

Do We Really Have Control? New Problems Facing Libertarian Free Will

*The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes
but in having new eyes.* ~Marcel Proust

1. Introduction

Newly emerging neuroscientific evidence has important ramifications for the metaphysics of free will. In light of this new evidence, I examine the two most prevalent notions of Libertarianism. I argue that advocates for both the *agent-causation*¹ and *causal indeterminist* models of libertarian free will suppose a misguided depiction of what constitutes a free decision. In order to retain a consistent standpoint, I argue that libertarians must view the conscious decision-making process as one of an *Architectural* nature, which includes a vital element for freedom that Libertarians often overlook. Libertarians suppose (depending on their notion) that humans are either the *primary cause* of their actions, or that they at least have the option to *do otherwise*. If libertarian advocates argue these claims as being consistent with libertarian free will, they must also regard humans as having the ability to consciously *create* their decisions. I argue that this capacity for creation—which I outline in the Architectural framework—is vital to the type of free will that libertarians suppose we, as human beings, possess. I continue my argument by demonstrating that the *Architectural* ability to create decisions is flawed, and that we instead make decisions in an *Archaeological* nature. In this new paradigm, our conscious minds merely *discover* decisions, rather than *create* them. I show that both neuroscientific and philosophical evidence support this new model of conscious decision-making and I examine how the *Archaeological* view of conscious discovery significantly undermines libertarian free will.

2. The Libertarian View of Decision-Making

In a metaphysical context, the term *Libertarianism* refers to the view that humans possess the ability to freely make decisions. Libertarians are incompatibilists, which means that they hold to the belief that humans have free will, and that free will is incompatible with determinism. However, different notions exist within the Libertarian framework about *how* we can freely make decisions.

One notion rests on a concept, which is commonly referred to as *agent-causation*, which will be the primary focus of this paper. Many libertarians adhere to this idea as a way of avoiding an indeterministic conception of free will.² Better put, the notion of agent-causation provides a metaphysical explanation for how an agent can freely cause—and have control over—a decision, which is independent from any deterministic cause. On this view, a metaphysical *agent* exists, which is regarded as the *primary cause* of the brain events that lead to an action.

Another notion of Libertarianism (called *causal indeterminism*), is supported by philosophers such as Robert Kane, who argues for a kind of libertarian free will that does not hinge on the concept of agent-causation, but instead, one that accommodates a rather indeterministic view of free will—hence the name.³

However, common to both these notions of free will—and indeed to *all* libertarian explanations for free will—are the assumptions that, for a decision to be considered a freely willed decision, a person must (a) have *control* over the decisions she makes and that she (b) have the ability to do otherwise⁴ (which suggests that she has the ability to make some sort of decision about whether or not she will carry out the action). Libertarians also postulate that a person can consciously deliberate about which decision

she should put into action. This includes the ability to approve which decisions one will act on, and to disapprove unfavorable decisions one does *not* wish to act on. Some Libertarians stop here and claim that this is sufficient enough reason for regarding one as having free will.

However, I argue that this does not go far enough. To regard the libertarian view of free will accurately, you cannot stop at the point where a decision is merely *approved*, and call the subsequent action one that was freely willed. If we are to suppose—as Libertarianism suggests—that the person is the *primary cause* of each freely willed action, then we must look much deeper than the mere *approval* of some fully constructed decision. If we are to regard the person (or agent or even the soul) as the primary cause, then we *must* regard that person as the *creator of the decision*, not as just she who *approves the decision*. For a libertarian to disregard the building process of even an *option* is to imply that this person can only choose between some options that were caused *apart from the conscious individual*. This, without a doubt, indicates that the person is *not* the primary cause of the action, but is rather a mere bystander, whose purpose is nothing above approving the most attractive option that randomly emerges into the conscious mind.

Because of this, I argue that, for the libertarian conception of free will to remain a consistent, coherent position, one cannot stop at the mere *approval* of the decision, but one must also be regarded—much like Chisholm suggested—as the primary cause of the decision as well. If a person has no control over how her decisions are developed, then it cannot be supposed that these decisions are free, nor would any subsequent *action* thereof be considered as such. To possess the type of free will supported by libertarians, a

person—and not merely her unconsciously caused brain events—must be the primary cause of any decision that is to be considered freely willed. One should already be aware of the distinction between *free action* and *free will*. This paper concerns *free will*, and therefore, must examine decisions themselves, rather than actions. This claim is surely controversial when regarding the *causal indeterminist* position. I will address this now. On *any* libertarian view, including the *causal indeterminist* view, a person must have control over her decisions in order to have free will. To necessarily have control over her decisions, it follows that one must (a) be conscious of the decisions she makes⁵, and that (b) this process must be self-created in such a way that her decision is one of her own free will (i.e., that it cannot be caused by any other event). Also, *causal indeterminists* focus more specifically on the ability *to do otherwise*. They argue that our *reasons* and *motives* cause our actions and decisions—and that such actions and decisions are free, as long as such causal relations are not always deterministic. Either way, *causal indeterminists* argue that as long as we have the ability *to do otherwise*, our decisions can be regarded as free.

Yet, having the ability *to do otherwise* isn't *much* of an ability at all! This merely requires the ability to consciously stop decisions before we act on them. It seems that this explanation does not correlate with the rigorous criteria of what constitutes a libertarian free will. I argue that merely approving or disapproving which decisions to put into action does not constitute such a free will, and therefore, in order for Libertarianism to remain a coherent position, a certain type of conscious decision-making process is necessary.

The type of decision-making process that is necessary to support the libertarian view of free will is one where the person freely and consciously *creates* decisions—as mentioned above⁶. If a person is unable to make a decision without dependence upon some determining factor, then it cannot be said that she unequivocally has control over that decision. And if she does not have control over the decision then it cannot be said that the decision is free. On the libertarian view, a decision cannot be free unless it is a *consciously made decision*. This claim surely accords with the libertarian position about what constitutes a freely willed decision. If one does not create a decision *consciously*—that is, if she is unaware of the decision she is supposed to be creating—then how can we suppose that she has control over a process, of which, she is unaware?

The libertarian view suggests one is not morally responsible for an action if one is ignorant about performing that action. This is simply because she is *unaware* of the action—there is no conscious will there. And if ignorance of an *action* pardons one from praise or blame, then ignorance of the *decision that caused the action* would surely pardon one as well. The reason such actions pardon one from blame, is because these actions are not considered to be freely willed actions. And for the same reason, if a person does not have control over a decision—due to lacking awareness of its formation process—then one cannot infer that such a decision would be a free decision.

For the reasons given in this section, I believe we have sufficient incentive to suppose that the libertarian assumption about how decisions are made actually indicates a process of creation: i.e., that decisions are only freely willed if a person consciously creates them.

3. The Libertarian Architectural Archetype

Concerning the necessary condition about how libertarian decisions are made—*that they are consciously created under the control of the person*—I propose that this can be understood as an *Architectural Archetype*. I argue that this archetypal view is the most sufficient way of explaining how one can be considered as the primary cause of an action or decision, which entails a metaphysically stimulated brain event—which Libertarianism already presupposes.

The argument in section two perfectly demonstrates why I label the libertarian decision-making process as one of an *Architectural* nature. To elucidate this model, I will briefly parallel the similarities between any literal architectural process and the libertarian assumption about how people make choices. Consider the following. Both the libertarian who constructs a decision and the architect who constructs some edifice are understood as having the ability to: (a) freely deliberate about what they desire to construct (be it a blueprint, a building, a thought, or a decision); (b) be active in the process of construction (e.g., the architect designs and revises building plans both before and during construction; and the libertarian can both design and revise a decision before its completion); (c) approve or disapprove of the finished product before they unveil it (e.g., the architect can either put her stamp of approval on the structure before revealing it to the world or she can discard it if it is deemed unsatisfactory; and likewise, a libertarian does not have to act on a decision, they too can discard it before unveiling it to the world, by way of action); and (d) be responsible for the effect, given that (a), (b), and (c) all hold true. Because of these similarities, I will now designate the *libertarian decision-making* process as the *Architectural* process.

4. Problem I: Neuroscientific Evidence Against Libertarian Free Will

From here, I will examine whether the *Architectural* hypothesis can endure the current neuroscientific evidence which opposes it.

In the 1970s, Benjamin Libet discovered unconscious electrical processes in the brain, which suggested that decisions might form before subjects become consciously aware of them. The problem, however, was that this unconscious activity emerged only a fraction of a second before a subject would become aware of the decision.⁷ Many speculated about whether or not this research *truly* pointed to an unconscious decision-making process; but recently, this research has been expanded to new and exciting areas, which seem to support Libet's hypothesis.

In early 2008, a team of neuroscientists, led by professor John-Dylan Haynes, discovered that the outcome of a decision can be encoded in the brain of a human being up to 7 seconds before it enters conscious awareness.⁸ In these experiments, participants were asked to relax and focus on the center of a screen that displayed a stream of letters, which would change every 500 milliseconds. At whichever time they felt like doing so, the subject would immediately press one of two buttons, with either their right or left index fingers. Once pressing the button, the subjects were instructed to remember which letter was on the screen at the time they had consciously made the decision. After the subjects pressed one of the buttons, a 'response mapping' screen appeared, which displayed four choices. The subjects then indicated when they had made the motor decision by selecting which letter corresponded with the letter that was present on the screen when they had made the decision. After doing so, the test would be repeated.

Using an fMRI machine, researchers then recorded the subject's brain activity to determine what happened in the moments leading up to the person's awareness of the decision. Researchers also took into account which parts of the brain caused the *readiness potential* that lead up to a decision. They found that two specific regions in the frontal and parietal cortex had considerable information that predicted the outcome of a motor decision the subject had not yet become aware of. Remarkably, the predictive information in the fMRI signals from the brain was present up to *7 seconds* before the subject became aware of the decision.⁹ This indicates that the decision was already unconsciously underway, as much as *7 seconds* before the subject became aware of it!

If a free decision is supposed by proponents of *agent-causation* as one that the person *created*, then the fact that the simplest decision is formed apart from the person's conscious awareness seems to undermine the libertarian conception of free will. How can we regard a person as the *primary cause*, if that person remains unaware of the causation process?

Concluding this experiment, professor Haynes stated:

‘Many processes in the brain occur automatically and without involvement of our consciousness. This prevents our mind from being overloaded by simple routine tasks. But when it comes to decisions we tend to assume they are made by our conscious mind.

This is questioned by our current findings.’¹⁰

However, Haynes is a neuroscientist, not a philosopher. And many still speculate about whether neuroscience possesses the ability to undermine our intuitions about free will. Some¹¹ argue that neuroscience cannot address the question of free will, because

neuroscience only examines *actual* properties, but neglects the *modal* properties that are essential to the case for free will. I agree with this claim. However, to regard the problem of intuitions, we can turn to the philosophical objection to libertarian free will, which also primarily concerns the *Architectural* assumption.

5. Problem II: The Libertarian Misconception About How Decisions Are Made

Specifically concerning the neuroscientific evidence from the previous section, the libertarian *Architectural* view seems to be a *misconception* about how the conscious decision-making process functions. To reiterate, if we do not consciously form or create our decisions, then how can it be said that we have control over our decisions? And if we do not have control over them, how can we say that we freely choose them? If the answer is “we don’t consciously create decisions,” as the evidence suggests, this means that the libertarian view may need revision.

5.1. A New Paradigm for “Decision Making”

The *Architectural Archetype* seems undoubtedly flawed. But, if this model of decision making is in fact insufficient, then, in order to abandon this paradigm of thought, a more sufficient model must replace it. Here I will propose a newer, more accurate model of how decisions are made, which I call the *Archaeological Archetype*.

In the *Architectural* view of how decisions are made, a person, who acts as an authority over the entire process, freely creates decisions. In contrast, the *Archaeological* view of decision making functions in such a way where decisions are consciously *discovered*, rather than *created*. All of the evidence mentioned in this paper so far points

to such a notion of how the decisions are actually made. We will examine this new archetype here.

The *Archaeological Archetype* is the view that our thoughts, desires, and decisions (etc.) are not *created consciously*, but that they are instead formed *unconsciously*, and only after they are formed can they be *consciously discovered*. Also, similar to an actual archaeologist who excavates an artifact, our conscious mind must make sense of the data it uncovers. And again, like the archaeologist, the conscious mind must be trained to interpret its findings. Better put, the conscious mind's job is not to simply *discover* thoughts, ideas, decisions (and so forth), but it must also provide rational *justification* for what it finds.

Indeed, this idea should seem familiar. Consider how most people deal with problems they encounter while writing essays. Most people are familiar with the method of simply leaving the project be for a while, and coming back to it later. This does not entail that you go consciously work out the problem while you are away from your essay, but rather that you *forget about it* for a while, so that when you return, you find it easier to solve the problem. This implies that your unconscious mind is working out the details while you are conscious of other things, and, after some amount of time, you can return to the essay and usually enjoy more success—that is, if you do not have an *epiphany* first!

5.2. Concerning Intuitions

Viewing how decisions are made under this new paradigm will provide a different outlook regarding how we become aware of many other phenomena. A few that emerge into my conscious mind are *obsessions*, *epiphanies*, and especially, *intuitions*.

Intuitions are significant to philosophical thought. But under this new paradigm, they can be viewed quite differently. If it is the case, as evidence (and even my intuition) suggests, then, similar to epiphanies, obsessions, thoughts, decisions, and so on, intuitions would also emerge into our conscious mind, independently from being constructed by it. And if intuitions form unconsciously, independent of any control, then an intuition about free will would not be fundamentally free itself, as one would not have any control over which intuition they might have. Discussing this topic, however, is not the primary motivation for this paper, and so I will leave it here until further speculation.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, regardless of whether one *can do otherwise* does not support the libertarian view in this case, either. First off, if one does not *cause* the decision, but merely *approves* it, she cannot be regarded as the architect of the decision—that is, she could not be regarded as the *primary cause* of the decision. This is inconsistent with the agent-causation notion of free will. If the fact that we are not the *primary cause* of our decisions does not undermine the *causal indeterminist* notion of libertarian free will, consider that one would have, at best, *limited* options that she could *otherwise do*; and none of those would be options that she *chose to cause*. In fact, if the conscious mind only has the ability to “do otherwise,” then this adheres more with the Archaeological view, instead of the Architectural view. As a result, one could not regard such actions or decisions, which are this far constrained, as being *free* under the libertarian view of what constitutes a *free will* or a *freely willed action*.

Furthermore, the combination of both innovative neuroscientific evidence with this new paradigm of how decisions are made seems to present sufficient enough reason to dismiss the libertarian hypothesis *as it stands*. Because of the degree to which this argument undermines libertarian free will, it at very least necessitates a rebuttal from libertarian advocates. The Archaeological view functions in such a way that decisions are consciously *discovered*, not *created*. Given the evidence in this argument, the *Archaeological* process explains how decisions are made more sufficiently than the *Architectural* view. In this paper, I've examined an isolated portion of the *Archaeological* view and its philosophical implications, but much more work remains to be done under this new paradigm.

NOTES AND WORKS CITED

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1. Sometimes referred to as *immanent causation*.
 2. R. Kane, "Free Will," (Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2002), p. 284.
 3. *Ibid.*, p. 284.
 4. I mean "to do otherwise" in the simplest fashion. All that is required for the sake of this argument is that, for someone to adhere to the libertarian conception of free will, they must at minimum hold the view that—in some respect—there exists an option to perform some other action than the action that was, or is to be, performed.
 5. The fact that an agent *must* be a conscious agent in the libertarian view of free will is explored in greater detail in the extended version of this paper.
 6. Discussed on page 3 of this paper.
 7. B. Libet, et al., *Behavioral Brain Science*: 8, pp. 529-566, 1985.
 8. J.D. Haynes, et al., *Unconscious determinants of free decision in the human brain*, (Nature Neuroscience, May 2008).
 9. *Ibid.*
 10. *Ibid.*
 11. A. Roskies, *Neuroscientific challenges to free will and responsibility*, (Trends in Cognitive Science: Vol. 10, No. 9).