

Injecting the Phenomenology of Agency Into the Free Will Debate

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1. Some Reliably Introspectible Aspects of Agentive Phenomenology

Not the phenomenology of fortuitously appropriate bodily motion.

Not the passive phenomenology of psychological state-causation of bodily motion.

Is the phenomenology of self as source. (Libertarian lingo is phenomenologically apt—e.g., agent causation.)

Includes the phenomenological aspect of core optionality.

Sometimes also includes additional phenomenological aspects of superimposed non-optionality.

Is more closely akin to perceptual/kinesthetic experience than it is to discursive thought.

2. Frankfurt Scenarios: What They Show and What They Don't

A “best case” Frankfurt scenario: The malevolent being—who (unbeknownst to the agent) wants the agent to perform act A, is monitoring the agent’s decisionmaking processes, and is ready to intervene should the agent be about to decide against performing A—will intervene if need be, by causing the agent to undergo an experience that is *phenomenologically indistinguishable* from the experience of freely performing A. But, since the malevolent being ascertains that the agent is about to freely perform A anyway, the being does not intervene.

Intuitive verdict (and I agree): In this scenario the agent does exercise free agency, and is morally responsible, even though the agent could not have behaved otherwise.

As for how to generalize, consider these two claims:

(A) It is not the case that in every possible situation S, an agent exercises free agency in S only if the agent can/could choose and act otherwise in S.

(B) In no possible situation S is it the case that an agent exercises free agency in S only if the agent can/could choose and act otherwise in S.

Frankfurt scenarios do show that (A) is true. But it would be a gross non sequitur to infer claim (B) from such scenarios.

It remains extremely plausible that in *most* possible situations that human agents might encounter—and probably all *actual* situations that humans have ever encountered (or ever will)—an agent exercises free agency in the given situation only if the agent can/could choose and act otherwise in that situation.

I.e., it remains extremely plausible that core optionality is a *defeasibly* necessary condition for the exercise of free agency.

The real relevance of Frankfurt scenarios is that they specify potential (though hugely far-fetched) circumstances under which the defeasible requirement of core optionality would actually get defeated—viz., circumstances involving a *pre-empted potential cause*, waiting in the wings and unbeknownst to the agent, that would have caused the agent to exhibit A-behavior, and to have the experience as-of freely performing A, had it not been the case that the agent freely performed A by herself/himself.

3. Five Dimensions of the Free Will Debate

Three *content* questions:

C.1. What are the satisfaction conditions of free-agency phenomenology?

C.2. Does free-agency phenomenology have libertarian satisfaction conditions?

C.3. Does free-agency phenomenology have compatibilist satisfaction conditions?

Three *introspectability* questions:

I.1. Can question C.1 be reliably answered directly by means of introspection?

I.2. Can question C.2 be reliably answered directly by means of introspection?

I.3. Can question C.3 be reliably answered directly by means of introspection?

Five dimensions of the debate: phenomenological, conceptual, metaphysical, epistemic, and moral.

Regarding the conceptual dimension:

Quite probably, the satisfaction conditions for the concept of free agency are very largely (or entirely) inherited from the satisfaction conditions of free-agency phenomenology.

Quite probably (and this brings in the moral dimension), context-dependent variations in uses of the concept are directly inherited from distinct aspects of the overall intentional content of agentic phenomenology. (Core optionality, superimposed non-optionality.)

Regarding the metaphysical dimension:

This mainly concerns (i) the question of what constitutes genuine free agency, and (ii) the question whether humans actually exercise free agency.

Question (i) is tightly interconnected with the conceptual dimension, because *prima facie* this question is essentially equivalent to the question of what constitutes the satisfaction conditions of the concept of free agency.

Since there is clearly some degree of context-sensitivity in the workings of the concept of free agency, an important special case of (i) is the question of what constitutes free agency of the kind typically regarded as a (defeasibly) necessary condition for moral responsibility.

This question, which obviously incorporates the moral dimension, also is tightly interconnected to the conceptual dimension, because *prima facie* it is essentially equivalent to the question of what constitutes, *in contexts of moral-responsibility assessment*, the satisfaction conditions of the concept of free agency.

And of course, question (i) is highly pertinent to question (ii).

Regarding the epistemic dimension:

People at large, and the vast majority of philosophers too, routinely accept as veridical the deliverances of their own free-agency phenomenology.

People at large, and the vast majority of philosophers too, routinely assume that other persons normally exercise this same kind of free agency.

These beliefs are presupposed in self-directed and other-directed reactive attitudes, in judgments of moral responsibility, and in judgments of “basic desert” for blame, and punishment.

But are these beliefs epistemically justified?

The more demanding are the satisfaction conditions of that phenomenology, the greater is the looming worry that such beliefs (and the associated moral attitudes/practices), are not epistemically justified, that such phenomenology is illusory rather than veridical,

Regarding the moral dimension: Already discussed, in relation to each of the other dimensions.

4. Introspection and the Satisfaction Conditions of Free-Agency Phenomenology

Many will answer “Yes” both to question I.2 and to question C.2. I’ll call the conjunction of these two answers the thesis of *libertarian introspectability*.

I acknowledge the strong *prima facie* plausibility of this pair of “Yes” answers.

But I maintain that “No” is the correct answer to both questions.

I also maintain that introspection alone can’t reliably answer any of questions C.1-C.3.

5. Embracing Libertarian Introspectability: Three Package-Deal Positions

5.i. Package-Deal Libertarianism

Conceptual dimension: Smoothly integrates the content of the concept with the content of the phenomenology (+); but it’s notoriously hard to give any satisfying positive account of libertarian self-sourcehood (-).

Metaphysical dimension: honors the strong belief, held by almost everyone (including most philosophers), that free agency is a genuine phenomenon (+); but conflicts with the very credible scientific hypothesis that the cognitive processes leading to choices and actions are implemented by brain processes that either are deterministic at the neurochemical level of description or are at least near-deterministic—with any quantum-level indeterminacies, if such there be, being “drowned out” rather than affecting the behavior of neurons; and libertarian self-sourcehood is very probably conceptually incoherent (-).

Epistemic dimension: acknowledges the fact that people believe they exercise free agency largely because of the experiential character of their own free-agency phenomenology (+), and it honors the thought that this phenomenology renders the belief in free agency epistemically well justified (+); but because of the very real scientific possibility that brain processes are deterministic or near-deterministic at the neurochemical level of description, and the very real possibility the very notion of libertarian self-sourcehood is ultimately incoherent, the hypothesis that humans exercise libertarian free agency lacks strong epistemic justification *on balance* (-).

Moral dimension: acknowledges the fact that an act's being the product of free agency is a prerequisite for holding the agent morally responsible for the act, for having reactive attitudes directed at the agent because of the act, and for regarding the agent as having basic desert that warrants blame and punishment (+); but since belief in libertarian free agency is epistemically unjustified on balance, so likewise are the moral attitudes, and the associated social practices, that presuppose that people actually exercise free agency (-).

5ii. *Package-Deal Hard Incompatibilism*

Conceptual dimension: smoothly integrates the content of the concept of free agency with the content of free-agency phenomenology, and plausibly treats the former as derived from the latter (+); avoids the need to render intelligible the prima facie incoherent notion of libertarian free agency, by affirming outright that this notion is indeed incoherent (+).

Metaphysical dimension: comports with the very credible scientific hypothesis that the cognitive processes leading to choices and actions are implemented by brain processes that are deterministic or near-deterministic at the neurochemical level of description (+); but fails to honor the strong belief, held by almost everyone (including most philosophers), that free agency is a genuine phenomenon (-).

Epistemic dimension: honors the fact that on balance, the hypothesis that humans exercise libertarian free agency lacks strong epistemic justification, and the further fact that on balance, the hypothesis that humans lack libertarian free agency has strong epistemic justification (+); but is committed to the contention that among those who believe in the reality of free agency (viz., almost all people), many are manifesting a serious lapse in epistemic competence, because they are informed enough about science to realize how live is the possibility that the cognitive processes are neurochemically deterministic or near-deterministic (-).

Moral dimension: honors the very plausible contention that in order for someone to be genuinely morally responsible for an act, and in order for reactive attitudes toward the person to be morally justified, and in order for basic-desert based praise, blame and punishment to be morally justified, the person must have exercised the kind of moral agency that we humans experience ourselves to exercise (+); but committed to the contention that nobody is ever genuinely morally responsible in the way that confers moral justification upon reactive attitudes, attributions of basic desert, or basic-desert based praise, blame, and punishment (-).

5.iii. *Package-Deal Libertarian Compatibilism*

Conceptual dimension: acknowledges and honors the contention that free-agency experience has libertarian satisfaction conditions (+); a voids the need to render intelligible the prima facie incoherent notion of libertarian free agency, by affirming that this notion is incoherent (+); incurs a non-negligible theoretical cost by positing two kinds of content (-?).

Metaphysical dimension: honors the strong belief, held by almost everyone (including most philosophers), that free agency is a genuine phenomenon (+); comports with the very credible scientific hypothesis that the cognitive processes leading to choices and actions are implemented by brain processes that are deterministic or near-deterministic at the neurochemical level of description (+).

Epistemic dimension: honors the fact that on balance, the hypothesis that humans exercise libertarian free agency lacks strong epistemic justification, and the further fact that on balance, the hypothesis that humans lack libertarian free agency has strong epistemic justification (+); acknowledges the fact that people believe they exercise free agency largely because of the experiential character of their own free-agency phenomenology, and honors the thought that this phenomenology renders the belief in free agency epistemically well justified (+).

Moral dimension: flouts (**big minus!**) the following extremely plausible contention, a putative Requirement for Moral Responsibility (RMR):

In order for someone to be genuinely morally responsible for an act, and in order for reactive attitudes toward the person to be morally justified, and in order for basic-desert based praise, blame and punishment to be morally justified, the person must have exercised the kind of moral agency that we humans experience ourselves to exercise.

6. Against Libertarian Introspectability

First: Normal human conceptual competence is often mainly a matter of being able to correctly apply a given concept *to a concrete case* (modulo one's available evidence). But the envisioned task is the *direct, intuitive*, formation of a judgment about its *general satisfaction conditions*, just by introspectively attending to one's phenomenology and then deploying one's conceptual competence to form such a judgment. It's doubtful that conceptual competence is that powerful.

Second: The libertarian introspectability hypothesis probably rests on a conflation between two distinct features that might accrue to one's free-agency phenomenology: (a) **not** presenting one's choice/behavior **as** casually determined by prior conditions, and (b) presenting one's choice/behavior **as not** casually determined by prior conditions.

Third: Elsewhere I have argued (i) that the concept of free agency is governed by implicit, contextually variable, semantic parameters, (ii) that everyday default settings on these parameters render free-agency attributions compatible with determinism, and (iii) that explicitly posing the problem of freedom and determinism tends to drive the implicit parameters away from their default setting and toward a setting under which freedom-attributions become incompatible with determinism. So, when one undertakes to answer question C.1, one is apt to mistakenly think that it is introspectively self-evident that the intentional content of one's free-agency phenomenology is incompatible with state-causal determinism—when one's tendency to think so has actually arisen because the *judgmental* aspect of one's introspective endeavor has unwittingly been prodded into a non-default parameter-setting by the posing of the very question one is seeking to answer.

7. Package-Deal Compatibilism

My favored version would answer “No” to each of I.1 – I.3, “No” to C.2, “Yes” to C.3, and treats answering C.1 as important further theoretical business.

My version would incorporate contextualism about ‘can/could choose/do otherwise’, allowing for non-standard limit-cases contexts in which this notion conflicts with determinism.

My version would eschew straight possible-world semantics for modals and counterfactuals generally (because p-w semantics works badly on the assumption of determinism), and hence also for ‘can/could choose/do otherwise’. Replacing or modifying p-w semantics is a residual task.

PD compatibilism fares badly if the libertarian introspectability thesis is true, but fares well otherwise.

Conceptual dimension: smoothly integrates the content of the concept of free agency with the content of free-agency phenomenology, and plausibly treats the former as derived from the latter (+); avoids the need to render intelligible the prima facie incoherent notion of libertarian free agency, by affirming outright that this notion is indeed incoherent (+).

Metaphysical dimension: honors the strong belief, held by almost everyone (including most philosophers), that free agency is a genuine phenomenon (+); comports with the very credible scientific hypothesis that the cognitive processes leading to choices and actions are implemented by brain processes that are neurochemically deterministic or near-deterministic (+).

Epistemic dimension: acknowledges the fact that people believe they exercise free agency largely because of the experiential character of their own free-agency phenomenology (+); it honors the thought that this phenomenology renders the belief in free agency epistemically well justified (+); acknowledges the fact that people believe they exercise free agency largely because of the experiential character of their own free-agency phenomenology, and honors the thought that this phenomenology renders the belief in free agency epistemically well justified (+).

Moral dimension: honors the very plausible contention that in order for someone to be genuinely morally responsible for an act, and in order for reactive attitudes toward the person to be morally justified, and in order for basic-desert based praise, blame and punishment to be morally justified, the person must have exercised the kind of moral agency that we humans experience ourselves to exercise (+); acknowledges the fact that an act's being the product of free agency is a prerequisite for holding the agent morally responsible for the act, for having reactive attitudes directed at the agent, and for regarding the agent as having basic desert that warrants blame and punishment (+).

Overall upshot: On the basis of overall theoretical costs and benefits, within the hopper of abductive reasoning that appeals to wide reflective theoretical equilibrium, (a) the libertarian introspectability thesis is very likely false, and (b) PD compatibilism is more likely true than any of its three package-deal competitors.