

What Should a Powers-Based Theory of Free Will Be About?
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1. Caveats and context

These comments are extrapolations from a lengthy diagnostic paper about what happens to the Humean-inflected free will problematic if one adopt a powers-based metaphysics. Technically speaking, it's sublated: both terms – free will and determinism (compatibilism and incompatibilism, too) – acquire new meanings, such that the old opposition is superseded. That paper, in turn, was a follow-up to a chapter in a book that I've recently written, on how Humeanism shapes theorizing about agents and the social – including how it is built into the free will debate in analytic philosophy. So today's comments presume a lot of argument, but are themselves mainly bald assertions. Still, hopefully they are interesting ones.

2. What exactly is the contemporary free will problem a problem of?

The standard framing of the problem isn't perspicacious. From a powers-based perspective, the problem is that *agency is threatened by what post-Cartesians have come to think causation is* (or isn't).

There are two tributaries to the problem.

- The first is *nomological necessitation*, already clear in Descartes, but given full expression in Kant. This source of the problem is well appreciated in the literature.
- The second is the *passivist rejection of dynamism*, given full expression in Hume's repudiation of powers. This source is less well appreciated.

Both lead to the conclusion that we can't cause anything.

- Nomological determinism implies that **we** can't cause anything (as it is laws, or conditions arranged in a lawful fashion, that "cause" things, i.e., sustain the appearance of productive causation; moreover, the laws/arrangements are invariant); it also generates an "other," viz., a-causal spontaneity, which equally precludes agential causal purchase.
- Passivism implies that we can't **cause** anything (as, strictly speaking, nothing can – at least not in a realist sense of bringing something about – given the non-existence of causal powers).
 - There is obvious tension between these two points, but they have nonetheless been fused in certain interesting ways in contemporary neo-Humeanism.

3. What are the structural limitations of event-causal libertarianism, event-causal compatibilism and standard agent-causal accounts as responses to the post-Cartesian problem?

Event-causal libertarianism and event-causal compatibilism *leave the governing presuppositions in place*. Both therefore require their proponents to accept that agents can't cause anything. Standard agent-causalists reject the governing presupposition, but they do so by engaging in *metaphysical special pleading* for humans, vis-à-vis an otherwise unchallenged underlying passivist, neo-Humean metaphysics.

4. What is free will taken to be by those who accept that agents can't cause things?

Proposed *alternative content* for free will includes:

- escape from causation
 - either altogether, or in the spaces left open by probabilistic laws;
- acting in accordance with duty;
- acting for a reason; (or for reason as such)
- getting to do what one wants to do/not being coerced;
- having been able to do otherwise, had one wanted to do otherwise
- getting to choose what one's wants are;
- choosing one's wants &/or courses of action well (according to some designated criteria, e.g., internal harmony, 2nd order desires).

5. What does the powers-based theorist need to establish metaphysically, in order to show that agency is possible in the face of causation ?

S/he needs to establish the reality of *emergent entities* (agents), who can *initiate causal processes*, via the exercise of *real causal powers* borne by them as *sentient* substances.

At the level of metaphysics, therefore, s/he needs:

- Dynamism; i.e. *powers* that are not elliptical versions of stimulus-response sequences
- Viable causal *bearers* thereof (substances, objects, or entities that are powerful particulars)
- Causation as irreducibly dynamic *doing*, by powerful particulars, here agents
- *Emergence*
 - *Agents* who don't reduce to their bodies
 - *Mental powers* that don't reduce to physical powers

6. What does the powers theorist need to be able to do at the level of epistemology, if s/he is to pick out token instances of free will?

S/he will have to be able to tell when it is indeed the agent who has initiated the causal process. I will call this the task of *identifying authorship*.

- This task is different from that of fixing *control*, at the level of *metaphysics*. The agent has causal control in virtue of being the cause, when she is the cause.

- It's a genuine task (closer to the standard of problem of source-hood than to that of luck), but it is made easier than those problems are for Humeans by the non-transitivity of causation (or at least punctuated nature thereof) on at least some powers accounts.

7. Distractions re: authorship

Re: external putative authors:

- As a matter of ontology, one can be said to have initiated a causal process, even if one has done so **at the command** (loosely speaking) of another entity.
- The problem of identifying token instances of free will should not be conflated with the issue of **moral culpability** in relation to a causal process that an agent has indeed initiated (or attempted to initiate) or with the issue of **socio-political freedom**.

Re: internal putative authors:

- As a matter of ontology, one can be said to have initiated a causal process even if having done so is **not in accord with one's best or truest self, or with one's second-order desires**. Agents who are addicts initiate causal processes.
- The problem of identifying token instances of free will should not be conflated with issues of **well-being**, e.g., internal psychic harmony, character, etc.
- Limit case: as a matter of ontology, the powers theorist does need to have a real definition for agent-hood (part and parcel of #5, above).

8. What should a powers-based theory of free will *not* be about?

Here's what a powers-based theory of free will **needn't be** about, because the points follow directly from the underlying metaphysics:

- Reconciling agency as we experience it with causal determination
 - From a powers perspective, the greater the freedom, the greater the degree of causal determination
- Resolving the intelligibility, control or luck problems faced by event-causal libertarians
- Resolving the "mysterious," "ad hoc" causation problem faced by otherwise Humean agent-causalists

Here's what a powers-based theory of free will **shouldn't be** about, because the issues involved are at best ancillary to the topic of free will *per se*:

- Moral responsibility
- Frankfurt cases
- Psychic harmony, unity and/or authenticity
- Freedom as a social-political phenomenon (though there are interesting things to be said about the relationship between a powers metaphysics and freedom)

9. What should a powers-based theory of free will be about?

Any or all of the following.

- On the assumption that it is possible for agents to initiate causal processes via their powers as sentient subjects: *articulating the nature of such displays*;
- Establishing the metaphysical conditions of possibility of such a phenomenon (*as per #5*);
- Specifying how token instances of such acts may be identified (*as per #6*);
- Further exploring the nature of *sentience* as a complex power.

10. Final thoughts

Event-causal libertarianism and event-causal compatibilism both presuppose, at the level of metaphysics, that there are no such things as powerful particulars, sentient or not. Powers theorists think that there are.

It is because they deny the existence of powerful particulars, that event-causal libertarian and event-causal compatibilist theories of free will are oblique to the theorizing of free will from a powers-based perspective.

Not being about free will doesn't mean that an issue isn't worth theorizing from a powers-based perspective – or that the metaphysics is irrelevant to what one will say about it.