

# The Act of Choice

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## ASPECTS OF FREE WILL

Nietzsche: the will “is a unit only as a word”. (*Beyond Good and Evil* §19)

Some different dimensions: moral responsibility; theological aspects; agency; the phenomenology of freedom.

Johnson: “Sir we *know* our will is free, and *there’s* an end on’t”. “You are surer that you can lift up your finger or not as you please than you are of any conclusion from a deduction of reasoning.” “All theory is against the freedom of the will; all experience for it”. (All quotations from Boswell’s *Life*. Compare Locke: “I cannot have a clearer perception of any thing than that I am free”, letter to Molyneux 1693) What is the nature of the experience?

## PHENOMENOLOGY OF FREEDOM

Even here, there are many aspects: phenomenology of agency; phenomenology of deliberation; phenomenology of choice. The latter is an experience of an act of *choice* or *decision* (i.e. a decision *to*, not a decision *that*).

Libertarianism misses this point, as noted, for instance, by Anthony Collins who objects to those who appeal to vulgar experience to support libertarian views, ‘yet, inconsistently therewith, contradict the vulgar experience, by owning it to be an *intricate matter*, and treating it after an intricate matter’. (*An Inquiry Concerning Human Liberty*, Second Edition 1717, p. 30)

The central contention here: there is such an activity as making a choice; and this is significant because choice has two important features:

The *necessity* of choice for action. Typically, in order to move to action, we need to make a choice about what to do. The beliefs and desires that we have are not, on their own, enough to move us; moreover they are not enough to cause our choices. Thus neither our actions nor our choices are determined by our prior beliefs and desires.

The *sufficiency* of choice for action. Typically, having made the choice we will now act: given the right context, the choice is effective in taking us to action.

Both of these features are features that we can plausibly, but defeasibly, be aware of in experience. (Compare our awareness of the truth of other mundane causal claims.) They

are, however, not incompatible with determinism. They are only incompatible with a particular way in which our actions might be determined, i.e. via beliefs and desires. (Don't be misled by the names into thinking that I'm giving necessary and sufficient conditions for choice!)

Challenges to necessity: automatic actions (habitual; instinctive). Distinguish local and global challenges.

Challenges to sufficiency: automatic actions overruling choice; choice as epiphenomenon. Again distinguish local and global challenges.

## STANDARD COMPATIBILIST ACCOUNTS

Standard compatibilist accounts typically don't make space for an act of choice; and it is hard to see how they could make sense of it if they wanted to.

### Desire based accounts

The objects, means, &c are the weights, the man is the scale, the understanding of a convenience or inconvenience is the pressure of those weights, which incline him now one way, now another; and that inclination is the will. (Hobbes, *Collected English Works* Vol. V p. 326.)

### Belief (or reason) based accounts

- (i) deliberation:  
considering the options that are available, and their likely consequences; getting clear on one's own desires, and one's own prior plans and intentions; seeing how the options fit in with these desires and plans; establishing pros and cons.
- (ii) deciding *that*:  
making a judgment that a certain action is best, given the considerations raised in the process of deliberation. The upshot of the judgment is a belief.
- (iii) deciding *to*:  
deciding to do the action that one judged was best. The upshot of this decision is an intention
- (iv) acting:  
acting on the intention that has been made, which involves both doing that thing, and coordinating other actions and intentions around it.

On the internalist account, (iii) collapses into (ii); but then there no real place for choice. On the externalist account the two remain distinct, but then choice becomes a liability.

## EXPLAINING THE NEED FOR CHOICE

(1) Theological considerations: the need for a test etc. Hopeless without God, tricky with him.

(2) Indifference and incommensurability. Yes, but there is a risk that it makes choosing look like picking.

(3) The use of resolutions in resisting temptation. Shows why beliefs aren't enough; and gives empirical reason for thinking that prior mental states aren't sufficient (we need to factor in abilities, effort etc); but gives little basis for the utility of choice. Why not automatically form the intention on the basis of one's belief, formed away from the temptation, about what is best?

(4) Acting on limited information.

Maximizing is very difficult and so very cognitively expensive; we are typically unable to do it. So we do not arrive at stage (ii). Situations of perceived incommensurability can be understood as involving an inability to rank, not necessarily as involving the (philosophically tendentious) conviction that there is no ranking available. We are very frequently in the position that several options look good, and that whilst we think that one might be the best, we are unable to form a judgment, in the time available, about which one it is. If we have little idea about how to go about ranking them, that is a situation that we would think of as possibly involving incommensurability; if we know how to rank but lack the time to do so, that is simple lack of information. Both of these are situations in which the ability to choose is needed. But choosing here does not amount to mere picking. The agent deliberates in deciding what to do; it is just that this deliberation does not involve arriving at judgments as to what is best. (More on what this deliberation amounts to later.)

## THREE OBJECTIONS

(i) If you can't get an objective ranking, go for a subjective ranking. *Response:* this misunderstands the force of the worry: it is exactly the subjective ranking that is unavailable.

(ii) On satisficing accounts, the action is determined by the belief that a certain outcome is good enough. *Response:* the belief that an option is good enough merely makes it eligible for choice; it isn't the reason for choosing it. And in many cases there will be more than one option that is eligible.

(iii) If choice is itself an act, then we must in turn choose whether to choose, and then in turn choose that, which brings a regress. *Response:* I never said that *every* act involved choice. I explicitly said that some (e.g. automatic acts) don't. Acts of choice typically aren't acts that we choose to perform (though they can be), so no regress gets going.

## JUDGEMENT AS SUBSEQUENT TO CHOICE

The argument so far: choice to perform a certain act frequently does not follow from a judgment that that act is best. A further claim: even when that judgment exists, it frequently *follows* the choice.

Nisbett and Wilson's right bias experiments: subjects came to judge that the right-most of a set of identical objects was the best. But did the subjects have a brute tendency to judge the right-most best? Or did they rather have a brute tendency to choose the right-most, and they then inferred that it must be best on the basis of their choice? The latter explanation seems more plausible. (Nisbett and Wilson speak of *choice* throughout their discussion, as do most of the subsequent commentators.)

It's easy to think that such judgements are just rationalizations; that is the approach that has dominated cognitive dissonance theory. Alternatively it might be held that they provide a path to self-knowledge: that agents come to discover something about themselves as a result of looking at their own behaviour. That is the alternative interpretation given by various cognitive theorists (e.g. Bem). There are many difficult empirical issues here, some of which do not immediately concern us. But it is worth distinguishing three questions:

- (i) Does the choice provide evidence to the agent of *prior* belief?
- (ii) Does the choice lead the agent to form a *subsequent* belief?
- (iii) Is the belief likely to be true?

Answers (in reverse order):

(iii) Sometimes; and almost always, more likely than not. Much of the more picturesque psychology literature focuses on cases (like the right bias case) in which the choices are not triggered by appropriate features of the situation. But many cases are not like this. Competent actors very often gain abilities to make good choices without having any insight into what they are doing, and so without forming beliefs about what is best. (For instance, in the laboratory, Lewicki *et al.* on the quadrant game; in the real world, Klein on fire-fighters, neo-natal nurses, missile operators.) Choosing, even in the absence of belief, is not just random picking. If this is right then in such circumstances agents would do well to base their beliefs about what is best on their choice behaviour. Indeed, given that there are such circumstances, then if in the cases in which the choice goes wrong that is because it picks up on irrelevant features, and not on contra-indications (so getting it right is no worse than chance), forming one's belief on the basis of one's choice will be better than chance even if one has no way of knowing when one is tracking something.

(ii) Yes. This is true assuming that the agent is using this method of forming beliefs, and not just insisting that they had no belief about what was best. So it gives self-knowledge about what their beliefs are (this is not just rationalisation.) Whether it gives knowledge of what is best depends, at the very least, on the details of the reliability of the process described above.

(i) No. The agent has a sensitivity to various kinds of evidence. Prior to choosing they don't have a conscious belief. Might it be thought that they have an unconscious belief? We need to know more about what might count as an unconscious belief. My suspicion is that the dispositions will be too brute to count as a belief: for instance, the nurse's decision to call a doctor, based on the unconscious registering of a certain pattern of skin colouring, would not be influenced by the knowledge that in that baby the colouring was benign. In particular, it would be hard to argue that there is an unconscious belief that a certain course of action was not simply good, but best; for that involves an idea of ranking alternatives that the unconscious states are unlikely to be up to.

#### CLARIFICATIONS

Is it only in cases where we lack knowledge of what is best that we make a choice? Response: No. The idea is that we have the capacity to choose because we frequently lack knowledge. But the capacity functions in all cases, whether there is such a lack or not; or at least, all cases where there is nothing stopping it.

Does the account effectively make the old and disreputable move of identifying freedom with ignorance? Response: it is true that the account does suggest that if we always knew which option was best, then we would have no need for the capacity to choose. But the phenomenology of choice is not simply an illusion engendered by our ignorance; it is not that we mistakenly believe that we have choice as a result of our ignorance. Choice is a real process, made necessary by our ignorance. (It is perhaps true that if we knew what we were going to do, we would not experience choice as we experience it now; but if we knew what we were going to do our phenomenology would be very different altogether.)

Does the empirical evidence suggest that the experience of choice is epiphenomenal? No.