is entailed by factors which are beyond the grasp and control of the subject.

But this result is unacceptable, I think, for our world.

It seems that we really do deliberate and it seems that we are really agents. It seems that we really have open possibilities in front of us – both in deliberating and in action. It seems that we can do otherwise than what we in fact, at the end, did. How and why is this possible?

4. *God is not a deceiver and actish phenomenal feeling*

I shall use some thoughts from Desartes (1911) and Ginet (1990) to show this (see also Pećnjak 2018 for earlier statements about this part of the argument). First, it is not hard to establish that God is not a deceiver. Here, I shall be very brief. God is traditionally conceived as a morally perfect being. Of course, God has many other attributes, but these other attributes are not pertaining for our needs here. Being who is morally perfect would not systematically mislead the beings which are His creations (and seemingly have consciousness, capacity for morality, rationality and a capacity to lead a diverse life and advance and improve themselves). So, a morally perfect being would not deceive – so, God is not a deceiver.

The concept of “actish phenomenal feeling“ is introduced by Carl Ginet (1990) and it refers primarily to our intentional mental actions. But it also refers to the will when it comes to making something with our body or its parts. It is something that accompanies our intentional saying something to ourselves or, for example, when we consciously try to make occurent some mental item from our memory. But let Ginet speak for himself: “The act of mentally saying *peu* is a different sort of mental event from the unbidden occurrence of that word in one’s mind. ... The unbidden occurrence is not an act. And, most importantly, the mental act does *not* consist of an event just like an unbidden occurrence *plus* its having a certain extrinsic relation to the subject. Rather, the mental act differs from the passive mental occurrence *intrinsically*. The mental act has what we may call (for lack of a better term) an *actish* phenomenal quality. This is an extremely familiar quality, recognizable in all mental actions, whether it be mental saying, mental forming an image, or willing to exert force with a part of one’s body. ... This quality is intrinsic to and inseparable from the occurrence of the word in my mind when I mentally say it.“ (Ginet 1990: 13) So, even when we try consciously and intentionally to make a certain (physical) action with our body or its parts (moving hands or legs in order to do something, or even just moving them), we have this actish phenomenal feeling which is such that tells us that we and nothing else is the ultimate origin of making that action.

So, it applies to both mental actions and mental precursors of our physical actions, which stem from our mentally formed will. If this is true, and I think it is, then we can be in control of our thoughts, i.e., beside sometimes “unbidden“ occurrences in our consciousness of various contents – be it words, phrases, beliefs and whatever other content that may become conscious – we can and very often are, in control of what we think, when we think and to what conclusions we came. So, we can really have a process properly called deliberation, because it can be itself freely done in each of its steps and the action which eventually follows, also is free. Action is in fact free even in a twofold sense. It is a proceeding of a freely obtained result of deliberation (namely of will

and intention thus formed), and even when we start to do an action, we still have a possibility to refrain from it.

If we are the ultimate origins of making mental or physical action, it is up to us what we make, and from these it follows that we could have done otherwise than we did, both mentally and physically.

5. St Anselm's and Anselmian approach

Now, to complete the theistic argument. Since God created human beings and since human beings have this “actish phenomenal feeling“, and since God is not a deceiver, then we are not deceived by Him that we have freedom of deliberation, and, hence freedom of the will and freedom of action. We really have these freedoms. Namely, God would not let us have something (namely that “actish phenomenal feeling“), that would lead us so often, massively, on an everyday basis into a completely false stance about our freedom in deliberating, will and action.

It seems to me that with what I offer here is congenial with St Anselm's theory of free will. St Anselm formulated his theory of free will in the following treatises: “On Free Will“ and “Why God Became Man“ (St Anselm of Canterbury 1998). Let me explicate just the basics of his theory with some adaptations for modern use. He considers that human beings, as created rational beings, have the power to choose between mutually exclusive options. How is that so? First of all, traditionally, God is conceived as the supreme creator, which means that each and every created being is dependent on God; everything that exists is dependent on God. According to St Anselm, God creates a situation for human beings that consists of at least two mutually exclusive possibilities for future action. Human beings, according to such a creation of the situation by God, have desires to pursue both of them. St Anselm adds that this situation, which consists of a twofold desire system for pursuing incompatible courses of action, is necessitated by God. If God created human beings with only one desire to pursue and act in only one way, that pursuing and action would not be free and it would be fully necessitated by God, so by factors wholly outside the control of human beings as human agents. If something is fully outside the control of a supposed agent and if the agent could not do anything about it, then determinism would be the case. So, if human beings were to have only one desire or affection to do just one action, then in fact that desiring and action would be determined by God, and in fact human beings would be only God's deterministic puppets. But, according to St Anselm, it is not so. Having two different desires to act in incompatible ways leaves room for genuine opting for one of them. Everything that is created and everything that is different from God depends on God. Still, God has given the power to choose to his crown of creation, to human beings. This power, as a power, and that we have it, really depends on God, but the power itself is such that nothing is in advance determined by it or

by God. Human beings themselves use this power to choose between possibilities. Nothing and no one else, including God Himself, determines the results of what is in the scope of this God-given power which human beings have. But, possibilities and awareness of these possibilities are something that is given by God. In especially morally relevant situations of choice, human beings know what is right to do, but they are also aware of doings which are not right. Both of these, as possibilities and awareness of them, are God-given. But, according to St Anselm, God has given to everyone to know what is right, and we can persevere in the righteousness of will – namely, to will, and then to do, what is right. In St Anselm’s words, we can persevere in truth and righteousness. This very perseverance, as mental action, is not something that is determined, even it is not determined by God. It is up to each human being to persevere – we have the power to do it, this is what is God-given only. So, no one and nothing, besides each human being, chooses for him/herself; then, as agents, each one of us determines for himself or herself what to will and what to do according to this will. We may choose what is not right, but we do not thereby lose our power for freedom of the will, as it is a power; we only do not then “persevere in what is right.” The power is always there as is the possibility to persevere in what is right. Choosing sin or a morally bad action, we thereby do not lose this power of will (to persevere in righteousness). Though, adds St Anselm, the most free is the being who never stops persevering in what is right. This is so because every time we choose what is right, we choose it freely and just for the sake of righteousness itself. Perseverance in good is freely done because the subject who wills it, wills it on his or her own; nothing necessitates perseverance, though there is a possibility that the will succumbs to something that is not good, but nothing necessitates this as well.

All that is said, though St Anselm is concerned with moral situations, is also applicable to choosing in non-moral contexts. Subject, or an agent, is aware of two or more possibilities what to will and how to act, and it is up to him or her to choose one possibility and then bring it to action. No one else and nothing else determines the choosing and a decision, which is forming the will, what to do. Using a bit of St Anselm’s language, a human being can persevere in holding his or her decision, as the will to do something, and can persevere in doing actions on the basis of the persevered will, and nothing necessitates this persevering, as well as nothing necessitates refraining from this persevering.² Freedom is given at a moment of choice when one course of action has been chosen, which happens between two equal desires for pursuing an action in incompatible ways. So, the required indeterminacy for freedom of the will and freedom of the action (which follows)

² For careful and detailed modern interpretation of St Anselm’s theory of freedom and free will, see Rogers (2008, 2015). See also Gwozdz (2009) and Nash-Marshall (2008).

is located in a moment of choice when one course of action has been chosen rather than another. This is a moment in which God does not intervene, and agents choose completely by themselves for pursuing that one course of action. So, this is called choosing *a se*. Rogers (2015) rightly calls st Anselm's theory of free will agent-causal theory³. There is no special power to choose between incompatible courses of action; the agent him/herself just perseveres in one course of action, choosing it and performing it (Rogers 2015 calls it per-willing). This is an event because it happens in time (Rogers 2015: 97). So, how does this fare with the traditional claim that God is the creator of everything that exists? Anselmian answer would be, as Rogers points out (2015: 97), that "God is the cause of all that exists, but He is not the cause of all that happens." Certain events are caused by beings to which God has given the ability to make choices and perform actions based on those choices. So, sovereignty of God is not at all jeopardized by giving agents libertarian agent-causal freedom of the will and action.⁴

Now, we can return briefly to the first theistic argument put forward in the first part of the article to see its full strength, combining it with Anselmian view of freedom of the will. There, we said that, according to Ginet, we have an actish phenomenal feeling when we deliberate and decide – this actish phenomenal feeling gives us that we feel that at the moment of choice we by ourselves directly just make a decision, which has an intentional structure, and that nothing else determines this (and not even God). We make a decision just by making it by ourselves, by that very mental act. This actish phenomenal feeling is located within deciding between two incompatible desires that God has given or created in us, according to St Anselm, where there is genuine indeterminacy at the moment of choice and that indeterminacy is God given that we by ourselves can fully make that decision and pursue one rather than the other course of action and so persevering or per-willing in one chosen course of events. As we said, God is not a deceiver, and

³ For agent-causal theories in contemporary philosophy, see O'Connor (2000), Chisholm (1964), Clarke (1993, 2003: chapters 8-10), Griffith (2007). For a different neo-scholastic libertarian theory of free will, so-called "Dual Sources", see Grant (2019).

⁴ In his interesting study, Peter Furlong (2019) examines what the consequences of divine determinism would be. He defines divine determinism borrowing Heath White's proposal, which consists of two claims: a) The facts about God's will wholly determine every other contingent fact, and b) The facts about God's will will explain every other contingent fact (Furlong 2019: 15). Given our arguments in this text, using the Anselmian approach to free will, it is not so. It is not so because the facts about God's will do not wholly determine every other contingent fact, nor is every other contingent fact explained by the facts about God's will. Since human beings can choose by themselves which course of action to pursue, these courses of action (which are contingent facts) are not determined by God's will, nor are they explainable by God's will (apart from the fact that God *allows* them). So, there is no threat of divine determinism. According to the view presented here, God determines "everything that exists, but does not determine everything that happens" (Rogers 2015: 97).

because this actish phenomenal feeling is pretty much straightforward, we have strong reason to believe that it is right and true in presenting to us that we just by ourselves directly bringing, on our own, a decision and action that follows.

6. *Experimental evidence*

With the things said till now, certain experimental results go hand in hand. I do think that good philosophy does not need experimental data to confirm it, but nevertheless, I find these data also to signal that in this world, for which we are the most interested, we have genuine incompatibilistic freedom of the will and action. Though those philosophers, such as Mark Balaguer (2010), who think that in the end the freewill problem boils down to the empirical question, would be delighted. Neurological electroencephalogram experiments of Schultze-Kraft et al. (2016) showed that there is a possibility for subjects to stop their intended action until 200 ms before the beginning of the physical execution of the action. So-called spontaneous movements are preceded by the onset of brain activity (and it is called readiness potential). This onset of neural brain activity is not already conscious when it does begin and it is unconscious for some time on. It seems that sometimes certain brain neural activity can be even four seconds long (Soon et al. 2013.) before subjects tell that they are conscious of their choosing, as only then they feel it as a conscious will and conscious intention to do something. So, it may seem that determinism reigns because if our actions are products of non-conscious neural brain activity, then human beings are not free – something else determines what human beings do – namely, laws of nature and previous states on which these laws operate. That would threaten what we said above about the possibility of having freedom of will, deliberation and action. When we became conscious of our will, it seems that it is too late – it is only an illusion that we decide and will something on our own consciously, though all this would be a product of other factors – unconscious brain events – over which we do not have an influence. But is it so? Further experiments show that it is not.

“As early as a second before a simple voluntary movement, a so-called readiness potential is observed over motor-related brain regions” (Schultze-Kraft et al. 2016: 1080), which is not conscious.⁵ The question that is highly important is then, “...whether a person can still exert a veto by inhibiting the movement after the onset of the readiness potential?” (Schultze-Kraft et al. 2016: 1080). Experimental results of Schultze-Kraft et al. (2016), show that persons can act in such a way that they can issue a veto “even after onset of this preparatory brain process” (Schultze-Kraft et al. 2016: 1080), which is non-conscious.

⁵ Though these researchers also warn that what is the exact causal role of these signals is in fact not definitely solved.

Their results “suggest that humans can still cancel or veto a movement even after the onset of the readiness potential. This is possible until the point of no return, around 200 ms before movement onset. However, even after the onset of the movement, it is possible to alter and cancel the movement as it unfolds.” (Schultze-Kraft et al. 2016: 1084). This suggests that human beings can consciously and voluntarily stop an action that started unfolding as an unconscious neurological process. So it seems that we are not at the mercy of our unconscious processes. We can voluntarily change the course of our own actions.

7. Conclusion

Several different points point to the same conclusion, so we may regard them as a kind of cumulative evidence for libertarianism: we see that there is a plausible way to construct human will and human action as having the property of libertarian free will. It seems that actions, both mental and physical, are up to us in the sense that we could have done otherwise than what, in fact, we did.⁶

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