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WHAT SHOULD WE RETAIN FROM A PLAIN PERSON'S CONCEPT OF FREE WILL?

Gilberto Gomes

Hodgson (2004) makes a forceful defence of the plain person's view that free will exists in conscious voluntary action, for which I have great sympathy. He presents arguments against the view that human action is automatically determined by external or internal factors over which the subject has no control. He contends that it is up to the person to choose among alternatives and that the person is solely responsible for her or his choices.

However, he also believes that free will is incompatible with natural causation. This is the point where I diverge from his views. In fact, both *libertarians* (such as Hodgson) who believe in a non-naturally caused free will and *determinists* who believe that free will is an illusion are *incompatibilists.* They share the view that free will is incompatible with the natural causation of conscious voluntary acts. Libertarians take side with free will and let go of natural causation. Determinists keep natural causation and relinquish freedom. *Compatibilism*, on the other hand, is the view that free will exists and is compatible with natural causation (for a review, see, for instance, Vaas, 2001). Hodgson's article may be seen as an attempt to present a 'plausible alternative to determinism'. We may say that it does not address the compatibilist alternative.

There are problems, however, with Hodgson's account. He states that it does not require the subject to 'be a 'substance' distinct from the brain processes that support it, much less an immortal soul'. He characterises it as a 'dual-aspect account of physical processes and conscious processes' (page 5 above). However, if conscious processes of free will are another aspect of physical processes of the brain, it is hard to see how they could escape being subject to physical causation.

Hodgson is not wrong in maintaining that the presence of a readiness potential (RP) prior to a conscious decision to act now is consistent with conscious free will (page 5) — even of the non-naturally caused sort that he favours. This has also been pointed out long ago by Eccles (1985), an author who, in contrast to Hodgson, does accept the existence of an immaterial self that is distinct from any brain processes and interacts with them (Eccles, 1977). Eccles (1985, p. 542) presented a hypothesis that 'preserves fully the role of conscious intention in

initiating the movement'. According to this hypothesis, the earlier phase of the RP reflects spontaneous fluctuations in cortical activity, which are necessary for the immaterial agent to be able to act on the brain.

It must be recalled that the RP cannot be observed in any single EEG recording. The expression of the neural events underlying the RP is too weak to appear against the noise of neural signals registered in the EEG. It is only by averaging a large number of tracings that the RP appears. We may therefore suppose that the spontaneous fluctuations assumed by Eccles are continuously occurring, but are only detected by averaging numerous occasions in which they were seized upon by the conscious agent. The muscular movement provides in this case the zero-point from which to average the tracings backwards. When there is no movement, the spontaneous fluctuations assumed to give rise to the initial part of the RP might be there as well, but there is no way to synchronize them in different tracings so as to make them appear by averaging.

Eccles' spontaneous fluctuations in cortical activity would stand in relation to the conscious decision to act now as the sea waves stand in relation to the surfer. They are necessary requisites for surfing and can be regularly detected some time before the initiation of surfing, but they do not by themselves determine the surfer's initiation of action. If the surfer is not willing to ride on a particular wave, he or she will just let it go. However, Eccles' hypothesis is just a theoretical possibility, and we cannot see how it could be tested at present. There is no experimental evidence favouring it. On the contrary, variations in the instructions given to the subjects lead to longer or shorter RPs (Sirigu *et al*., 2003), and this goes against the idea of spontaneous fluctuations unrelated to the decision itself of when to move.

Eccles' hypothesis seems less parsimonious than the assumption that the neural processes underlying the initial RP only occur when a voluntary action is being prepared and take part in the genesis of this action. It seems that Hodgson is prepared to accept this but, according to him, these neural processes may be considered as the 'unconscious preparation [that] is required before a person has immediately available the alternatives of consciously doing or not doing an action' (page 5). Free choices would depend on a process of neural preparation which is unconscious and naturally caused. This process would do no more than present the subject with the alternatives. But why should the choice itself have to be non-naturally caused?

It seems that Hodgson is trying to salvage the plain person's intuition that a free action is determined by the conscious subject herself or himself and not by external or unconscious factors. Determinists despise the intuitions of folk psychology as prejudices that must be abandoned. I agree with Hodgson that they may instead contain valuable insights into the true nature of the mind. But is it not possible to preserve what may be good in that intuition in a way that is compatible with natural causation? I will come back to this point.

Hodgson's free will is not determined by natural laws, but he believes it can be exercised without violating those laws. He refers to quantum mechanics and chaos theory as allowing a certain degree of indeterminacy in physical events

(page 9). However, neither can Hodgson's free will be accounted for by randomness. Selections are not random, they are determined by the subject's 'capacity to respond to particular gestalts' (page 11). This capacity would allow the subject to make more satisfactory choices, having thus been selected by evolution.

But it is not clear why this capacity should not be determined by natural causation. Hodgson believes that physical determinism plus randomness cannot account for 'the subject's particular gestalt experiences that are part of the pre-choice state' (page 17). Why not? One may also wonder how a capacity that is not subject to natural causality could be determined by genes (as a necessary condition for natural selection).

Hodgson argues that free choice involves rational judgment that is not accounted for by algorithmic procedures (page 8). However, being subject to natural causation does not imply that the processes leading to a free decision be algorithmic and independent of conscious judgment. Conscious judgment itself may be a naturally caused non-algorithmic process.

A compatibilist account of free will might agree with most of Hodgson's points (Gomes, 1999). We may agree that free will exists, that it involves choice among alternatives, that this choice is determined by the subject herself or himself, that free choice involves consciousness, that reasons are non-conclusive (Gomes, 2002, p. 306), that free choice is not random selection, that it may be guided by moral principles and that the subject is responsible for her or his free choices. All this may be considered as compatible with natural causation of the subject's free choices.

Of course this is a departure from the plain person's intuitive notion of a free will. But not so radical a departure as to deny the existence of free will itself. What needs to be changed is the folk concept of the subject. According to this concept, the subject acts on the world and is influenced by the world, but it is not part of the world. It is *in* the world like a fish is in the water: the fish acts on the water and the water acts on the fish but the fish is not made of water.

However, we must distinguish the *subject's* world from the *entire* world, which includes the subject. We may assume that the subject is made of the same elements and processes as the rest of the world, although it does not experience itself as being so made. We may assume that the processes that occur in the subject and determine its choices are of the same causal nature as those that occur in the rest of the world, although the subject does not experience them as such. Indeed, we may assume that the subject is a system of neural activity in a person's brain, subject to natural causation (including random processes), although this person does not experience it this way (Gomes, 1999; 2002).

According to folk concepts, if our actions are determined by natural antecedent causes they are not under our control. But why not? 'Our control' may be included in the relevant natural antecedent causes. According to folk intuition, if our actions are determined by natural causes, they are not determined by us. But why not admit that their natural causes are *in us*? According to a usual way of thinking, if our actions are subject to natural causation, then we should not

bother about what to do, because it will not change anything. But why not admit that our bothering or not bothering are among the natural causes of what we do?

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ISOLATING DISPARATE CHALLENGES TO HODGSON'S ACCOUNT OF FREE WILL

Liberty Jaswal

In the sixth proposition, the proposition included for the purpose of exonerating David Hodgson's own particular account of free will from the charge of violating physical law, Hodgson fails to acknowledge and address a salient challenge that charges his account with the violation of physical law. His failure to acknowledge this is, perhaps, a result of the formulation of the objection he endeavours to resolve; and that formulation can be bolstered by confounding disparate issues, which Hodgson in fact seems to be doing.

Let us begin by stating the objection as formulated by Hodgson:

> *Unless in every case the alternatives that are possible according to QM occurs at random within the probability parameters established by the laws of QM, then physical law would be violated*, in the sense that the statistical predictions of QM would be falsified (p. 12 above, emphasis added).

It is important to take note of the emphasized segment in this formulation, for it supposes that the only challenge confronting his account is one that involves a violation of statistical predictions. Hodgson's strategy to address this challenge can be presented in two steps: first, that because of the uniqueness and complexity of pre-choice states, 'it is unlikely in the extreme' to demonstrate a 'violation of QM statistical predictions'; second, even if there were such a demonstration, it would fail to illustrate a violation of physical law because the statistical predictions that we would arrive at would not take into account certain efficaciously relevant components (p. 11 above).

Even if Hodgson is correct in his assessment above — that no violation of physical law with respect to statistical predictions can be empirically demonstrated — he entirely leaves out another possible violation. Another constraint