

# A Parsimonious Agent Causation

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## Abstract

Free will and moral responsibility share an intricate relationship. Whether we deem an agent morally praiseworthy or morally blameworthy depends, in part, on whether or not the act was “performed freely”. However, numerous difficulties emerge when one tries to articulate what “performed freely” entails: one must not only provide an account of free will with reference to its nature, he or she must also take into consideration its compatibility, or lack thereof, with existing and/or potential features of the world. Ultimately, this paper attempts to do just that, to provide an account of free will that is both coherent and naturalistic. Consequently, I argue that such an account be contrived under the umbrella of agent-causal libertarianism using the mechanics of quiescence.

## 1 Introduction

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Whether we deem an agent as morally praiseworthy or morally blameworthy depends, in part, on whether the act was performed freely. However, numerous difficulties emerge when one tries to express what performed freely entails. It is my goal, then, to resolve these difficulties by providing a coherent account of free will.

In §1, I examine literature to supply an understanding of free will, including theories regarding its nature and its various debates. In §2, I consider contemporary objections to agent-causal libertarianism, a philosophical position concerning free will. In §3, I provide my own account of agent-causal libertarianism outlining its requirements in detail. Finally, in §4 I address possible objections to my account. Ultimately, it is my position that agent-causal libertarianism remains a tenable view worthy of consideration in current free will debates.

## 2 Free will and Determinism

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There are two main conceptions of the nature of free will.<sup>2</sup> According to the first conception, an action is up to the agent if he “could have done otherwise,” or, rather, if there were alternative possibilities open to him (Kane, 1998, 32). For example, one might say that the Greek hero Odysseus has free will in choosing to confront Scylla if he could have confronted Charybdis instead, or even refrained from entering the deadly strait altogether. According to the second, less familiar conception, an action is up to the agent if he is ultimately responsible for it (Kane, 1998, 35). Using the example above, one might say that Odysseus has free will if he, and nothing else, is the ultimate reason for his choice to confront Scylla. This holds, even if there were no other alternatives open

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<sup>2</sup> Here, I am following the work of Kane (1998)

to him at that time. Ordinarily, philosophers define and analyse free will along one of these two conceptions (van Inwagen, 1983); however, it is not uncommon to think free will involves both.

In addition to the nature of free will, much has been written regarding the thesis of causal determinism. In short, causal determinism assumes that all present and future occurrences are necessarily determined by past events and the laws of nature. Take, for example, the act of throwing dice. If one knew the position of the dice upon its release, its properties, and the laws of nature (i.e., the laws of gravitation, classical mechanics, etc.), then he could reasonably determine where the dice would come to rest after it was thrown (Timpe, 2013, 18). Now, according to the thesis of causal determinism, the world operates like the dice in the sense that the non-relational past and relevant laws of nature causally determine our behaviour.

Generally, philosophers fall into camps to explain how the thesis of causal determinism operates with respect to free will. Compatibilists argue that the existence of free will is compatible with the truth of causal determinism. Strictly speaking, if scientists were to discover that causal determinism is true, agents could still perform at least some actions freely. Incompatibilists, on the other hand, argue that the existence of free will is incompatible with the truth of causal determinism such that an agent acts freely only if causal determinism is false. In any case, it is important to point out, as Timpe suggests, that “neither position by itself is making a claim about whether or not agents actually do possess free will” (Timpe, 2013, 18). However, there are several subgroups which do make this claim, such as libertarianism.

### 3 Libertarianism

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Libertarianism is an account on which incompatibilism is true. Thus, it holds that free will exists. Simply put, “one acts freely only if one’s action was not determined – directly or indirectly – by forces outside one’s control” (Moreland, 2009, 41). Consequently, libertarians bear the burden of proof in showing that the thesis of causal determinism is in some way false.<sup>3</sup> Assuming they accomplish this onerous endeavour (which, for the purposes of this paper, I will accept); libertarians still must show how their variety of freedom is possible and even intelligible.

#### 3.1 Noncausation or Simple Indeterminism

Typically, there are three ways to explain libertarian freedom. One way, headed by Ginet (1990, 1997, and 2002) and McCann (1998, and 2012), is to assert “neither that a free action has any internal causal structure nor that it be caused by anything at all” (Clarke, 2003, 17). Accounts such as these are labelled non-causal or simple indeterministic because they do not require any positive conditions on freedom; even overt actions that are a function of basic decisions and reasons are noncausal. One consequence of these accounts, then, is that a decision can be completely up to the agent; however, as Clarke has pointed out, the problem with them is that they “fail to provide adequate accounts of active control and acting for reasons” (Clarke, 2003, 24). Assuming this objection

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<sup>3</sup> For arguments, see Timpe (2013) and van Inwagen (1983).

holds, (and I think it does given Clarke's reasoning above,) one can find an intelligible account of libertarian free will only among causal views; that is, views that describe how an agent is able to cause her choices freely.

### 3.2 Event-Causation

Event-causation is another way to explain libertarian freedom. On this view, both *relata* in the causal relation of a choice (i.e., the cause and effect) are taken to be events. However, unlike compatibilism, event-causal libertarianism maintains that some events are caused indeterministically. For example, suppose Ted is deliberating about whether to rock out with Bill tonight. However, he also wants to complete his final history report so he does not fail his history class, prompting his father to send him to military school in Alaska and dashing his dreams of forming a band. After carefully considering his reasons for performing each action, Ted decides to complete his history report. According to the event-causal libertarian, Ted's desire to complete his report causes his behaviour, but it does not sufficiently determine his behaviour – there is still a chance his alternative desire to rock out could have caused him to perform that action instead.

As with non-causal accounts, event-causal libertarians face several objections, such as a lack of rational explicability and loss of control.<sup>4</sup> If it is true that decisions are caused indeterministically, then it seems like the agent would lack sufficient control over his actions, thereby undermining his responsibility for that action. In response, some argue that the indeterminacy should be placed before the decision, in the deliberative process, rather than at the moment of decision (Mele, 1995). In this way, the agent can still be responsible for the action, even though it is caused indeterministically. However, as I explain below (§5.3), this response is problematic.

### 3.3 Agent-Causation

The final way to explain libertarian freedom and the account I adopt in this paper, is termed agent-causation. Agent-causation is similar to event-causation in that a free decision cannot be causally determined. However, it differs in that the cause of a free choice or volition (i.e., the first causal *relatum*) is not an event at all, but rather an agent. Randolph Clarke summarizes the requirements of such a view as follows:

“On a common version of such a view, it is required (1) that a directly free decision or other directly free action be caused by the agent; (2) that neither the decision (or other action) nor the agent's causing that decision (or other action) be causally determined by events; and (3) that this causation by the agent not consist in causation by events.”

(Clarke, 2003, 133-134)

In such a way, the agent, or substance, is the ultimate source and sole originator of her free choices – she and nothing outside of her is responsible. Given this framework, one can examine a few problems facing this account.

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<sup>4</sup> For further objections to event-causation, see Clarke (2003).

## 4 Problems with Agent Causation

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### 4.1 The Problem of Reason-Explanation

The first problem (or set of problems) relevant to agent-causal accounts concerns the reason-explanation of free choice. It is widely thought that if an agent acts according to reasons, then her recognition of those reasons, by citing them, will inevitably provide an explanation for why she chose to perform that action (Clarke, 2003, 21). In other words, reason-explanation contributes to an intelligible account of active control; if there are no reasons then there can be no active control.

One difficulty with reason-explanation is that agent-causal libertarians are committed to a non-reductive causal analysis; that is, they deny that events outside or within the agent (e.g. beliefs, dispositional states, reasons, etc.) can directly cause an agent's free choice. If they do concede this non-reductive analysis and argue that agential events directly cause a free choice, then they are no longer arguing for agent-causation, but rather event-causation. However, if the agent *does* remain committed to this analysis, it would seem that the agent has less control than if he did have reasons determining his behaviour. Ultimately, the agent-causal libertarian must provide an alternate account of reason-explanation to avoid overt mysteriousness and to justify active control.

### 4.2 Problem of Luck

Equally challenging is the problem of luck because it seems to impede agent's control over their actions. In the past several years, the "luck objection" has taken many different forms by philosophers both for and against agent-causal libertarianism; however, Balaguer's (2002) interpretation concisely captures the objection.<sup>5</sup> Simply put, "If a decision is undetermined at the moment of choice, then given the same past, the agent could just as easily have made another choice without anything about the agent changing, and so the agent could not be the source of, or have control over the choice" (Balaguer, 2002, 388).

Using the above example, suppose Ted is torn between rocking out with Bill and completing his final history report. Eventually, Ted chooses to complete his final history report in lieu of rocking out. Nevertheless, had one somehow turned back time, Ted could have easily chosen to rock out instead. It seems, then, that it is just a matter of luck, or perhaps chance, whichever choice Ted decides to make; and if it is just chance, then Ted is not really in control. Firstly, we should note that the problem of luck is not only a problem for libertarians, but also a problem for ethicists considering it is found in most philosophical discussions of moral responsibility. Nevertheless, it is still up to the agent-causal libertarian and not the ethicist to show that agential actions are not simply random since non-random, agential actions will contribute to a more coherent theory of agent causation.

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<sup>5</sup> For other arguments of this kind, Waller (1988), Mele (1999), Fischer (1999), Strawson (2000), and O'Connor (2000).

## 5 A Naturalistic Account of Agent-Causation

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The libertarian account defended in this paper is a modification of Rogers' account. It is rooted in Anselmian thought insofar as it employs a term coined by Anselm: *pervelle*, loosely translated as "per-will".<sup>6</sup> According to Rogers, the term "per-will...expresses the important technical concept that the choice for B [over A] is the *successful continuation of desiring B* to the end of the TC [torn condition] stage so it becomes the effective intention" (Rogers, 2015, 92). Given this description, one way an agent's free choice might proceed is as follows: at T(1) an agent, S, encounters a torn decision regarding whether to opt for A over B, two mutually exclusive events. Then, at T(2), following T(1), the torn decision terminates and the agent per-wills A instead of B. However, immediately upon termination of the torn decision and thereafter, the agent could have per-willed B instead of A.

Initially, this account seems similar to the event-causal account described in §3.2 insofar as it gives prominence to torn decisions, a specific subset of decisions. However, it differs in a few crucial ways. First, as with all agent-causal accounts, the agent and not prior events, causes a directly free decision or action. Second, this account employs an Anselmian concept, *pervelle*, as a model for free choice based on quiescence. Finally, the relevant indeterminacy necessary for libertarian free choice occurs at the moment of choice rather than preceding it.

### 5.1 Torn Decisions

According to Balaguer (2002, 382), "a torn decision is a decision in which the person in question (a) has reasons for two or more options and feels torn as to which set of reasons is strongest, i.e., has no conscious belief as to which option is best, given her reasons; and (b) decides without resolving this conflict."

Looking back at Ted's predicament, one might notice that certain reasons motivate his choice to rock out with Bill: certainly, it produces great pleasure for him, and helps him hone his skills as a guitarist for his band, "Wyld Stallyns". However, one might also notice that certain reasons motivate his choice to finish the history report: if he does not complete it, he will fail his history course prompting his father to send him to military school in Alaska and ending his career as musician. Suppose he deliberates for a while, but is unable to discern which set of reasons is stronger. Nevertheless, Ted chooses to complete his history report even though his reasons for doing so did not outweigh his reasons for rocking out. As a matter of course, he just chooses.

In many ways torn decisions are reminiscent of what Kane (1998, 107-115) calls "self-forming actions," which are "undetermined, regress stopping voluntary actions" that presuppose "plural rationality." However, there are two key differences. First, as Rogers (2015, 91) claims, torn decisions are mostly conscious experiences. It seems that agents are at least somewhat aware of their reasons for decisions, even though subconscious, dual willings (i.e. situations in which the agent has good reasons to choose A and B even though they are mutually exclusive) may come into play (Rogers, 2015, 91). Second, even though one may agree with Kane that if determinism is true, torn decisions could be causally determined by the natural universe (e.g., by events in our mind), one may

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<sup>6</sup> See Anselm's *De Casu Diaboli* (Anselm and Hopkins, 2000) and Katherin Rogers (2015).

disagree with Kane regarding where he locates the relevant indeterminism necessary for libertarian freedom. On his view, the indeterminism proceeds the choice, occurring during the torn condition, but as argued in §5.3, the indeterminism should be located at the moment of choice so as to avoid a further objection. At any rate, it is important to recognize that torn decisions involve a conscious, internal struggle between two mutually exclusive events, or motivating circumstances. Given this description, one may now turn to the Anselmian concept of *pervelle* to explain agent-causation.

## 5.2 Parsimonious Per-willing and Quiescence

On Rogers' account, the agent opts for B over A by per-willing (i.e. by continually desiring B until it becomes an effective intention) (Rogers, 2015, 96). Initially, it looks as if this account has a lot going for it: it does not introduce any new causal powers beyond the existing desires preceding the choice and the opting for B over A is under the agent's control. However, it is still unclear how A becomes overridden the instant B is per-willed. If, at T(1), S desires both A and B, and then at T(2), he per-wills B so it becomes the intention, why does the desire for A simply go away? To some, this may seem oddly mysterious and, therefore, problematic. As a possible response to this objection, I propose the dropping out of a non-per-willed action be understood along the lines of quiescence, as explained below.

In Stump's *Aquinas*, she argues that the human will has three positions regarding some issue:

“The will can assent to something or reject it, but it can also simply do nothing at all. It can just be turned off; it can be inactive or quiescent...Furthermore, in principle, the will can move directly from any one of these positions to another. That is, in general, it can move from rejecting to quiescence, from quiescence to assenting, from assenting to rejecting, and so on”

(Stump, 2003, 394).

Given this description, Stump goes on to say that nothing external to the agent causes her state of quiescence, “it is always in the will's own power to be quiescent or not” (Stump, 2003, 401).

In order to explain how an agent's will becomes quiescent, Timpe (2007, 290) suggests we appeal to Dowe's analysis of “causation by omission”. Simply put, Dowe's view is that causation by omission is not a genuine cause at all, but rather, “a counterfactual claim...about the mere possibility of causation” (Dowe, 2001, 216). In other words, omissions are cases in which a genuine cause is possible and therefore, “they can be cited in causal explanations. As a result, we can treat them as ‘quasi-causes’.” (Kittle, 2015, 92). Using this information as a framework, Timpe develops a theory of control whereby an agent controls an event *e* when either (1) an action of the agent causes *e* to occur; or (2) an omission by the agent quasi-causes *e* to occur (Timpe, 2007, 292). Now, applying the mechanics of quiescence and Timpe's theory of causation to Rogers' account of *pervelle* one can explain the dropping away of a non-per-willed action. To appreciate this, consider a free choice made by Ted. Suppose, at T(1), Ted encounters a torn decision regarding whether to rock out with Bill or to complete his final history report. Soon after, at T(2), Ted ceases to be torn and per-wills the completion of his

history report until it becomes an effective intention. Immediately upon per-willing the completion of his history report, we can say that Ted becomes quiescent to his desire to rock out; that is, only when Ted per-wills the completion of his history report does Ted also quasi-cause the completion of his history report through the omission of rocking out. In this way, Ted is morally responsible for the outcomes of both his action and his non-action (i.e., his omission) in a manner that is not overtly mysterious.

### 5.3 Indeterminacy

Towards the end of §5.1 it was mentioned that placing the relevant indeterminism prior to the agent's choice could prove problematic for the libertarian. If, as Kane suggests, "[a free choice] one way or the other is *undetermined* because the process preceding it and potentially terminating in it (i.e., the effort of will to overcome temptation) is *indeterminate*," then the indeterminate process (viz., neurons firing one way or another) could probabilistically cause the agent's behaviour, introducing an element of luck (Kane, 1998, 128). For example, suppose Tom, through some indeterminate process, deliberates between two mutually exclusive events, A and B. After serious thought, Tom ceases to deliberate and his desire for A probabilistically motivates his choice to A. However, it just may be that the indeterminate process preceding the choice terminates in neurons randomly firing one way when they could have fired another way. Ultimately, it does seem lucky that this indeterminate process could be responsible for causing an undetermined choice.

As a response to this objection, I suggest one place the relevant indeterminacy at the moment of choice. In doing so, external events (e.g., indeterminate processes, neurons, or the relevant laws of physics) could not cause the agent to choose as she does (Balaguer, 2002, 387). And if one juxtaposes a lack of external causation with intentional choice, as Balaguer suggests, then it is true to say that the agent is the sole originator of her free choices; that is, she has complete authorship and control over her free choices (ibid, 387).

## 6 Agent-Causal Problems Revisited

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In §4, I introduced a couple problems that could threaten the adequacy of any agent-causal libertarian account. These problems are the reason-explanation of libertarian free choice and the problem of luck. The remainder of this paper dispels these threats with respect to the account provided above.

### 6.1. Problem of Reason-Explanation Revisited

Recall from §4.1 that the agent-causal libertarian is committed to a nonreductive analysis; that is, they deny that events outside or within the agent (e.g., beliefs, dispositional states, etc.) can directly cause a free choice. However, as the objection goes, if there are no reasons that cause an agent's actions or behaviour, then she has no active control over her actions or behaviour. Ultimately, the task of the agent-causal

libertarian is to provide an alternate account of reason-explanation to justify active control.

Like Leibniz (1714) and Chrisholm (1964), I would argue that an agent's reasons motivate or incline without necessitating the making of a free decision, since necessitation would preclude agent causation. What this means is that, "[reasons] do not, on their own, cause the agent to decide as she does. Rather what makes the relevant difference is the agent's causal contribution to the decision" (Haji, 2008, 178). In such a way, an agent's free choice is motivated by a reasons-based element and caused by agent-causal element. To appreciate this, consider again a free choice made by Tom. Suppose, at T(1), Tom encounters a torn decision regarding whether to order a salad or a burger, two mutually exclusive events. Before long, at T(2), Tom ceases to be torn and per-wills that he order a salad in lieu of ordering a burger. The point here, is that Tom's reasons for ordering a salad or a burger at T(1) motivate his choice to order a salad or a burger, but they do not necessitate his choice. It is the inclusion of the agent-causal element that allows Tom to per-will, thereby causing, his ordering of the salad at T(2). Ultimately, this account of reasons-explanation grants the active control the agent-causal libertarian seeks without being arbitrary. However, it is still unclear why the agent chooses one option over the other, a problem to which I now turn.

## 6.2 Problem of Luck Revisited

As stated above, the problem of luck goes something like this:

"If a decision is undetermined at the moment of choice, then given the same past, the agent could just as easily have made another choice without anything about the agent changing, and so the agent could not be the source of, or have control over the choice"

(Balaguer, 2002, 389)

However, this objection does not hold. As Balaguer argues, even though Ted was torn at the moment of decision, meaning neither set of reasons pick out the best option, it does seem like he has a rationale for making a choice: namely, that he does not remain in a state of indecision (ibid, 389). Consequently, Ted has good reason to choose one option over the other, even though one option might not be clearly better than the other. Furthermore, we might say that what explains Ted's reasons for choosing to finish his history report in lieu of rocking out is simply Ted's acceptance of his reasons for that choice (Pruss, 2006, 135). That is to say, his reasons for completing his history report provide sufficient explanation for his choice even if they were not necessitating reasons. Had he chosen to rock out instead, his reasons for that decision would sufficiently explain his choice. Ultimately, though, it is important to understand that whichever choice Ted decides to make, he is still the source of his choice and in control insofar as his decision was conscious and nothing external caused him to choose as he did.



## 7 Conclusion

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The purpose of this paper is to offer a naturalistic and coherent account of agent-causation that is not overtly mysterious or incoherent. Using Rogers' account as a starting point, I have argued that the dropping away of a non-per-willed desire is best understood using the mechanics of quiescence. In addition, I have demonstrated that the relevant indeterminacy necessary for libertarian free will should occur at the moment of choice as opposed to proceeding it. Suitably, the next step for agent-causal libertarians is to develop their understanding of the nature of indeterminacy, that is, to understand how it might occur in the process of free choice and in what proximity. Ultimately, such an understanding will have vast implications on our understanding of free will and moral responsibility.

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