

Degrees of freedom

Timothy O'Connor*

Department of Philosophy, Indiana University, Sycamore 115, Bloomington, IN 47405, USA

I propose a theory of freedom of choice on which it is a variable quality of individual conscious choices that has several dimensions that admit of degrees, even though – as many theorists have traditionally supposed – it also has as a necessary condition the possession of a capacity that is all or nothing. I argue that the proposed account better fits the phenomenology of ostensibly free actions, as well as empirical findings in the human sciences.

Keywords: agent causation; automaticity; awareness; consciousness; intention; reasons

I have defended elsewhere an agent-causal theory of the core metaphysical component of (directly) free actions (O'Connor 1995, 2000, 2002, 2005). On this theory, at the originative core of every free action is a certain kind of mental action. The mental action is the forming of a choice or decision, but not every event that we might reasonably categorize in that way suffices. The requisite type is *sui generis*: it is the agent's causing the coming to be of an executive intention (an intention to act here and now), where the causation is an ontologically primitive relation between a substance (the enduring agent) and an event internal to the agent of the specified type.

Agent-causal theories of free action (and in some cases of action generally) have been roundly criticized over the last several decades within the philosophy of action. Some continue to insist that the very idea of causation by a substance is incoherent. In O'Connor (2009), I try to show, to the contrary, that it can be readily understood within a dispositionalist account of causation generally. Here I wish to address two other broad criticisms of the theory. One criticism is that the theory cannot provide a satisfactory account of the way reasons guide the formation of free choices thereby permitting a richer explanation of them than merely saying that the agent caused them. Another and related criticism is that the form of control the theory ascribes to the agent is implausibly extreme, inconsistent with observations in social science and everyday life alike that human actions, even paradigmatically free actions, are heavily shaped by a host of factors, sometimes in ways to which the agent is oblivious. In response to both these criticisms, I shall propose an account of the influence of reasons and other factors on free choice that strongly suggests an unusual thesis: freedom comes in degrees. Though I motivate the thesis as a consequence of features of my favored version of the agent-causal theory, its plausibility is largely independent of this kind of theory of freedom.

*Email: toconnor@indiana.edu

1. Agent-causal account of reasons for acting: the basic model

We shall not say that the obtaining of a reason in the agent – the agent's coming to have a mental state that motivates a certain course of action – is a factor that contributes to causally *producing* the event which consists in the agent's causing (the coming to be of) an intention. Why not? Two reasons. First, if there are factors that produce the agent's causing of an intention to act, they would undercut the agent as the ultimate locus of control in producing the action, which feature is the primary attraction of the agent-causal theory as a theory of *free* action. Second, it may well be that the supposition is an impossible one (as I argue, in O'Connor 2009).

But perhaps we can achieve the desired causal connection between reason and action by supposing instead that the agent's coming to appreciate a reason for acting appropriately affects (in the typical case, by increasing) an *objective propensity of the agent* to cause the intention to so act. On this latter suggestion, while nothing produces an instance of agent causation, the possible occurrence of such an event has a continuously evolving, objective likelihood. Expressed differently, agent causal power is a *structured* propensity towards a class of effects (the formings of executive intentions), such that at any given time, for each causally possible, specific agent-causal event-type, there is a definite objective probability of its occurrence within the range (0, 1), and this probability varies continuously as the agent is impacted by internal and external influences. Where the event promoted occurs, the effect of the influencing events is to alter the prior likelihood of an outcome, not to produce it.

Where reasons confer probabilities in this manner, I will say that the reasons *causally structure* the agent-causal capacity. Since agent causation is plausibly taken to be an inherently purposive causal capacity, we may suppose that every instance of agent causation is causally structured in this way: necessarily, when an agent causes an intention *i* to occur at time t_1 , he does so in the presence of a motivational state whose onset began at a time $t_0 < t_1$ and which had an appreciable influence on the probability between t_0 and t_1 of his causing of *i*. Let us say that when a reason *R* satisfies this description, the agent freely acted *on R*.

One might worry that by introducing the concept of objective probabilities for instances of agent causation, we will face a dilemma when it comes to limit cases involving extreme probabilities. If (as agent causalists and incompatibilists generally maintain) I cannot be free if the prior probability of my action is 1 (i.e., my action is causally determined), then is it plausible that I may be free if the probability is lowered slightly, to 0.99? 0.9999? If, however, one allows that freedom would be absent in cases of extremely high probability, how high does the probability need to be for freedom to be negated? Or does it steadily diminish as we move from 0.5? And isn't that, too, absurd?

Happily, I think we can avoid this sort of dilemma by contending that it will not be possible for the probability of an *agent-causal event, at a specific time*, to be extremely high. The reason to think this is right is that the capacity to cause an intention is inherently 'plural', capable of being directed in the circumstances to more than one end, and it necessarily involves the option *not to choose*: not to cause an intention to act, just then. Plausibly, the probability of taking this option must be non-negligible. Given this, the closest extreme-probability-just-short-of-1 scenario I am able to conceive is one where there is a slight chance that an external circumstance might occur that would prompt me to become aware of a competing motivation for acting, one that would have significance to me. In this kind of case, where the improbable event does *not* come to pass, the probability evolves to 1 that the relevant portion of my *internal state* will cause the intention with

the appropriate content. Thus, the high probability at the earlier time attaches to a possible agent-causal action at a later time (conditional on a low-probability change of circumstance), not an action here and now.

We will acknowledge in a moment that the basic account indicated above does not capture every important element that obtains in some cases of freely undertaken decisions. Even so, this picture of the core metaphysical ‘springs’ of the agent-causal theory does suffice to show that agent causation is consistent with a robust and fairly straightforward understanding of the way reasons influence free choices. What is more, it is not a ‘god-like’ capacity floating free of external causal constraint, but one that may be causally structured by any number of factors. It *is* a distinctive capacity, one that can be intelligibly attributed only to agents of a certain kind of sophistication, and we have introduced a correspondingly novel notion, *causal structuring*, needed to make room for the right sort of causal influence upon it. But it is surely not a desideratum that there be nothing at all distinctive about a capacity that grounds the sort of intentional agency required for moral responsibility.

Yet viewed from another vantage point, the sort of freedom for which the basic model of acting for a reason suffices appears to be quite modest. For, consistent with what has been advanced thus far, we may suppose that the agent-causal capacity is continuously and heavily causally structured by factors of which the agent is wholly unaware. On the resulting picture, agents regularly determine their courses of action, deciding between options towards which they feel ‘impelled’ to varying degrees, yet they know not why, at least on a conscious level. In stark metaphysical terms, they are free – they have a *power of freedom*. But in thicker moral and cognitive terms, their freedom is quite attenuated. If human free actions were always like that, we would not value as highly the freedom they manifest, and the attribution of moral responsibility would be rendered problematic. Conscious awareness of one’s motivations is vital to the process by which we come to ‘own’ them in such a way that we can appropriately be criticized for having and acting upon the motivations that we do. It is vital to the sort of freedom that consists in enjoying a significant moral *autonomy*.

2. Agent-causal account of reasons for acting: the enhanced model

According to the above account, agents who act freely must directly produce the intentions that initiate and guide their actions, acting on an inclination that is the causal product of certain reasons they acquired (and subsequently retained) at some point prior to this causal activity. But sometimes, it would appear, there is more to be said about the way that reasons motivate freely undertaken actions. Generally, I am conscious of certain reasons that favor the course of action I am choosing. And sometimes, I expressly choose the action for the purpose of achieving the goal to which those reasons point. That is, this goal enters into the content of the conscious intention I form. In such cases, instead of simply intending to *A*, for some action type *A*, I cause the intention to *A for the sake of G*, where *G* is the goal of a prior desire or intention that, together with the belief that *A*-ing is likely to promote *G*, constitutes the consciously grasped reason *for* which I act. Now, since I freely and consciously bring the intention into being and thus give it just this purposive content, that purpose cannot but be one for which I am acting. What is more, a further explanatory connection between that reason and the choice is forged beyond the reason’s influence on the choice’s prior probability. This connection consists in the conjunction of the external relation of prior causal influence and the purely internal relation of sameness of content (the goal *G*). There may be several reasons that increase the likelihood that I would cause the intention to *A*. In the event that I do so,

each of these reasons are ones *on* which I act. But if I am conscious of a particular reason, *R*, that promotes a goal *G* (and no other reason promotes that goal), and I cause the intention to *A* for the sake of *G*, then *R* plays a distinctive explanatory role, as shown by the fact that it alone can explain the goal-directed aspect of the intention's content. It alone, as I shall say, is one *for* which I act.

In these sorts of cases, I appear to exhibit a heightened measure of freedom, of a sort we typically associate with fully responsible agency. This is due to the fact that I am aware of the motivations on which I act and I actively and consciously forge a link between the goals to which certain of these motivations point and the action, making it the case that these motivations are ones for which (consciously) I am acting. Where agents' actions often reflect this enhanced model, it is more readily understandable why they are properly held to account for their morally significant actions: they have knowingly wielded a power of freedom in a way that endorses certain ends as the ones to be pursued. Assuming that they are able to appreciate the moral significance (good or bad) of embracing those ends, they are plainly responsible for doing so.

3. Degrees of freedom

We do well to note a fact that it is quite obvious, yet perhaps goes under-acknowledged in many discussions of human freedom: much of our behavior exhibits automaticity – while we have a general sense of acting, of being in control of (the 'author' of) our thoughts and behavior, we do not directly will or intend the actions in a conscious way. Routine or learned, skilled behaviors are the clearest instances, and they also underscore the usefulness of automaticity. The point to observe is that it is not these sorts of actions that we take directly to involve conscious will. Were all behavior automatic in this way, never issuing from conscious choices to do this or that, we would not (at least would not properly) ascribe metaphysical freedom to ourselves. Yet we are responsible for such actions, and in a sense, do them freely. Authors such as Peter van Inwagen, Robert Kane, and Randolph Clarke appear to be correct, then, that the freedom of automatic actions derives or is 'inherited' from the comparatively few *directly free* choices that we make.

However, even in many non-automatic actions, it seems that human agents' motivations at times can be largely or entirely hidden to them. And there are a host of other influences on decision-making. Awareness of such factors appears to vary and they may be more or less congruent with the agents' basic motivational or belief structures. Recent studies indicate quite surprising ways in which we can be significantly influenced in our decision-making by extraneous circumstantial factors without being aware that this is so, factors which at a conscious level we would deem to be irrelevant to our decision-making.¹

I argued above that conscious awareness of the factors guiding one's choices is a feature of the most significant variety of freedom. Our present observations, then, suggest that freedom of the will, metaphysical freedom, is something that comes in degrees. It is minimally present where agents have the power to directly produce the intentions that initiate and sustain their actions (a power that, in my view, is correctly identified by the agent-causal theory). But it can vary in strength in relation to the kinds and degree of awareness of one's motivations – and so vary over time within an individual and across individuals.

There is more than one dimension along which freedom plausibly varies. Here are three such dimensions, all of which seem freedom relevant:

- degree of awareness of *y*, for each influencing factor *y* (desire, intention, belief, or circumstance);

- the relative ‘portion’ of one’s total motivational structure (the totality of influencing factors) of which one is aware;
- the degree of likelihood that an unconscious influence y is a factor that one would reflectively endorse, were one to become aware of y ’s influence. (It is one thing to be partly moved to act by a presently unconscious desire or intention that is well-integrated into my character. It is another to be motivated by a factor – such as the level of ambient noise – whose relevance I would repudiate if asked.)²

There is at least one more degreed dimension to our motivations that I think bears importantly on our freedom. The medieval philosopher Robert Grosseteste in one place invites us to imagine God’s creating an angel that exists for a single instant only.³ In that instant, we are to imagine, the angel exercises his freedom by an instantaneous act of the will. In order to circumvent quite sensible worries about the coherence of Grosseteste’s thought experiment, let us stretch out the angel’s life to a few seconds. We will also suppose that the angel springs into existence with a fully developed psychology (of the typical angelic sort), complete with a bunch of pseudo-memories (false apparent memories) of a long, character-shaping history. And, as in Grosseteste’s telling, he comes with a disposition to decide some matter straightaway. Finally, let us imagine that he is deciding between a plurality of alternatives, each having some attraction to him, is *fully* aware of his own motivations, and has the capacity to determine himself to do any of them. In short, his will appears to be significantly free. Here is my question: in making his one and only choice, is our angel (whom we may call ‘Angelo’) just as free as a counterpart (‘Angela’) who at the time in question is intrinsically identical to Angelo, while differing dramatically *historically*: unlike Angelo, Angela really does have a history, one filled with many prior choices that have partly shaped her present inclinations and intentions? At the time at which they both chose, where they happen to coincide perfectly in their inclinations and capacities, are they equally *free*?

It seems not. The reason is that for Angela, unlike Angelo, the very factors that shape her choice were to some extent of her own making. Like Angelo, she began with a set of psychological and behavioral dispositions that were merely ‘given.’ But over time, as she habitually made certain choices, her psychological makeup reflected less and less this ‘givenness’ and more and more something that is her own free creation.

And so, too, for ourselves. We come into the world with powerful tendencies that are refined by the particular circumstances in which we develop. All of these facts are for us merely ‘given.’ They determine which choices we have to make and which options we will consider (and how seriously) as we arrive at a more reflective age. Now, most of us are fortunate enough not to be impacted by traumatic events that will forever limit what is psychologically possible for us, and, on the positive side, are exposed to a suitably rich form of horizon-expanding opportunities. Where this is so, the framework of considerations that structures our choices increasingly reflects our own prior choices. And, in this way, our freedom can *grow* over time.

For a further reason to think this is right, consider a scenario involving an agent much as we take ourselves to be – except that his psychology is regularly manipulated, altering some of his preferences and the strengths of others. Owing to the marvelous, wireless neural-intervention technology of the late twenty-first century, all this occurs while he remains wholly oblivious. Even if his capacity to choose remains robust, it seems clear that we must judge his freedom, his autonomy, to be diminished.⁴ The integrity of the self-formation process is a component of freedom, or of freedom of the most valuable sort. This conclusion is reflected in corresponding judgments about moral responsibility.

If Angelo and Angela each contemplate a morally significant matter, are inclined to a degree to both a virtuous and a vicious action, and choose the virtuous one, Angela seems the more praiseworthy. The action is *hers* to a greater degree.

Thus, a fourth neglected dimension of freedom is historical. To a first approximation, the condition is something like this: the degree to which motivation y is a product of the agent's own past free choices. Plainly, this will not do as it stands. The specific effects of past decisions are relevant to their bearing on the freedom of future choices. We can imagine scenarios, for example, in which early choices cause one to fixate on certain goals, without one's having foreseen or intended this consequence, and this would clearly diminish rather than enhance one's future freedom. Likewise, we might come to have deeply rooted attitudes in response to experiences in the earlier stages of life (including early adulthood), and sometimes these attitudes more plausibly diminish, not enhance, our freedom. I'll not attempt here to develop an account of the historical dimension of freedom that captures this nuance.

I suspect that there is a corresponding condition with respect to *beliefs* that also shape one's choices: I am freer to the extent to which I am not being influenced by beliefs that have been formed by defective mechanisms, or even by importantly false beliefs that have arisen through nonculpable misuse of normally functioning mechanisms. (The hallucination-generated beliefs in schizophrenics are an extreme case of what I have in mind here.)

It is an open empirical question the extent to which any given individual, or human beings in general, realize these conditions – just as it is an open question whether and when the basic capacity to choose, to which philosophers give most of their attention, is present and regularly exercised in a way necessary for true freedom of choice. And so empirical sciences of brain and behavior potentially have a lot to teach us about the *extent* and *scope* of human freedom, once we recognize the mistake of thinking that it is an all-or-nothing matter. In truth, human freedom is always limited, fragile, and variable over time and across agents. It is the sort of thing that comes in degrees, a fact that should inform not only our philosophical-cum-scientific theorizing but also our moral understanding and assessment of one another.

Acknowledgements

Substantial portions of this paper derive from the later sections of my (forthcoming) 'Conscious Willing and the Emerging Sciences of Brain and Behavior'. Section 1 also draws on O'Connor (2009). I would like to thank audiences at the University of Valencia, Purdue University, the Jean Nicod Institute, and the 21st German Congress of Philosophy in Essen for very helpful feedback.

Notes

1. See O'Connor (2009) for some discussion.
2. A corollary to the freedom relevance of these conditions is that one can increase one's freedom by becoming more aware of typical unconscious influences on human decision-making. This point is noted by Nahmias (forthcoming), who also emphasizes the relevance of conscious knowledge to freedom of will.
3. See his *On the Freedom of the Will* (translated into English by Lewis [1991]). Grosseteste's views influenced (via Henry of Ghent) the arch-champion of freedom of the will, John Duns Scotus.
4. Al Mele (1995), chapter 9, makes this point, and Clarke (2003, 16n4, 77) concurs. For a dissenting view, see Daniel Dennett (2003), pp. 281–287.

Notes on contributor

Timothy O'Connor is Professor of Philosophy at Indiana University, Bloomington. He has published widely in the areas of metaphysics, philosophy of mind, and philosophy of religion. He is the author of *Persons and Causes* (2000) and *Theism and Ultimate Explanation* (2008), and the editor of *Agents, Causes and Events* (1995) and *Philosophy of Mind: Contemporary Readings* (2003).

References

- Clarke, R. 2003. *Libertarian accounts of free will*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Dennett, D. 2003. *Freedom evolves*. New York: Viking.
- Lewis, N. 1991. The first recension of Robert Grosseteste's. *De libero arbitrio. Mediaeval Studies* 53: 1–88.
- Mele, A. 1995. *Autonomous agents*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Nahmias, E. Forthcoming. The psychology of free will. In *Oxford handbook on philosophy of psychology*, ed. J. Prinz. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- O'Connor, T. 1995. Agent causation. In *Agents, causes, and events: Essays on indeterminism and free will*, ed. T. O'Connor, 173–200. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- O'Connor, T. 2000. *Persons and causes: The metaphysics of free will*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- O'Connor, T. 2002. Dualist and agent-causal theories. In *Oxford handbook of free will*. ed. R. Kane, 337–55. New York: Oxford University Press.
- O'Connor, T. 2005. Freedom with a human face. *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 29: 207–27.
- O'Connor, T. 2009. Agent-causal power. In *Dispositions and causes*, ed. T. Handfield, 189–214. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- O'Connor, T. Forthcoming. Conscious willing and the emerging sciences of brain and behavior. In *Downward causation and the neurobiology of free will*, ed. George F.R. Ellis, Nancey Murphy, and Timothy O'Connor. New York: Springer.

Copyright of Philosophical Explorations is the property of Routledge and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.