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The Phenomenology of Free Will

Abstract: *Philosophers often suggest that their theories of free will are supported by our phenomenology. Just as their theories conflict, their descriptions of the phenomenology of free will often conflict as well. We suggest that this should motivate an effort to study the phenomenology of free will in a more systematic way that goes beyond merely the introspective reports of the philosophers themselves. After presenting three disputes about the phenomenology of free will, we survey the (limited) psychological research on the experiences relevant to the philosophical debates and then describe some pilot studies of our own with the aim of encouraging further research. The data seem to support compatibilist descriptions of the phenomenology more than libertarian descriptions. We conclude that the burden is on libertarians to find empirical support for their more demanding metaphysical theories with their more controversial phenomenological claims.*

Introduction

Theories of free will are more plausible when they capture our intuitions and experiences than when they explain them away. Thus, philosophers generally want their theories of free will to aptly describe the experiences we have when we make choices and feel free and responsible for our actions. If a theory misdescribes our experiences, it may be explaining the wrong phenomenon, and if it suggests that our experiences are illusory, it takes on the burden of explaining this illusion with an error theory.

Compatibilists conceive of free will in a way that is compatible with causal determinism; *libertarians* have a more robust conception of free will that requires, at a minimum, indeterminism. While the two camps agree that we have free will, their differing conceptions of it are often manifested in disagreements about the phenomenology of free will. In practice, however, they tend to agree

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that this phenomenology can be discovered by introspecting on their own experiences and describing what they find. If claims about the phenomenology of free will were uncontroversial, this practice would not be worrisome. But they *are* controversial, as evidenced by the philosophers' conflicting accounts of it. Furthermore, introspective reports about the relevant experiences are likely influenced by the theoretical commitments of the philosopher doing the introspection. Introspection does not simply present 'pure' content to be analysed; rather, by the time philosophers develop theories of free will, they introspect through the lens of their theoretical commitments.

While we believe that it is crucial to 'trust the subject' in order to study the nature of conscious experience, we worry that philosophers with theoretical axes to grind may be the wrong subjects to trust. Rather, since the phenomenology of free will plays an important role in the theoretical debates, we see a need to collect systematic data about the relevant experiences of ordinary people. It's not that such 'folk phenomenology' reveals theory-free descriptions of the experience of free will: ordinary people's phenomenological descriptions will also be influenced by their theories and conceptual schemes. Rather, 'folk phenomenology' comprises the set of claims philosophers' theories should accord with if they want to gain any support from phenomenological considerations.

We first discuss three disputes in which libertarians and compatibilists offer conflicting phenomenological descriptions and explain why it matters whose description is more accurate. We then discuss psychological research that might shed light on these debates. Though this research is limited, it offers some useful data and methodologies. We supplement this research with some pilot studies of our own, not in order to resolve these questions about the phenomenology of free will but rather to motivate further research in this area. (We did not want to encourage a move away from the armchair without getting out of our own.)

We conclude that further empirical research on the phenomenology of free will must be carried out, and that such research, though difficult, is possible. We also suggest that libertarians have the burden of finding empirical evidence supporting the accuracy of their phenomenological descriptions, since, on the one hand, the research we discuss in fact favours compatibilist descriptions, and on the other hand, libertarian theories demand more from the phenomenology. Libertarian phenomenological claims are generally more robust than their compatibilist counterparts, so stronger empirical support is required to substantiate them. More importantly, libertarian phenomenological descriptions set more demanding veridicality conditions, since their theories require more demanding metaphysical conditions than compatibilist theories do. This raises the question: Why should we believe we need libertarian free will unless we feel like we have it? Why shouldn't we be satisfied with the less demanding compatibilist conception of free will if it is in fact consistent with our experiences?

Motivating the Project

We will lump people's experiences of deliberating, making decisions, and feeling free and responsible for their actions together under the umbrella term 'the phenomenology of free will'.¹ One might think that exploring this phenomenology would have a rich history. Yet despite the intrinsic value of understanding the phenomenology of these philosophically controversial topics, there are surprisingly few sustained research programs that investigate them.

Taking a cue from recent empirical work on 'folk intuitions',² we think the best way to understand the phenomenology of free will — if there is one — is to find out what ordinary people's experiences are like. If this is not possible, philosophers' competing introspective descriptions will remain in yet another free-will stalemate. If we can understand this phenomenology, however, then this will at least situate the burden of proof: if libertarian descriptions of our experiences are right, then compatibilists must explain why it shouldn't matter if those experiences are illusory, and if compatibilist descriptions are right, then libertarians must explain why we need to satisfy conditions for free will more demanding than what is suggested by our experiences. It is thus worth trying to attain a more systematic understanding of the phenomenology of free will. And, as the articles in this collection suggest, we have reason to think such an understanding is attainable. Cognitive scientists and philosophers are increasingly interested in studying first-person experiences, recognizing both the need to 'trust the subject' and to develop more reliable methods for gathering data about such experiences so as to warrant this trust.³

Most philosophers seem to believe that there is no need to do such research on folk phenomenology because the relevant data can be procured by introspecting on their own experiences.⁴ Perhaps they assume that most people experience free will in roughly the same way and, if people reflect properly on these experiences, they will offer similar descriptions. So, philosophers, reflective by training, can offer phenomenological descriptions adequate, if not superior, to those offered by the folk. Regardless of the rationale, we find the tendency of philosophers to project their own phenomenology and intuitions onto the folk — a practice we call the 'universality assumption' — problematic. As we'll see, this assumption crops up when philosophers make phenomenological claims, but it is challenged

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- [1] We are using 'phenomenology' throughout to mean roughly the way experiences seem from the first-person point of view. The plural 'phenomenologies of free will' may be more accurate, since there may not be homogenous experiences associated with what either the folk or philosophers mean by 'free will'. The list of relevant experiences may include voluntariness, efforts of will (or self-control), authorship, intention formation, etc. (see Horgan *et al.*, 2003). We focus our discussion below on three issues central to the philosophical debates about free will.
- [2] See, for example, Knobe (2003), Mele (2003), Nadelhoffer (forthcoming; 2004), Nahmias *et al.* (forthcoming), Nichols (forthcoming), Stich & Doris (2003), and Weinberg *et al.* (2001).
- [3] See also Jack & Shallice (2001), Nahmias (2002a), and Vermersch (1999).
- [4] Others may simply neglect the phenomenology, perhaps believing it is irrelevant to theoretical debates. As Horgan *et al.* note, 'there has been a widespread, and very unfortunate, tendency to ignore the phenomenology of doing altogether — and to theorize about human agency without acknowledging its phenomenology at all' (2003, p. 332).

by the conflicts among these claims. Perhaps different philosophers' experiences are fundamentally different in a way that leads them to adopt diverse theoretical views, or perhaps their theoretical commitments have influenced their experiences or the way they describe them.

Either way, there is a problematic connection between philosophers' theoretical claims and their phenomenological claims. As David Velleman suggests, 'the experience of freedom serves, in some philosophical theories, as a datum from which conceptual consequences are derived. The conceptual problem of freedom thus becomes intertwined with the phenomenological problem' (1989, p. 32). If possible, then, we need to find out whose descriptions of the experience of free will more accurately reflect pre-philosophical phenomenology. If we find that none does, we need to consider the consequences — for instance, that philosophers should no longer present phenomenology as support for their theory of free will.

In what ways do philosophers disagree about the experiences associated with free will? We identify three debates between libertarians and compatibilists driven, in part, by differing phenomenological descriptions:

- (1) Categorical vs. conditional analyses of 'could have done otherwise'.
- (2) Free actions as caused by the agent or as caused by the agents' mental states.
- (3) 'Close-call decisions' vs. 'confident decisions' as paradigms of free action.

As we elucidate these disputes, notice how difficult it is to distinguish philosophers' *conceptual* claims from their *phenomenological* claims. Notice also the underlined passages illustrating the 'universality assumption' that we suggest leads philosophers to downplay the systematic 'folk phenomenology' we're calling for.

1. *The ability to do otherwise*

Libertarians say an action is free only if, *given all conditions as they are at and up until the moment of choice*, the agent is able to act or choose in more than one way. Traditional compatibilists disagree, suggesting instead that the ability to do otherwise can be analysed as a conditional ability or in terms of general capacities to respond appropriately in the relevant circumstances.⁵

Unsurprisingly, they also disagree about how to describe the experience of choice. For instance, the libertarian C.A. Campbell writes: 'Everyone must make the introspective experiment for himself: but I may perhaps venture to report . . . that I cannot help believing that *it lies with me here and now, quite absolutely, which of two genuinely open possibilities I adopt*' (1951, p. 463).⁶ Keith Lehrer says that such an experience 'accurately describes what I find by introspecting,

[5] Compatibilists who, following Harry Frankfurt, reject the necessity of the ability to do otherwise nonetheless accept that agents must have general capacities to choose otherwise if conditions were different in relevant respects (e.g., to be responsive to reasons).

[6] For these quotations, we've italicized the portion that illustrates the relevant claims about the phenomenology and underlined the portion that illustrates the 'universality assumption'.

and I cannot believe that others do not find the same' (1960, p. 150). And John Searle asks his readers to 'reflect very carefully on the character of the experiences you have as you engage in normal, everyday human actions' and tells them, 'You will sense the possibility of alternative courses of action built into these experiences . . . that we could be doing something else right here and now, that is, *all other conditions remaining the same*. This, I submit, is the source of our own unshakable conviction of our own free will' (1984, p. 95). None of these philosophers concludes from these experiences that we in fact *have* an unconditional ability to do otherwise, but they do suggest that if we *don't* have such an ability, free will is an illusion. Our *experience* would be illusory.⁷ If so, the burden of proof is on the compatibilist: if free will is compatible with determinism, then why does it *feel* like it isn't?

Some compatibilists have shouldered this burden, accepting the libertarian description of the feeling of free will but explaining why it does not accurately capture the sort of freedom necessary for moral responsibility.⁸ Other compatibilists, however, reject the libertarian description altogether. For instance, Adolf Grunbaum writes: 'Let us carefully examine the content of the feeling that on a certain occasion we could have acted other than the way we did. . . . This feeling simply discloses that we were able to act in accord with our strongest desire at that time, and that *we could indeed have acted otherwise if a different motive had prevailed at the time*' (in Lehrer, 1960, p. 149). J.S. Mill agrees: 'When we think of ourselves hypothetically as having acted otherwise than we did, *we always suppose a difference in the antecedents: we picture ourselves* having known something we did not know . . . or as having desired something . . . more or less than we did' (in Boyle *et al.*, 1976, p. 49).

Libertarians and compatibilists hence offer competing phenomenological descriptions to support their competing conceptual analyses of the ability to do otherwise. The question is whether or not we experience our choices as sufficiently caused by conditions at the moment of choice, such that a different choice would require some difference in those conditions (internal or external). If people experience their choices as following a causal sequence involving desires, beliefs, and reasons via a deliberative process, this would put pressure on the libertarian claim that people feel they could choose one way or the other *all things* (including desires, beliefs, and reasons) being equal. Conversely, the libertarian position would get support if, when people make choices, they feel as though they, as agents, add some 'causal oomph' to make otherwise undetermined events go one way or the other. This idea leads to a second dispute.

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- [7] Some psychologists writing about free will, notably Daniel Wegner (2002), offer evidence that our experience of consciously willing our actions does not accurately represent the mechanisms responsible for causing our actions, and hence our experiences are illusory. They usually assume something like the libertarian description of the phenomenology as their starting point. See Nahmias (2002b).
- [8] Hard determinists (incompatibilists who believe we do not have free will) tend to agree with the libertarian description of the phenomenology, but they argue, contra the compatibilist, that it does capture the sort of freedom necessary for moral responsibility, a type of freedom we do not have.

2. *The agent as cause?*

Libertarians often suggest that we experience ourselves as active causes somewhere in the process of decision-making, whereas compatibilists often describe the deliberative process more passively, with our decisions ‘flowing from’ our desires and beliefs. The libertarian view is most explicit in theories of *agent causation* which hold that free actions are caused in a unique way, not by other events but by the agent herself.⁹ Timothy O’Connor writes of agent causation that it ‘is appealing because it captures the way we experience our own activity. It does not seem to me (at least ordinarily) that I am caused to act by the reasons which favor doing so; it seems to be the case, rather, that *I produce my own decisions in view of* those reasons, and could have, in an unconditional sense, decided differently’ (1995, p. 196). Horgan *et al.* (2003), though not endorsing the metaphysics of agent causation, agree that ‘your phenomenology presents your own behavior to you as having *yourself as its source*, rather than (say) presenting your own behavior to you as having your own occurrent mental events as its source’ (p. 225).

Compatibilists, however, are less apt to describe an agent’s mental states as causes distinct from the agent herself. They analyse free actions (roughly and with caveats) as actions appropriately caused by the agent’s beliefs and desires. W.T. Stace, for instance, claims, ‘Acts freely done are those whose immediate causes are psychological states in the agent’ (1952, p. 257), and Joseph Priestly suggests that ‘all that a man can possibly be *conscious of*. . . [is] that nothing hinders his choosing or taking whichever of the fruits *appears to him more desirable*’ (in Boyle *et al.*, 1976, p. 28). David Hume argued, contra the agent causationist Thomas Reid, that ‘our idea of power is not copied from any sentiment or consciousness of power within ourselves’.¹⁰ Similarly, Daniel Dennett suggests that ‘we have to wait to see how we are going to decide something, and when we do decide, it bubbles up to consciousness from we know not where. We do not witness it being *made*; we witness its *arrival*’ (1984, p. 78). He argues that we do not experience, but rather *construct*, a self as source of our decisions, ‘building a psychological theory of “decision” . . . by inserting decisions where theory demands them, not where we have first-hand experience of them’ (p. 80).

Such compatibilists suggest that it is the theoretical demands of libertarian conceptions of free will that motivate, and perhaps influence, phenomenological claims about the experience of a ‘self as source’. The burden of proof, they suggest, is on the libertarian to show that we actually have a ‘thick’ experience of ourselves as agent-causes that goes beyond our experience of our mental states causing our decisions and actions. Another way this phenomenological dispute

[9] Other ‘event-causal’ libertarians eschew the problematic metaphysics of agent causation and require only that indeterministic events occur in specific places as an agent comes to act (see Ginet, 1990 and Kane, 2002). However, they generally agree about the phenomenology; Ginet writes of the ‘actish phenomenal quality’: ‘My impression at each moment is that *I* at that moment, and nothing prior to that moment, determine which of several open alternatives is the next sort of bodily exertion I voluntarily make’ (1990, p. 90).

[10] Enquiry (section VII).

plays out in the free will debate is in the different types of choices libertarians and compatibilists point to as paradigmatic of free will.

3. *Close calls vs. confident decisions*

Since libertarians argue that free will requires the ability to do otherwise in the precise circumstances of choice, they point to those choices where we feel, given our reasons and desires, we could choose either way. Hence, the paradigmatic experiences of free will involve ‘close-call’ decisions, where we feel we have nearly equal motivation and/or reasons for alternative actions. Compatibilists, on the other hand, emphasize our ability to deliberate effectively to reach a decision about what we really want to do (or feel we should do). Hence, the paradigmatic experiences of free will involve ‘confident’ decisions, where we feel that, at least *after* deliberation, our reasons for choosing one alternative clearly outweigh the others.¹¹

Some libertarians argue that free will is *only* possible when one’s reasons and motivations remain closely balanced — otherwise the agent would have sufficient reasons or desires to causally determine his action. Peter van Inwagen suggests that a person exercises free will rarely, only when he faces choices ‘in which it is not obvious to the agent, even after reflection, and when all the facts are in, how he ought to choose’ (1989, p. 234). Robert Kane requires such close calls for ‘self-forming actions’ in which ‘there is a tension and uncertainty in our minds about what to do. . . . The uncertainty and tension we feel at such soul-searching moments of self-formation is reflected in the indeterminacy of our neural processes themselves’ (2002, p. 228).¹²

On the contrary, some compatibilists suggest that we are most in control of our actions when we overcome uncertainty and tension by ruling out all but the one alternative we feel confident we should act on. Daniel Dennett, for instance, presents Martin Luther’s claim, ‘Here I stand; I can do no other’, as a paradigmatic instance of free action (1984, p. 133). Similarly, Harry Frankfurt suggests an agent is free when she acts on ‘a desire with which [she] is *satisfied*’, where the feeling of satisfaction is ‘a state constituted just by the absence of any tendency or inclination to alter its condition’ (1991, p. 104). And Susan Wolf suggests that, given the ability to choose on the basis of good reasons, the ability to choose otherwise is ‘a very strange ability to want, if it is an ability at all’ (1990, p. 56).¹³

It should be no surprise that libertarians focus on the experience of close calls, since their view rests on the ability of agents to choose one way or another given the exact same conditions, an ability that only seems attractive when we experience closely balanced desires for either alternative. And it should also be no surprise that compatibilists focus on the experience of confident choices, since their view rests on the ability of agents to arrive at and act on decisions about what they really want, so the less conflict the better. What we would like to know is

[11] See Nahmias (forthcoming) for further discussion of this debate.

[12] See also Campbell (1951) and O’Connor (2000).

[13] Compare Descartes’ *Meditation IV*, 58.

whether ordinary people associate acting of their own free will with the experience of confident decisions or close-call decisions.

Although there are undoubtedly other disagreements about the phenomenology of free will, we believe the three disputes described above represent the most significant conflicts between libertarians and compatibilists. Since the philosophers cannot agree on the phenomenology of free will, we suggest systematic psychological research on the relevant experiences of non-philosophers. If such research vindicates the libertarians' description, they can back up their claim that compatibilists offer a 'wretched subterfuge' for what we want out of free will. If, instead, it vindicates the compatibilists' description, they can back up their claim that we don't want out of free will what the libertarians say we need (and could not have if determinism were true). The 'losing' side would then need to mount an argument either against the research itself, against the folk's (or rival philosophers') ability to get in touch with the relevant experiences, or against the relevance of phenomenology to the theoretical debate.

Of course, we may find that neither side's phenomenological descriptions are vindicated, because both are, in a sense, accurate. Perhaps people experience some choices in the libertarian way and others in the compatibilist way. Or perhaps some people experience deliberation and choice the way libertarians say, and other people experience it the way compatibilists say. This possibility would show the universality assumption to be mistaken.¹⁴ But we should try to find out whether this is the case. And until such research has been conducted, philosophers should not talk about the phenomenology as if it is univocal and hence *prima facie* support for their theory.¹⁵

Even if systematic investigation of people's phenomenology in fact vindicates one of the conflicting descriptions offered by philosophers, this alone may not vindicate one of the conflicting *theories* of free will. The other side can still attack the alleged connection between the phenomenological facts and the conceptual conclusions or argue that phenomenology is entirely irrelevant. But as it stands (as illustrated by philosophers' claims about our shared experiences of free will), phenomenology plays a significant role in the debate. Our point is that such use of phenomenology is premature until we get some evidence from a larger sample size of people who are less subject to the theoretical influences of the philosophical debate.¹⁶

[14] It would also suggest an interesting explanation for the interminable nature of the free will debate: some philosophers' phenomenology leads them to develop libertarian views and others to develop compatibilist views, and when they whittle the arguments down to the disputed premises, they end up just banging their (fundamentally different) heads against each other.

[15] Of course, neither side must claim that we *never* experience free will in the way the other side describes. Rather, they may be picking out particular experiences as the paradigmatic instances of free will. Here, it looks like we may also need to explore what ordinary folk's *intuitions* about free will and responsibility are (see Nahmias *et al.*, forthcoming).

[16] One might worry that ordinary people's experiences are subject to other problematic influences, such as the theoretical views imported from their religious or scientific beliefs. While this poses a problem (which may, however, be testable), our goal is at least to gain a better understanding of the experiences as reported by the folk the philosophers *say* they speak for.

Psychological Research on the Phenomenology of Free Will

We've seen that philosophers have used their own phenomenology to support their analyses of free will. But their phenomenological descriptions conflict. Despite these conflicts, philosophers tend to assume that their own introspection sufficiently describes the experiences of ordinary people, so from their perspective, there has been no need for intersubjective studies on the 'folk phenomenology' of free will. There is thus a gap between introspection from the armchair and systematic research.

Unfortunately, we have been able to find little research that fills this gap. There are few studies on the *experiences* involved in choice, deliberation, voluntary action, etc. Admittedly, many research paradigms require subjects to deliberate and make choices, including work in cognitive dissonance, attribution theory, and game theory. These areas of research, however, fall within the behaviourist and cognitive psychology traditions, and they typically focus on the *objective* conditions for decision-making with no real systematic probe of subjects' experiences.¹⁷

When we look for psychological research on subjects' experiences, we find much less to work with. This is likely because the traditions that focused on such data — namely, introspectionism and phenomenology — fell to behaviourism. Surprisingly, even within those traditions, there seems to be little research devoted specifically to the experiences involved in deliberation and decision-making.¹⁸ Some introspectionists worked on volition, but they said little about the experiences of deliberating and choosing that precede voluntary action. Exceptions include Narziss Ach (1905) and Michotte & Prum (1910), who carried out introspective studies on the phenomenology of action; these studies are discussed in Haggard and Johnson's contribution to this collection (2003), where they also point out the dearth of such research: 'No studies of action phenomenology, to our knowledge, have achieved the harmonious combination of rigour of experimental control, depth of introspective report, and power of quantitative psychophysics' (p. 77).

Here we discuss an American introspectionist who followed up on these studies: Honoria Wells' *Phenomenology of Acts of Choice*, which was published in 1927 during the dying years of introspectionism and has not been discussed since. Like most introspectionists, Wells used a small number of subjects (six including herself), all trained in the methods of introspection and educated in the relevant theoretical debates. The subjects learned the tastes of eight liquids and then were presented, over hundreds of trials, with two liquids at a time. They chose one to drink and immediately offered 'a full report of all the processes

[17] In attribution research, for instance, subjects are sometimes asked to explain why they make decisions but not to describe the experience of making decisions. Libet (1985) and Wegner (2002) also neglect systematic exploration of the phenomenology of conscious will.

[18] See Pfander (1968) for one example from the phenomenology tradition.

which had been introspectable . . . from the moment when the two alternatives were presented to the . . . choice' (pp. 4–5).¹⁹

Relevant to our interests, subjects tended to report a negative affect experienced with 'close-call decisions'. In such cases, 'the normal trend of conative activity in the act of choice is impeded. . . . Displeasure, and other affectively toned contents such as dismay, discomfort, confusion, surprise, etc. make their appearance' (p. 77). Subjects report feeling less *control* over their choices when faced with similarly valenced alternatives: 'Until the resolve to let things go, consciousness was very troubled; a great feeling of impotence' (p. 77). Subjects were more apt to experience control over their choice when they were able to reach a confident conclusion about what they wanted than when they chose in a close-call situation.

Furthermore, subjects' reports generally have a passive tone. They usually describe thoughts and desires 'coming into' consciousness and their choices following automatically, even in the close-call cases Wells describes as 'effortful choices'. Here are two representative reports (the nonsense words label the liquids): '*Ziv* seemed to be attracting me rather than my determining it. I seemed to be passive. *Ziv* seemed to draw me. Chose *Ziv* and drank with pleasure' (p. 80); '*Meb-Vab* present in a sort of jumble. Clear knowledge both very unpleasant. Nearly equally so. . . . Oscillation. Distinct feeling of strain . . . I accepted rather than chose *Mep*' (p. 85).

Such results challenge the libertarian description of the phenomenology of free will. They suggest that when subjects were not theorizing about how deliberation and decision-making occur, they described the process in relatively passive terms: subjects were aware of the need to choose, of various desires and thoughts coming to mind, and of these desires and thoughts leading to a decision. A problem with introspectionist methodology, however, is that it *does* lend itself to theorizing (the diverse training methods of subjects is often cited as one of the causes of introspectionism's demise). While many of the reports offered by Wells' subjects used ordinary language and sound natural, when they introduced the theoretical language in which they were trained, they sounded unnatural and, well . . . theoretical: 'I could distinguish a sort of mental movement towards *Tauk*. Still more hesitation, a distinct reference to 'self'. I designated *Laip* with a strong consciousness of action' (p. 138). Subjects did not use the term 'consciousness of action' or refer to 'the self' in early trials.²⁰ Rather, they had reported 'something in the choice they were missing', and were told to 'observe this point very attentively in subsequent experiments'. Indeed, they soon began to mention the theoretical terms they knew from the literature: 'Having once caught the experience of Self-activity, [subjects] were able to identify it in subsequent though weaker experience. . . . And this is in no sense an unscientific

[19] Wells also took physiological measurements during the experiments, such as galvanometric responses. Her attempt to correlate verbal reports with objective measures is an oft-overlooked method used by many introspectionists, one which we should replicate today (with fMRI scans, etc.).

[20] These terms come from the work of Ach and Michotte & Prum which Wells was defending against theories advanced by Robert Wheeler.

method of observing phenomena. In microscopic work, for example, an inexperienced beginner . . . misses [objects], although they are plainly there for the [experienced] observer who is looking for them' (p. 144).

In this way, introspectionists justified the need for training: just as the biologist must be trained to notice and label objects under a microscope, the introspector must be trained to notice and label certain conscious phenomena. But while the objects under the microscope *are* there whether the observer can pick them out or not, it is not clear whether mental states that one must *learn* to notice are actually there waiting to be discovered. People can learn, laden with a theory, to experience things in a new way, perhaps a different way from observers trained under different theories and, more importantly, a different way from untrained folk.

On the other hand, perhaps Wells' subjects developed an ability to describe an experience of 'self-as-source', as suggested by the libertarian, which untrained folk also experience but cannot easily access or describe. This runs us into a fundamental difficulty of this project. Our goal is to understand the phenomenology of free will in a way that informs the theoretical debate without tainting the phenomenology itself. But one might argue that, without training, the phenomenology of free will is either too difficult to apprehend or to describe or both. So, even if there *is* a folk phenomenology of free will, we may be unable to get systematic descriptions of it from folk who have yet to be trained in some relevant way.

Again, however, a major motivation behind our proposed methodology is that we are sceptical of well-trained philosophers' introspective descriptions of the phenomenology. We believe that reports gathered from laypersons will be minimally tainted by *philosophical* theory. For this purpose, it would be helpful for psychologists, perhaps guided by the questions raised in the philosophical debate, to reconsider the basic introspectionist project of gathering first-person reports, even offering some guidance about how to attend to conscious phenomena, while avoiding the introspectionists' tendency to train subjects in the theoretical debates. If the data from subjects' reports can be triangulated with behavioural and neuropsychological data, all the better.²¹ Below, we describe our own attempt to use the 'talk aloud' method to gather concurrent reports from minimally trained subjects about their thoughts and feelings during deliberation and choice.

First, we will briefly describe two more areas of research on the experience of freedom. Five decades after Wells' study, decades during which behaviourism reigned in America, the cognitive psychologist Ivan Steiner proposed 'that we ought somehow to legitimatise and dignify research in which all dependent variables are abstracted from subjects' responses to inquiries concerning their feelings of control and choice. Perhaps that sounds outrageously phenomenological, but . . . until someone discovers a better way of gaining access to those experiences, we ought to listen to what subjects have to say' (in Perlmutter and Monty, 1979, p. 20–21). This research on 'perceived freedom' sheds some light on our questions, though

[21] See, for instance, Jack & Shallice (2001), Nahmias (2002a), and articles in this collection.

unfortunately Steiner's call to arms did not generate a sustained research effort on people's experiences of feeling free and making choices.

Perceived freedom studies present subjects with descriptions of agents making decisions and then ask subjects to judge the agents' level of freedom (or responsibility) in making the decision. Some studies show that subjects attribute higher freedom to agents when they act on a choice that accords with their clear preferences or their character traits than when they choose between two nearly equally attractive alternatives or act in other situations of uncertainty. Furthermore, attributions of responsibility track these judgments of freedom of choice.²² These results suggest that, at least when judging others, people see confident choices, based on the agent's preferences or character traits, as more indicative of free will and responsibility than close-call choices. Steiner reports: 'people experience choice when they seem in one way or another to control the decision-making process: They select an alternative they greatly desire; they confidently select among available options' (p. 25). Unfortunately, these experiments don't tell us much about people's *own* experiences, including experiences of the ability to do otherwise or of the 'self as source'. It is difficult to know whether subjects are imagining their own experiences as if they were in the place of the agents they read about or engaging their theories about how to describe such agents.

Malcolm Westcott attempted a more extensive study of people's own experiences of freedom. His *Psychology of Human Freedom* (1988) offers a useful history of the neglect of such research: 'Much as the phenomena of human freedom cry out for study from a human science viewpoint, there has not been much response' (p. 118). He then describes several surveys and interviews he conducted on these topics. Unfortunately, though, Westcott's work includes issues that go well beyond the scope of the philosophical debates about free will. His interviews involve questions like, 'Under what conditions do you feel free?' Unsurprisingly, the results tap into a range of experiences of freedom that go beyond deliberation and decision-making.

Nonetheless, some of his results are relevant to the question of close calls vs. confident decisions. Westcott developed seven generic descriptions of situations and surveyed subjects on how free (or unfree) they felt when they experienced such situations. The descriptions that drew the strongest ratings for freedom were 'self-direction' (taking steps towards a long-term goal), 'absence of responsibility', and 'exercise of a skilled behavior', which roughly fit the description of confident decisions. On the other hand, being 'faced with two important, apparently equal choices and deciding between them' drew the lowest rating among Westcott's categories, suggesting people do not experience close-call decisions as paradigmatic of freedom.

Westcott also tabulated subjects' descriptions of feeling *lack* of freedom into categories including, in order of frequency, 'prevention from without', 'diffuse unpleasant affect', and 'conflict and indecision'. These results also lend support to compatibilist descriptions, which emphasize freedom from external constraint

[22] See Trope (1978), Kruglanski & Cohen (1973; 1974), and Upshaw (1979).

and confident decisions. Though his results are of only limited relevance to our questions, Westcott's methodologies of surveying people about their experiences and interviewing them in a controlled way are interesting, and we have adopted these general strategies in the studies we describe below.

Pilot Studies on the Phenomenology of Free Will

So far we've seen that philosophers offer conflicting claims about the phenomenology of free will but make no real attempt to test their claims on a sample size larger than one. And psychologists tend to study the objective conditions and behaviours involved in decision-making rather than the first-person experiences of the subjects. We have found just a few attempts to break this trend. Unfortunately, we lack the resources to *remedy* this gap between philosophers' claims and psychological research, but we hope to motivate further efforts to close it. We offer preliminary studies as a good-faith effort to go beyond armchair speculation, while being well aware of their limitations. Notwithstanding, we hope our efforts will encourage philosophers, when they make empirical claims — including claims about our experiences — to present their problems and distinctions in such a way that they can be empirically tested.

Our initial study used specific questions with fixed responses drawn right from the philosophical debate. Here subjects are offering reports of remembered experiences and may be inclined to offer their theories rather than their phenomenology, problems we've already discussed. But it is important to note that when *philosophers* report their own experiences, they are likely to be reporting memories tainted by their own well-developed theories rather than their concurrent phenomenology. So, we thought it would be helpful to see what the folk say in response to alternatives suggested by the descriptions philosophers have offered.

The survey draws from competing libertarian and the compatibilist accounts of our experience of the ability to choose otherwise, as described above:

Imagine you've made a tough decision between two alternatives. You've chosen one of them and you think to yourself, 'I could have chosen otherwise' (it may help if you can remember a particular example of such a decision you've recently made).

Which of these statements best describes what you have in mind when you think, 'I could have chosen otherwise'?

A. 'I could have chosen to do otherwise even if everything at the moment of choice had been exactly the same'.

B. 'I could have chosen to do otherwise only if something had been different (for instance, different considerations had come to mind as I deliberated or I had experienced different desires at the time)'.

C. Neither of the above describes what I mean.

We gave this survey to 96 undergraduates taking introductory philosophy classes (none had yet studied the free will problem): 62% offered the

‘compatibilist response’ (B); 35% offered the ‘libertarian response’ (A); and 3% answered ‘neither’.²³

Obviously this study indicates no clear consensus on how to describe the experience of being able to choose otherwise, at least when subjects are given these two alternatives.²⁴ However, the fact that significantly more subjects picked the ‘compatibilist description’ over the ‘libertarian description’ is somewhat surprising, especially given how passive the compatibilist description is. Libertarians might respond that the subjects assumed the ‘something’ that had to be different was some factor which they could control, everything else remaining the same — e.g., control over whether a desire or reason came to mind or over their relative strengths in their deliberative process. Compatibilists, in turn, might wonder whether people actually feel they have control over whether specific desires or reasons come to mind or over their influence on one’s decisions.

Ultimately the goal is to get a sense of where precisely in the process of deliberation people feel they exercise control, how much control they feel they have, and how it seems to them to exercise it. What we need to do is catch people in the act of deliberating and deciding — or better, to get them to catch themselves in the act and tell us what it seems like to them. To attempt this, we adapted the talk-aloud method developed by Anders Ericsson & Herbert Simon (1993).²⁵ As a response to the behaviourists’ almost complete neglect of subjects’ verbal reports, but wary of errors made by introspectionists, Ericsson and Simon tested whether asking subjects to say out loud, but not explain, all the thoughts they are aware of while performing a cognitive task would disrupt ‘the course or structure of the thought processes’. Numerous experiments suggest the talk-aloud method is in fact a valid instrument to probe subjects’ cognitive processes. Usually the method is used for problem-solving tasks, though a few studies have been done on decision-making.²⁶ However, because these studies do not report the type of data we are interested in, we tried one of our own.

We devised descriptions of three apartments among which subjects were asked to deliberate and choose as if they were really going to live in one the next year. Following the basic talk-aloud protocol, we asked subjects to verbalize any thoughts (and feelings) they have as they performed practice tasks and the experimental task. Among our (twelve) subjects the general trend was simply to mention the features of the apartments they liked and disliked. As they read the

[23] Responses were counterbalanced for order.

[24] We ran a related survey to test J.L. Austin’s famous claim about missing a short putt, ‘It is not that I should have holed it if conditions had been different: that might of course be so, but I am talking about conditions as they precisely were, and asserting that I could have holed it’ (1970, p. 218). We asked subjects to imagine missing a short putt and thinking to themselves, ‘I could have made that putt’; then to pick among these descriptions of that sentence: A) I could have made that putt under the exact same conditions; B) I could have made that putt under very similar conditions; C) I could have made that putt only if something had been different; D) I make putts like that sometimes and I miss them sometimes; E) None of the above. Results did not support Austin’s claims: Of 33 subjects, 43% answered C and 24% answered D, while only 24% answered A (9% picked B or E).

[25] See also Ericsson’s contribution to this volume (2003).

[26] See Williamson & Ranyard (2000) and Svenson & Karlsson (1986).

descriptions and while they deliberated, they simply said aloud things like, ‘Hardwood floors — I like that’, ‘Five miles from campus — that’s too far’, ‘I’m choosing apartment C because it has a washer/dryer’, etc. It is difficult to discern whether subjects were reporting their thoughts or explaining their decisions or both. But, given the history of talk-aloud studies as well as our subjects’ post-experimental responses that their reports were accurate accounts of what they were aware of, it may be that for *this* sort of decision at least, the process looks similar to what we found in Wells’ introspectionist study: subjects are aware of their reactions to the information presented to them and in most cases decide based on being most attracted to one of the alternatives. The subjects described the process in passive terms and did not mention anything suggestive of a self that determines the outcome of an otherwise undetermined choice.

It may be that the experiences we’re interested in are too ‘thin’ to be noticed easily or are too difficult to describe fully. Or perhaps they are so normal that we typically don’t notice them (unless they are disrupted). Subjects usually had a pretty easy time picking one of the apartments — maybe the experience of making a decision becomes more salient in close-call situations. Perhaps to get interesting results using the talk-aloud method, the decision has to be moral or prudential.²⁷ Or we may just have to train our subjects a little more to get them to pay attention to what they normally take for granted, though we would then face the problem of inducing subjects to report experiences they might otherwise not have had.

Ultimately, we need a better way of finding out where to begin such studies. Here, the best idea may be to trust subjects to be the experts on their own experiences and use a qualitative research technique used primarily in the social sciences: the phenomenological interview. This technique involves extensive interviews with subjects about particular experiences, treating the subjects as co-investigators of the phenomena. The interviews begin with open-ended questions (e.g., ‘Tell me about your experience of time’ [Pollio *et al.*, 1997, p. 104]). From there, the interviewer lets the subject do most of the talking, directing the discussion with various ‘what?’ and ‘how?’ questions, but few demands for ‘why?’ explanations. The transcripts of numerous subjects are then coded by several experimenters to quantify the data. We attempted such interviews with a few subjects, but have not yet coded any results.²⁸

We recognize that some psychologists are likely to be wary of this methodology, given the difficulty of obtaining reliable quantitative data and the various research paradigms, such as attribution theory, suggesting that we are *not* experts about the way our minds work (though claims about our limited understanding of our mental *processes* need not challenge our ability to report how things seem to us, for instance, as we deliberate and act). Nonetheless, we need reports from subjects who are minimally tainted by philosophical theory while delving into the details of first-personal experiences neglected by most mainstream

[27] We’d like to adopt a study from game theory which offers subjects \$50 and the choice to keep as much as they want or give as much as they want to the Red Cross, obtaining talk aloud reports about their deliberations.

[28] See Karlsson (1988) for such an approach to studying these experiences.

psychological practices. Refining the phenomenological interview to serve these practices may be a valuable *first* step in developing more quantitative studies.

Conclusions

While the research we have conducted does provide some insight into what folk experiences of free will are like, it does not provide conclusive answers to many of the questions we began with. The relevant research does not yet exist. No one has systematically explored the experiences philosophers claim are central to the phenomenology of free will — namely, whether we experience ourselves as being able to choose otherwise *all things being equal*, whether we experience our *selves* as causal agents in the process of choosing, and whether the paradigmatic experiences of free will involve close calls or confident decisions. One reason for the dearth of studies on these questions is surely the difficulty of carrying out such research. The questions are not precisely formulated. The connections between people's conceptual/theoretical views and their phenomenology are not well understood. And the methods for studying phenomenology in a scientific way are in their adolescence, since they were largely neglected until cognitive scientists and philosophers became more interested in the scientific study of consciousness.

The philosophical debate about the phenomenology of free will thus faces a dilemma: either it is impossible (or prohibitively difficult) to get the data needed to vindicate one side's phenomenological descriptions of free will over the other's, or it *is* possible. If it is impossible, then, at a minimum, philosophers should stop suggesting that their theories of free will best fit our experiences of free will. More significantly, philosophers would have to get a better handle on what *is* motivating their conflicting analyses of free will. If the foundational disputes in the debate (e.g., about how to understand the ability to do otherwise) ultimately come down to a conflict of intuitions or different ways of experiencing the world, then it is unclear what *could* resolve the disputes. And if phenomenology is entirely irrelevant to the conceptual analysis of free will, it would be helpful to understand why that is so.

However, it is unlikely that phenomenology is entirely irrelevant to the philosophical debates about free will, as demonstrated by philosophers' practice of introspecting on and describing their own experiences. So, if it *is* possible to uncover the relevant data about the phenomenology, then even though we are admittedly some distance from realizing that goal, we should strive for it. In this endeavour, philosophers can play a crucial role in setting more precise questions for researchers to answer. Success in answering such questions would allow us not only to understand an essential aspect of human psychology but perhaps also to advance one of the most deadlocked debates in the history of philosophy.

Based on the preliminary evidence we have presented in this paper, libertarians should be especially concerned to find phenomenological data to support their theories. The research we have discussed above supports the compatibilist description of the phenomenology more than the libertarian description, though

not, of course, decisively. First, in Wells' study, Westcott's surveys, and perceived freedom experiments, individuals' perception of freedom was stronger in confident decisions than in close calls. Second, we found that a majority of subjects associate 'could have done otherwise' with hypothetical rather than categorical ('all things being equal') descriptions. Finally, our talk-aloud studies found no evidence of agents experiencing themselves as the causal source of their choices, and Wells' subjects usually used similarly passive language to describe their deliberations and decision-making, at least until they were prompted to use the theoretical concepts. Hence, libertarians should consider finding ways to probe the relevant phenomenology to find evidence that we in fact have the rich experiences they suggest we all share — e.g., of an unconditional ability to do otherwise and of the 'self as source' of action — evidence we did not find.²⁹ Of course, since libertarians' descriptions of the phenomenology are more substantial, it will be more difficult to do the research necessary to substantiate them.

Furthermore, libertarian theories of free will are more metaphysically demanding than compatibilist theories, requiring at a minimum indeterminism (in a specific place) and sometimes agent-causal powers. If these demands turn out *not* to be required by our experiences, then we may reasonably ask why we should accept a theory that makes such demands rather than accepting a compatibilist theory that more accurately accords with our experiences. In any case, to determine whether libertarians or compatibilists are in fact misdescribing the phenomenology to fit the theory, we first need to study the phenomenology itself.³⁰

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[29] See Nichols (forthcoming) for data that offers some support for the libertarian description.

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