

PROBABILITY AND FREEDOM: A REPLY TO VICENS

Timothy O'Connor

Abstract: I have argued elsewhere that human free action is governed by objective probabilities. This view, I suggested, is strongly supported by our experience of motivated decision-making and by our having emerged from probabilistically-governed physical causes. Leigh Vicens (2016) criticizes these arguments. She also argues that an account of human freedom as probabilistically-unstructured indeterminacy is less vulnerable to challenges to the plausibility of libertarian views of freedom. In this article, I explain why I am not persuaded by Vicens's arguments.

Leigh Vicens (2016) considers arguments I have given for thinking that human free action is governed by objective probabilities and finds them wanting. I find her criticisms to be instructive and helpful, even though they do not persuade me. In what follows, I explain why.

1 The Phenomenology of Freedom

I am a freedom-determinism incompatibilist. While I believe it is plausible that sometimes our choices—and particularly those we make ‘automatically,’ without deliberation and often without focal attention—are effectively causally determined, I also think that we sometimes decide freely. Let us here assume this conjunction of incompatibilism and freedom (with which Vicens appears to agree).

I have argued that our experience of our own motivations when deliberating and deciding suggests that these motivations (partly) ground objective probabilities concerning what we will freely decide to do.¹ Call this the Objective Probability Thesis. I do *not* suggest that the thesis can be directly ‘read off’ our agential experience. Instead, it is a plausible conclusion from reflection on the content of that experience. It is a common feature of agential experience that our motivational reasons—our motivational states considered as subjective reasons for acting in certain ways—come in degrees of normative strength as well as felt motivational strength. These can but

¹ See O'Connor 2000, 95–96; 2005; 2009.

need not coincide; sometimes what seems to us the best thing for us to do, all things considered, is not what we most want to do. The Objective Probability Thesis is suggested by our experience of (and beliefs concerning) *felt* motivation. When we deliberate among options, we often are aware of our inclining more toward some option(s) than others. If asked about what we are planning to do before we've come to a decision, we sometimes say, "I'm not sure, but probably I'll . . ." I take this to reflect a belief that it is objectively more probable that the option will be selected. (Just how much more probable we can't reasonably say, both because phenomenal experience is very indistinct in this, as in many other respects, and because the probability depends on what circumstantial factors come into play, and we are not in a position to know such things.)

Now, Vicens makes an interesting suggestion on behalf of an opposing, "aprobabilist" position in the course of discussing (de)habituation. Consider a person who, highly addicted to smoking cigarettes, undertakes to kick the habit and experiences a measure of success. Vicens notes that many free-will libertarians think it natural to analyze cases of this kind as involving changing probabilities associated with their smoking at opportune times, relative to such factors as the time since they last smoked. She argues, to the contrary, that we can just as easily analyze such cases without appealing to the claim that an agent's free choices have objective probabilities between 0 and 1:

For it may be that some addictive behaviors are *determined* by one's character and context at a given time, and that the reason one becomes more or less *likely* to engage in the behaviors over time is that different events which have some objective probability of occurring become or cease to be determining causes of the behaviors, as one makes certain habit-forming or habit-breaking choices in other contexts in which one's choices are *not* determined. (130)

We assume that for every possible choice relative to a total context either has probability 1 or 0 or is undetermined but with no objective probability. But there is (often) a probability between 0 and 1 that the agent will find himself in such a 'total context,' and it is this determinant which drives our judgments of relative likelihood of choice outcomes. To use her example, it may be certain the agent will smoke at work if she has to work late, but only 50% likely that she will have to work late. The conditional certainty may later cease to hold, but a similar certainty may attach to her smoking if she has to stay at work late *on little sleep*. There may be sundry such factors underwriting objective probabilities for more or less specific choice outcomes (just as we often suppose), and yet without there ever being a probability n ($0 < n < 1$) for a choice relative to total circumstance.

Vicens is correct to point to these other sources of choice-relevant objective probability in non-deterministic worlds. But I do not agree that her analysis can plausibly capture everything we find it natural to suppose. For

it to work, we have to suppose that there are transitions from probability 1 or 0 to pure indeterminacy for choices relative to context, and that this is indeed the norm. But how does this work? How do influencing factors of varying magnitude push an agent in the same, non-quantifiable fashion? To return to her original scenario, surely the habituated smoker's certainty to smoke if kept late at work won't just vanish without a trace, placing her tendency on a par with the occasional user; it will slowly taper over time. This context-specific tapering points to objective probabilities.

2 Indeterministic Causation in the Natural World

As Vicens notes, I also think that a probabilistic understanding of motivational influence better integrates with non-volitional causal indeterminacy in the physical world, which I think is best understood as reflecting objective, structured propensities. Vicens points to a couple of authors expressing doubts about this last claim, but obviously we can't settle that matter here. I have also argued for a strong emergentist conception of our capacity to choose, and of human mental phenomena generally. If both these contentions are so, then we are led to ask whether it is plausible that a capacity to choose that is plainly susceptible to myriad 'inner' and 'outer' influences, and that emerges from an organized system of propensities that are probabilistically structured, might itself be probabilistically unstructured. It is hard for me to see how one might argue this matter, but I judge it to be implausible (I shouldn't say impossible). If it were the case, the region of the world subject to direct or indirect influence from such choices (not just the choices themselves) would be unique in not having associated determinate prior probabilities. In simple cases concerning a single agent in the near future, there might be fairly constrained probability intervals associated with some possible events. (There might be a fixed probability that some external factor will occur that would be a necessary part of a choice scenario whose outcome would not be probabilistically governed.) But where outcomes will partly depend on multiple agents and choices, the probability intervals will be quite wide. So viewing the world through a wide-angle, chronological lens, there are continuously updating objective probabilities until the first free choosers appear on the scene. From that point on, spatiotemporal regions subject to their influence become probabilistically indeterminate, at times massively so. Again, this seems quite remarkable—improbably so.

One might urge that this appearance of implausibility is a result of considering the world only in abstract dynamical terms, not attending to the striking qualitative difference from fundamental physical qualities of consciousness in general, and goal-directed choice in particular. But that takes us back to the phenomenology of motivation and choice discussed earlier, and we saw that it does not favor the anomaly posited by the aprobabilist.

3 On Vicens's Worry That Conformity-to-Probability Appears to Undermine Free Will

What is at stake over the truth or falsity of the Objective Probability Thesis? Vicens does not commit herself, but she hints that free will may require its falsity:

Not only do such “unstructured tendencies” seem naturally possible, their possibility seems to relieve the burden on libertarians of explaining how a choice with a particular objective probability of occurring could be one which is free and for which an agent is morally responsible. (2016, 133)

She then cites arguments from van Inwagen, Pereboom, and Loewer against the reality of indeterminist free will, all of which assume (as either a contingent or necessary truth) that undetermined choices would be governed by objective probabilities. While it is certainly an advantage of a position not to be committed to a premise relied on in certain arguments against it, it will seem less significant to the extent that one is unmoved by those arguments. I am on record as being unmoved by each of these arguments.² Here I will say only this: I find myself to be a finite, conditioned agent, having originally and thereafter volitional tendencies of some definite strength that are rooted ultimately in nonrational factors that sustain me. More simply, I find myself to have preferences that are not of my own choosing. Even so, if I am a strongly emergent entity, an irreducible source of causal activity, then what I do is not merely ‘derivative’ from these shaping factors. I must and do choose. The rolling objective probabilities in play simply measure the relative likelihood of what I shall choose, they do not bring about my choice, rendering me a hapless transmitter of influence, or worse yet, the victim of a mysterious nemesis called *Chance*. Yes, objective likelihoods predict convergence on a distribution of outcomes were I to be (precisely) similarly inclined in (precisely) similar circumstances many, many times over. So what? I never could be so situated. (“But what if the future were ‘rolled back’ repeatedly?” [van Inwagen 2000]. Sorry, I really don’t understand.) And even if I could be and were, my control (or not) over an ostensibly free choice of mine supervenes on what occurs then and there, not on what I might do elsewhere and elsewhen.

Timothy O'Connor
E-mail : toconnor@indiana.edu

References:

O'Connor, Timothy. 2000. *Persons and Causes*. New York: Oxford University Press.

² See, O'Connor 2011 for responses to the first two arguments, and O'Connor 2000, Ch. 5, n. 21, for a response to the third.

- O'Connor, Timothy. 2005. "Freedom with a Human Face." *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 29 (1): 207–227. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-4975.2005.00113.x>.
- O'Connor, Timothy. 2009. "Agent-Causal Power." In *Dispositions and Causes*, edited by Toby Handfield, 189–214. New York: Oxford University Press.
- O'Connor, Timothy. 2011. "Agent Causal Theories." In *Oxford Handbook of Free Will*, edited by Robert Kane, 309–328. New York: Oxford University Press.
- van Inwagen, Peter. 2000. "Free Will Remains a Mystery: The Eight Philosophical Perspectives Lecture." *Philosophical Perspectives* 14: 1–19.
- Vicens, Leigh. 2016. "Objective Probabilities of Free Choice." *Res Philosophica* 93 (1): 1–11. <http://dx.doi.org/10.11612/resphil.2016.93.1.8>.