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Choice Paralysis: A Challenge from the Indeterminacy of Intentional Content

by

Ryne Smith MacBride

Under the Direction of Eddy Nahmias, PhD

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

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ABSTRACT

Christian List argues that three requirements are “jointly necessary and sufficient” for free will: intentional agency, alternative possibilities, and causal control. In contrast, I argue that List’s accounts of intentional agency and alternative possibilities do not adequately explain how an agent has free will. Specifically, I argue that if an agent has free will, then it must also have phenomenality; because phenomenality determines the propositional contents of an agent’s intentional states. I demonstrate that List’s analysis of free will brackets phenomenality and, as such, an agent on his account may find itself in a permanent state of “choice paralysis,” a state in which it lacks the ability to choose due to the indeterminate content of its intentional states. I conclude by suggesting that philosophers must adopt methodologies derived from both the third- *and* first-person perspectives in order to adequately explain how an agent with free will interacts with the environment.

INDEX WORDS: Choice paralysis, Christian List, Free will, Intentionality, Phenomenal Intentionality Theory, Phenomenality

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate my thesis to the memory of William Ralph Schroeder, who introduced me to the philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre and phenomenology. I wish that I could have shared this work with you; I think you may have agreed with me.

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INTRODUCTION

Christian List argues that three requirements are “jointly necessary and sufficient” for a “system or entity” to have free will (List 2019b, 10, 50): intentional agency, alternative possibilities, and causal control. On List’s account, a system or entity has intentional agency only if it has intentional states that enable it to interact “with the environment in a goal-directed or purposive way” (List 2019b, 50). The agent has alternative possibilities only if it has the metaphysical *possibility* to act otherwise and the *ability* to act otherwise based on its intentional states (List 2014, 2019b; List and Rabinowicz 2014). Finally, the agent has causal control only if its intentional states cause its actions rather than “non-intentional processes in the agent’s brain and body” (List 2019b, 113). If these three requirements are met, then, List believes, a system or entity has free will.¹

My aim in the following thesis is to argue that List’s accounts of intentional agency and alternative possibilities do not adequately explain how an agent with free will interacts with the environment. To make my argument, I rely on the work of the phenomenal intentionality (PI) theorists, specifically David Pitt, Terence Horgan, and George Graham (Pitt 2004; Horgan and Graham 2012). Through them, I confront List with what I call “the challenge from the indeterminacy of intentional content.” The indeterminacy challenge states that an agent on List’s account may find itself in a permanent state of “choice paralysis,” a state in which it lacks the ability to act otherwise due to the indeterminate content of its intentional states. The content of

¹ If List’s analysis of free will is sound, then it offers a unique solution to breaking the deadlock in the debate on free will in the literature of contemporary anglophone philosophy. This solution relies on what List calls “levels of description” to resolve the incompatibility of determinism with the metaphysical possibility of an agent to act otherwise (List 2019a; List 2019b, 88); although see (Elzein and Pernu 2017).

an agent's intentional states is indeterminate, I will argue, because List brackets phenomenality in his analysis of free will.

If the indeterminacy challenge is successful, then it puts pressure on List's analysis of free will. Of course, List can rectify the issue by accepting that phenomenality is indispensable for explaining how an agent with free will interacts with the environment; but then he must scientifically corroborate phenomenality in order to stay within bounds of his adopted methodology, scientific realism (List 2019b, 74–77). Phenomenality, however, has proven difficult for philosophers to explain in scientific terms (List 2022, 3–4). Consequently, such difficulties may suggest that phenomenality is incompatible with List's analysis of free will as he currently conceives it.

My thesis is structured as follows. In the first section, I describe List's analysis of free will. In the second section, I develop the indeterminacy challenge and illustrate how it compromises List's accounts of intentional agency and alternative possibilities. Specifically, I argue that List's analysis of free will is inadequate, because an agent on his account may lack the ability to act otherwise due to the indeterminate content of its intentional states. I conclude by suggesting that philosophers must adopt methodologies derived from both the third- *and* first-person perspectives in order to adequately explain how an agent with free will interacts with the environment.

1 LIST'S ANALYSIS OF FREE WILL

In this section, I describe each of List's "jointly necessary and sufficient" requirements for free will although I focus primarily on intentional agency and alternative possibilities, the latter of which the indeterminacy challenge directly compromises and both of which are arguably logically prior to causal control in List's theory of action. Consequently, I merely identify causal control as the process by which an agent's intentional states cause the agent's actions—or, more specifically, that moment when an agent's desires motivate it to act (List 2019b, 51, 113–147). It is also worth reiterating at the outset that List's second requirement, alternative possibilities, comprises two sub-requirements: metaphysical possibility and the ability to act otherwise (List 2014, 2019b; List and Rabinowicz 2014). Metaphysical possibility addresses whether the world is open such that an agent can in fact act otherwise. The ability to act otherwise, as I interpret List, addresses an agent's *ability to choose* a possible course of action; it does not address that agent *acting* on a course of action—to act on a course of action falls under the domain of causal control. I begin with a brief discussion of List's methodology.

1.1 List's Methodology

List's methodology for analyzing free will is governed by his commitment to scientific realism (List 2014, 167; List 2019b, 74–77). Scientific realism holds that one should take explanations for observable and unobservable aspects of the world "at face value," that there is little reason to question whether some aspect of the world is "really" real if that aspect is "scientifically well corroborated" (List 2019b, 74). The guiding principle of scientific realism—a principle that List adopts—is the *naturalistic ontological attitude*:

Naturalistic ontological attitude: Our best guide to any questions about which entities, properties, or phenomena exist in any given domain is to be found in our best scientific

theories of that domain (provided that, in scientific terms, we have no special reasons to doubt those theories). (List 2019b, 74)

Another guiding principle of scientific realism is to adopt “the perspective of an external observer investigating what it is for an agent to have free will”: the *third-person perspective* (List 2019b, 11). List explicitly adopts this perspective at the outset of his analysis of free will (List 2019b, 11).

Having adopted the principles of scientific realism, List brackets the use of “the internal perspective of the bearer of free will,” or the *first-person perspective* (List 2019b, 11); and for good reason: the key feature of the first-person perspective, *phenomenality*, has hitherto resisted scientific explanation (List 2022, 3–4). Phenomenality accounts for what “it is like to *be* a conscious subject, *for* that subject” (List 2022, 3), and its resistance to scientific explanation has resulted in what David Chalmers has famously called the “hard problem” of consciousness (e.g., Chalmers 1995, 1996).² By bracketing the first- in favor of the third-person perspective, List eschews the hard problem and thereby suggests that phenomenality plays no essential role in understanding free will, a suggestion that I challenge below.

1.2 Intentional Agency

Some systems or entities have more than just physical states; they have mental states. If a system or entity with mental states exhibits the property of intentionality, such that it “interacts with the environment in a goal-directed or purposive way,” then one might ascribe *agency* to that system or entity (List 2019b, 50). So an agent on List’s account is by definition an input-output system with intentional states in its state space (List 2019b, 50).

² List uses Thomas Nagel’s definition of phenomenality as “what it is like to be *x*,” where *x* picks out a specific subject, like, in Nagel’s example, a bat (Nagel 1974). I follow List’s use of Nagel’s definition throughout my thesis.

Intentional states are kinds of non-physical mental states that are “about” something: they have a “*meaningful content*” and “encode a certain attitude towards that content” (List 2019b, 53). The content of an intentional state is “typically” propositional, so a system with intentional states exhibits semantic or logical properties rather than mere physical properties (List 2019b, 53). The attitude of an intentional state encodes “the system’s ‘beliefs’ about how things are” and “the system’s ‘desires’ as to how [the system] would like things to be” (List 2019b, 51). Finally, for one to ascribe agency to a system or entity, the system’s intentional states must cause it to interact with the environment (List 2019b, 51).

While the above description captures most of List’s account of intentional agency, I make the following assumptions about that account. First, I assume that all the content of an agent’s intentional states is propositional, regardless of whether that content is obtained through perception, discourse, deliberation, or some other means (List 2019b, 53). Second, I assume that an agent is typically first *non-phenomenally self-aware* of the content of its intentional states before encoding its beliefs and desires with respect to that content.³ Insofar as such content is propositional, I will say that an agent that is non-phenomenally self-aware of the propositional contents of its intentional states is *thinking*, linguistically or semantically. I may also refer to the “non-phenomenal self-awareness of propositional contents” as *self-tracking*. Third, I assume that self-tracking is a distinct process from the process by which an agent encodes beliefs and desires with respect to the propositional contents of its intentional states. Finally, I assume that an

³ While I think that paradigmatic cases of free will involve instances in which an agent is self-aware of the content of its intentional states, I do not mean to suggest that an agent *must be* self-aware of that content in order for one to ascribe free will to the agent. Such a strong claim would require further argumentation. Additionally, while I would assume that one could ascribe “consciousness” to an agent that is self-aware of the content of its intentional states, I wish to emphasize a distinction that I draw between “consciousness” as the *non-phenomenal self-awareness of content* and “consciousness” as the *phenomenal self-awareness of content* (the latter of which I would call consciousness proper).

agent's beliefs and desires are "typically" propositionally encoded (e.g., "I believe that it is raining today").

1.3 Alternative Possibilities

For an agent to have alternative possibilities, the agent must have the metaphysical *possibility* to act otherwise and the *ability* to act otherwise based on its intentional states (List 2014, 2019b; List and Rabinowicz 2014). In what follows, I focus primarily on List's account of an agent's ability to act otherwise. I set aside his complex account of metaphysical possibility, since it does not figure in the indeterminacy challenge. I would, however, like to briefly note that List generally argues that agent-level indeterminism (metaphysical possibility) emerges from, and is fully compatible with, physical-level determinism, and that both indeterministic and deterministic levels obtain in an adequate description of the world.⁴

However, metaphysical possibility alone is insufficient for an agent to have alternative possibilities: it secures the possibility, but not the ability, for an agent to act other than it in fact acts. In fact, metaphysical possibility on its own threatens free will: "If an agent's action is left genuinely undetermined by his or her prior psychological state, including the agent's beliefs and desires, then we might wonder how this action could qualify as something for which the agent is truly responsible . . . the agent's actual action [would be] an agentially undetermined fluke event" (List 2019b, 108).⁵ To combat this threat, List maintains that an agent must have the

⁴ For an excellent introduction to levels, see (Craver 2015). For List's own account of levels, see (List 2019a). For List's account of emergent indeterminism, see (List and Pivato 2015). Finally, for List's account of alternative possibilities, see (List 2014) and (List 2019b, 79–111).

⁵ List is referring specifically to Alfred R. Mele's luck argument, which states that undetermined agential actions are matters of happenstance. See (Mele 2006) and, for Mele's direct challenge to List, (Mele 2013).

ability to choose a possible course of action as well; or, as he puts it, an agent must have the “ability to act otherwise” (List 2014; List 2019b, 107–111).

For an agent to have the ability to act otherwise, it must first be able to deliberate on which of its possible courses of action is “rational” for it to choose; that is, it must be able to ascertain which of its possible courses of action adheres to its beliefs and desires about itself and the world (List 2019b, 110). This deliberative process may take the form of weighing reasons for and against one course of action over another.⁶ Then, the agent chooses the rational course of action (List 2019b, 110). Finally, the agent’s desire to which the rational course of action adheres motivates the agent to act (List 2019b, 53, 108).

List further maintains that an agent with the ability to act otherwise chooses the *maximally* rational course of action; that is, an agent cannot choose to act contrary to its beliefs and desires about itself and the world even if it has the metaphysical possibility to do so:

While we can consistently hold that free will requires the ability to act otherwise . . . we cannot generally hold that it also requires the ability *freely* to act otherwise, where this is understood as the ability to act otherwise *with endorsement*. (List and Rabinowicz 2014, 157)

Consequently, on List’s account, if an agent acts of its own free will, then it *will* choose the maximally rational course of action over any other (List 2019b, 110).⁷

List seems to take a hard stance on an agent’s ability to act otherwise: if an agent chooses a less rational course of action, then the agent *does not* choose freely. It is worth noting,

⁶ For List’s in-depth account of rational choice, see (Dietrich and List 2013).

⁷ I understand List to be equivocating on the meaning of the word “will” in (List 2019b, 110). First, I understand him to mean that an agent with free will just is the kind of system or entity that wills the maximally rational course of action. Second, I understand him to be stating that one can successfully predict the outcome of an agent’s choices based on a third-personal account of the agent’s beliefs and desires about itself and the world. Third, I understand List to be introducing a kind of psychological fatalism into his account of alternative possibilities—one that he claims to oppose (List 2014, §7; List 2019b, 108).

however, that he later softens his stance on the ability to act otherwise and on the requirements for free will in general. He writes,

We need not think of free will as an all-or-nothing matter. We may also recognize partial instances of free will—either in the case of an agent or in the case of a specific action—where only one or two, but not all three, requirements are satisfied, or where all three are satisfied, but only to a limited degree. Perhaps the agent in question has only a restricted range of agential capacities, for example. Or his or her causal control over a particular action is somehow compromised, though not completely absent. (List 2019b, 29)

This passage indicates that List accepts that “the boundary between actions that are freely performed and ones that are not, may be vague” (List 2019b, 30).

Nevertheless, List recognizes four instances in which an agent’s ability to act otherwise is genuinely undermined such that one cannot ascribe the agent free will. In the first instance, an agent faces a choice set in which none of the possible courses of action are ones that the agent can rationally choose. For example, in William Styron’s novel *Sophie’s Choice*, “Sophie is forced by an SS officer to choose which of her children should be saved and, by implication, which should be allowed to be killed” (List and Rabinowicz 2014, 164). The possibility of harming her children does not accurately adhere to Sophie’s beliefs and desires, so the act of choosing in this instance is not one she freely commits. Second, the agent cannot ascertain which of its possible courses of action is rational for it to choose, because the agent’s possible courses of action are “outside the domain of what can be rationally adjudicated” (List and Rabinowicz 2014, 164). In this instance, the agent does not choose freely, because the criteria by which the agent deliberates are not rationally defined. Third, the agent fails to freely choose a course of action, because it cannot mediate its conflicting reasons for choosing one possible course of action over the other. In the fourth and final instance, an agent recognizes that the maximally rational course of action in its current choice set will undermine its ability to choose a desired

course of action later; this recognition renders the maximally rational course of action problematic and may impair the agent's ability to act otherwise.

1.4 Pierre's Choice

I conclude this section with an example in order to elucidate List's accounts of intentional agency, alternative possibilities, and causal control. In 1945, the French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre gave a lecture on Existentialism at the Club Maintenant. In the lecture, he described a student of his (call him Pierre) struggling to choose between joining the Forces Françaises Libres (FFL) in England to avenge his deceased brother or staying home to console his bereaved mother (Sartre 1966, 39–49). Sartre never shared what Pierre ultimately chose to do, but I will assume that Pierre chose to join the FFL. How would List analyze Pierre's choice?⁸

First, I believe that List would ascribe agency to Pierre given Pierre's "goal-directed or purposive behavior" (List 2019b, 50). He would then explain Pierre's behavior in terms of intentionality. He would say that the contents of Pierre's intentional states are propositional—and *meaningful* (List 2019b, 53)—and that the attitudes of Pierre's intentional states encode his beliefs and desires with respect to those propositional contents. List would likely postulate that Pierre is currently deliberating on the following proposition: "Either I join the Forces Françaises Libres in England to avenge my deceased brother, or I stay home to console Maman." He would also likely say that both clauses in the proposition are possible courses of action that Pierre believes he could choose and furthermore desires to choose.

⁸ List and Sartre would certainly interpret the outcome of Pierre's choice differently. Nevertheless, Pierre's choice serves as an excellent example of what I call a "paradigmatic case of free will," a case in which the agent is faced with two or more seemingly rational possible courses of action, and is therefore worth using to clarify List's accounts of intentional agency, alternative possibilities, and causal control. For Sartre's theory of freedom and choice, see (Sartre 2005).

Second, I assume that List might describe Pierre as an agent who thinks, given that Pierre is able to self-track the propositional contents of his intentional states. I also assume that List might draw a distinction between when Pierre self-tracks the propositional contents of his intentional states and when he encodes beliefs and desires with respect to those contents.

Third, I believe that List would describe Pierre's choice in terms of Pierre's ability to act otherwise. For example, imagine that upon questioning Pierre about his reasons for joining the FFL or staying home, List concludes that joining the FFL seems to maximally adhere to Pierre's beliefs and desires about himself and the world.⁹ Now, imagine that Pierre does in fact choose to join the FFL in England. List would say that Pierre had weighed his reasons for and against one course of action over the other and ascertained that it was maximally rational for him to join the FFL. Consequently, Pierre chooses to leave for England and his intentional states cause him to do so. However, if Pierre stays home with his mother even though it is more rational for him to join the FFL, then List would say that Pierre did not act freely (or that he acted less freely): staying home with his mother did not maximally adhere to his beliefs and desires about himself and the world (List and Rabinowicz 2014, 147).

I now shift from describing List's jointly necessary and sufficient requirements for free will to arguing that his accounts of intentional agency and alternative possibilities cannot adequately explain how an agent with free will interacts with the environment (List 2019b, 10).

⁹ I will assume that List has the kind of in-depth knowledge of Pierre's beliefs and desires that such a conclusion would require.

2 A CHALLENGE FROM THE INDETERMINACY OF INTENTIONAL CONTENT

The indeterminacy challenge states that an agent on List's account may find itself in a permanent state of choice paralysis, a state in which it lacks the ability to act otherwise due to the indeterminate content of its intentional states. To motivate the indeterminacy challenge, I argue for the following two claims:

First Claim (C1): The meaning of the propositional contents of an agent's intentional states on List's account is indeterminate.

Second Claim (C2): An accurate account of an agent's ability to act otherwise requires that the meaning of the propositional contents of an agent's intentional states be determinate.

Through the indeterminacy challenge, I demonstrate that it is inadequate for an agent to merely self-track the propositional contents of its intentional states since meaning is ambiguous or vague from the third-person perspective. Instead, an agent's mental states must have some additional property besides intentionality that *determines* meaning for the agent such that the meaning of the propositional contents of an agent's intentional states is unambiguous and clear (henceforth "determinate") for the agent. That additional property, I argue, is phenomenality: phenomenality determines meaning by fixing (Pitt 2004) or individuating (Horgan and Graham 2012) it for the agent first-personally such that the agent has the ability to act otherwise based on the propositional contents of its intentional states.

I begin the indeterminacy challenge by arguing for C1 and C2. Then I introduce two possible views from which List can select that explain how an agent's intentional states may have propositional contents with determinate meaning: the PI theorists' view and the representationalist view. Next, I argue that the PI theorists' view is preferable to the representationalist view. I conclude that since List brackets phenomenality when he adopts the third- in favor of the first-person perspective (List 2019b, 11), an agent on his account may find

itself in a permanent state of choice paralysis, a state which it lacks the ability to act otherwise due to the indeterminate content of its intentional states.

2.1 The First Claim of the Indeterminacy Challenge

The first claim (C1) of the indeterminacy challenge states that the meaning of the propositional contents of an agent's intentional states on List's account is indeterminate. Recall, List holds that an agent has intentional states with propositional contents. He writes,

Generally, intentional states can be defined as states that encode attitude-content pairs. The contents are typically *propositions*, and the attitudes encode the agent's relationship to those propositions, such as whether a given proposition is something the agent represents as true or is motivated to make true. Being "intentional" or "directed" in this sense is a *semantic* or *logical* property . . . (List 2019b, 53; emphasis mine)

He also holds that propositional contents are "*meaningful*" (List 2019, 53).

Now, if propositions are meaningful, then their meaning is also *ambiguous* or *vague* (henceforth "indeterminate") from the third-person perspective; no property of the environment unequivocally determines the meaning of language. As Willard Van Orman Quine argues, "If we improve our understanding of ordinary talk . . . it will not be by reducing that talk to a more familiar idiom; there is none" (Quine 2014, 3). Consider, for example, how the meaning of language can be ambiguous from the third-person perspective:

(S1): "I want to make a replica of Thoreau's desk at Walden Pond."

One can interpret the meaning of S1 in at least two different ways. First, one might interpret it to mean that I want to make a replica of the specific desk Thoreau used while he was living at Walden Pond. Second, one might interpret it to mean that I want to go to Walden Pond and make a replica of Thoreau's desk. The ambiguity in S1 arises from its syntactic structure; the meaning of S1 is *syntactically ambiguous* from the third-person perspective.

Now, consider another example:

(S2): “‘I see,’ said the blind man after he picked up his hammer and saw.”

One can interpret the meaning of S2 in at least *four* different ways. One might, for example, interpret S2 to mean that the blind man was miraculously able to see after picking up his hammer. One might also interpret S2 to mean that the blind man simply picked up his tools (a hammer and a saw). Leaving the other two interpretations aside, notice that the ambiguity arises from the multiple definitions of the phrase “I see” and the word “saw”; the meaning of S2 is *lexically ambiguous* from the third-person perspective, and multifariously so.

The meaning of language can also be *vague*. Quine argues in *Words and Objects* that one can interpret the meaning of words and propositions in a multitude of ways from the third-person perspective and that each interpretation is equally valid (Quine 2014, ch. 2). To motivate his argument, Quine gives the example of a linguist translating a certain native’s speech acts, which occur in an unknown language (Quine 2014, §7). The native utters “Gavagai” whenever a rabbit scurries past, which leads the linguist to translate “Gavagai” as “rabbit.” However, the linguist soon realizes that he could also translate “Gavagai” as “rabbit stage,” “rabbit part,” “rabbit fusion,” “rabbithood,” and so on (Quine 2014, 47). Nothing more about the native’s utterance allows the linguist to determine a more precise translation for “Gavagai,” forcing the linguist to translate what the native means by “approximation” rather than “identity” (Quine 2014, 35).

Even though meaning is indeterminate from the third-person perspective, it is typically determinate from the first-person perspective. For example, imagine that I utter S1 and my friend asks me why I would go all the way to Concord just to make a desk. I had not meant what my friend suggested by S1 *at all*. Instead, the meaning of S1 was determinate for me: I meant that I want to make a replica of the specific desk Thoreau used while he was living at Walden Pond.

Fortunately, I can clarify what I meant for my friend.¹⁰ However, notice that in this case, my ability to clarify the meaning of S1 for my friend, which happens third-personally, assumes that the meaning of S1 is first determinate for me first-personally. The fact that the meaning of S1 is determinate for me suggests that I may be more than just non-phenomenally self-aware of the content of my intentional states; I may be *phenomenally* self-aware of that content. In short, what it is like for me to think S1 may be that property of my mental state that determines what I mean when I think it.

Now, assuming that phenomenality is that property best suited to explain how an agent might have propositional contents with determinate meaning (I will defend this assumption below), recall that List explicitly brackets phenomenality when he brackets the first- in favor of the third-person perspective in his analysis of free will (List 2019b, 11). Consequently, although List establishes that an agent has intentional states with meaningful propositional contents, he also establishes that an agent is third-personally related to those contents. So it follows that the meaning of the propositional contents of an agent's intentional states on List's account may be meaningful, but they are also indeterminate.

2.2 The Second Claim of the Indeterminacy Challenge

The second claim (C2) of the indeterminacy challenge states that an accurate account of an agent's ability to act otherwise requires that the meaning of the propositional contents of an agent's intentional states be determinate. To establish C2, I will demonstrate how an agent with

¹⁰ I want to acknowledge that language users may also, in limited cases, rely on context to third-personally clarify the meaning of propositions. For example, if an interlocutor hears the blind man utter S2 while picking up his tools, then the interlocutor can assume that the blind man's utterance "I see" merely serves as a means of back-channeling—an assumption that is particularly apt if the blind man cannot miraculously see after picking up his hammer.

intentional states that have indeterminate propositional contents may lack the ability to act otherwise. To do so, I revisit Pierre's choice having established C1. Importantly, given C1, I assume that Pierre is third-personally related to the propositional contents of his intentional states such that the meaning of those contents is indeterminate for him.

As mentioned, Pierre is trying to ascertain whether he should join the FFL in England to avenge his deceased brother or stay home to console his bereaved mother. In trying to ascertain his future course of action, he thinks the following thought:

Pierre's Choice (PC): "Either I join the Forces Françaises Libres in England to avenge my deceased brother, or I stay home to console Maman."

I take PC to be an example of what I call a "paradigmatic case of free will," one in which an agent faces two or more seemingly rational courses of action. Consequently, Pierre believes that he could choose either course of action in PC and furthermore desires to do so. In order to act, then, Pierre must ascertain which of the two courses of action *maximally* adheres to his beliefs and desires about himself and the world.

First, Pierre will deliberate on why he wants to "stay home to console Maman." His reason is simple: he thinks to himself, "I love my mother." He knows what this thought means too, because he knows *what it is like* to love his mother. For example, he already knows what it is like to care for his mother since his brother passed; he also knows what it is like to be filled with pride when his mother thanks him for staying by her side. Consequently, what it is like to enact his love clearly determines the meaning of the proposition, "I love my mother." It also deeply informs his beliefs and desires with respect to the possibility of staying home to console her: he believes he can continue to console her, because he has successfully done so thus far; he desires to console her, because it fills him with pride. However, with C1 in place, Pierre will not be able to deliberate on why he wants to stay home. He may think, "I love my mother," but the

meaning of that thought will be indeterminate for him. He may turn to his mother and ask her to clarify what he means when he thinks that he loves her, but no amount of description can replace what it is like for him to have loved her.

As a result, Pierre might turn to deliberating on why he wants to “join the Forces Françaises Libres in England to avenge my deceased brother” instead. He might begin by thinking about what choosing to join the FFL involves. Fortunately, it will involve experiences of which he himself has not directly had, so he can determine much of what it means for him to join the FFL by consulting others. For example, he can ask a friend how to travel to England despite the travel restrictions; he can send cables to points of contact to secure a definite place for him in the ranks of the FFL, and so on. Nevertheless, Pierre cannot rely on clarification alone. He will also have to consider, for example, whether he is the kind of person to take someone else’s life. While he may not know what it is like to have killed someone, he does know what it is like to have put down a sick pet—an experience he detested but felt he could have again if necessary. He also knows what it is like to lose a family member to the war, so he knows that for him to take an other’s life will inevitably cause someone immense suffering. Consequently, what it is like for Pierre to have killed and to have suffered also clearly determines what he means when he thinks to join the FFL. It also deeply informs his beliefs and desires with respect to the thought: he believes that he could avenge his brother, because he knows he can kill if necessary; but his desire to kill is tempered, because he knows what it is like to suffer loss. So, with C1 in place, it should be clear that Pierre will also not be able to deliberate on why he wants to join the FFL.

It follows that if C1 holds and Pierre lacks phenomenality, then what PC means for him when thinks it will be indeterminate for him. As a result, he will be unable to ascertain which of

the two courses of action *maximally* adheres to his beliefs and desires about himself and the world. He will also be unable to choose one course of action over the other. Instead, Pierre may find himself in a permanent state of choice paralysis, a state in which he lacks the ability to act otherwise due to the indeterminate content of his intentional states. Pierre's inability to act otherwise supports C2: an accurate account of an agent's ability to act otherwise requires that the meaning of the propositional contents of an agent's intentional states be determinate.

2.3 Candidates for Resolving the Indeterminacy Challenge

Though the indeterminacy challenge compromises List's accounts of intentional agency and alternative possibilities, he has several views from which to select that explain how an agent's intentional states might have propositional contents with determinate meaning. The strongest views come from the PI theorists and the representationalists. The PI theorists argue that an agent's intentional states have the property of phenomenality, which "individuates" (Pitt 2004) or "fixes" meaning (Horgan and Graham 2012). I have assumed up to this point that the PI theorists' view is correct. The representationalists argue that a direct causal relationship between an agent's intentional states and the environment is responsible for an agent having intentional states with determinate content (e.g., Dretske 1995; Tye 1995). I will first introduce Pitt's and Horgan and Graham's views and defend the PI theorists collectively against a common counterargument they face. Then I will introduce the representationalist view and argue that it is unlikely to explain how an agent might have intentional states with content that has determinate meaning.

Pitt argues that phenomenality individuates the content of an agent's intentional states (Pitt 2004, 5). Content is "individuated" when the meaning of that content is determinate. Pitt

motivates his argument by first juxtaposing “simple perception” (when an agent perceives systems or entities in the environment) with introspection (when an agent *phenomenally* self-tracks the propositional contents of its intentional states) (Pitt 2004, 11). In the case of simple perception, Pitt argues that “perceived objects can appear to have properties that they do not have” (Pitt 2004, 11). For example, an agent may perceive an object on the horizon, and it be like seeing a person even though the object is in fact a tree. However, in the case of introspection, Pitt asserts that “there can be no false appearances in the case of conscious mental particulars, and, hence, no introspective knowledge based on false appearances” (Pitt 2004, 12). For example, an agent cannot introspect on “an orange after-image,” and, based on that image being orange-like, mistakenly introspect on the afterimage as red-like (Pitt 2004, 12). Similarly, an agent cannot mistakenly introspect on a painful sensation as a pleasurable one. So, with regard to introspection, Pitt concludes that “necessarily, if a conscious mental particular *is F* then it *appears F*; hence, knowledge by introspective acquaintance that a conscious mental particular is *F* can only be based on its appearing *F*” (Pitt 2004, 12).¹¹

Pitt also argues that the way *F appears* is the way *F is*, which follows from the fact that one cannot draw a distinction between what it is like to self-track a mental particular and the being of the mental particular itself (Pitt 2004, 12). He writes,

Naïve realism is the only possible view of the apparent properties of conscious mental particulars: they are properties of the particulars themselves. If an after-image looks orange, then it is orange, because its looking orange and its being orange are the same property; and if a sensation feels painful, then it is painful, because its feeling painful and its being painful are the same property. (Pitt 2004, 12)

¹¹ I understand Pitt to be using the verb “to appear” as a substitute for the phrase “what it is like”; he is speaking specifically about introspection, *not* simple perception. So, properly speaking, I do not perceive the propositional contents of my intentional states but am *self-aware* of them; I phenomenally self-track them.

In other words, an agent cannot draw a distinction between what it is like to self-track the content of its intentional states and the meaning of the content itself, because the meaning of the agent's content *is* only insofar as the agent phenomenally self-tracks it; a distinction between “being” and “being like” simply does not exist.¹² Consequently, Pitt concludes that phenomenality individuates the content of an agent's intentional states, because *a conscious mental particular is F only if what it is like is F*.

Horgan and Graham similarly argue that phenomenality fixes (determines) the content of an agent's intentional states. They differ from Pitt's approach in that they postulate their stance on phenomenality and then defend that postulation by appealing to readers' self-awareness and responding to counterarguments. The following passage captures their approach well:

Are there features of one's mental life whose presence is so obvious as to be beyond doubt? Indeed there are: viz., *phenomenal* features, i.e., those features such that there is “something it is like” to undergo them. Phenomenal character is distinctively *self-presenting* to the experiencing subject. Moreover, it is self-presenting in a way that figures directly in the content of higher-order beliefs about one's current phenomenal states: phenomenal character figures in such beliefs as a self-presenting *mode of presentation*—thereby giving such a belief a specific content that is directly fixed by the phenomenal character of the first-order state itself. As one might express such a higher-order belief linguistically, “My current mental state is like this”—where ‘this’ indexically picks out the self-presenting phenomenal feature itself, which is functioning in the higher-order belief as a content-determining, self-presenting, mode of presentation. Such a belief, because of its distinctive nature, cannot be mistaken—and cannot be doubted by the agent undergoing the belief. (Horgan and Graham 2012, 332–333)

Here, Horgan and Graham postulate that an agent that phenomenally self-tracks the content of its intentional states fixes the meaning of that content with phenomenality. Importantly, however, content is fixed only if it is *presently* like something for the agent; an agent cannot infallibly phenomenally self-track the content of a past intentional state, because the agent has already

¹² Graham, Horgan, and John Tienson make a similar point when they write that “skepticism achieves no hold on phenomenal intentional content because self-presentational phenomenology forecloses the possibility of an epistemic gap between how phenomenal states seem to the subject and how they really are” (Horgan, Graham, and Tienson 2007, 473–474).

encoded that content. Horgan and Graham's postulation is justified only if one is in fact phenomenally self-aware of the content of one's own intentional states and can confirm, "Yes, perceiving this coffee cup is exactly like *this*; thinking this occurrent thought is exactly like *this*."

Of course, Horgan and Graham's method of appealing to readers' self-awareness leaves their postulation open to doubt. Nevertheless, they accept the precariousness of their method; because, they argue, phenomenality necessarily belongs to the subjective, introspective, and first-personal. They write,

Phenomenal character, of course, is something that directly manifests itself only from within a first-person perspective on the world. What-it's-likeness is something one is acquainted with only in one's own case. So, if one tries to frame an account of mental or linguistic intentionality entirely on the basis of features of the world that are publicly accessible—e.g., behavior and behavior-dispositions, systematic correlations between patterns or neural activity and external-environmental conditions, and the like—then one is bound to miss the very feature which we are claiming is the root source of intentionality itself, and also of the determinacy of intentional content: viz., the phenomenal character of experience. (Horgan and Graham 2012, 338–339)¹³

In effect, Horgan and Graham shift the burden of proof onto the skeptic and suggest that the postulations that the PI theorists forward do not warrant doubt; rather the disjunct that exists between philosophers' methodologies warrants doubt. If a philosopher strictly favors a third-personal methodology when analyzing the mind, then that philosopher, by default, will fail to entertain the conclusions of theorists who favor a first-personal methodology; but this failure to entertain is not indicative of an inherent failure in such conclusions.

Nevertheless, the PI theorists face a common counterargument worth addressing. The counterargument states that the PI theorists unrealistically maintain that, through phenomenality, an agent has infallible knowledge of its intentional states. The force of this argument derives

¹³ Similarly, see (Horgan and Tienson 2002, 526). Note that from a methodological point of view, the viability of appealing to readers' ability for introspection is strengthened by giving the reader the proper theoretical framework through which to analyze first-person experience. Such is the methodology of the French and German phenomenologists as I read them.

from the commonly shared concern about the efficacy of Cartesian reflection and an agent's so-called "privileged access" to its mental states. However, this counterargument rests largely on a misconception: the PI theorists only maintain that an agent has infallible self-awareness of what the content of its intentional states is like; they do not maintain that the agent encodes infallible beliefs and desires with respect to that content. As Pitt writes, "It simply does not follow from the fact that conscious mental particulars cannot appear other than as they are that one's *beliefs* about the way they are/appear cannot be mistaken—any more than it would follow from an external object's necessarily having the properties it appears to have that one's knowledge of *its* properties is infallible" (Pitt 2004, 13).

In fact, there are at least three ways in which an agent may encode mistaken beliefs and desires. First, what it is like for an agent to perceive an object may not match what the object is as a matter of fact (Pitt 2004, 11). To return to a previous example, an agent may perceive a tree on the horizon, and it be like seeing a friend. The agent encodes the belief, "My friend is on the hill." The agent's encoded desire motivates the agent to walk up the hill, at which point the agent realizes that it has been perceiving a tree on the horizon the entire time. The agent's belief about the tree was clearly mistaken, but the PI theorists argue that the agent was *not* mistaken that the tree was like seeing a friend on the hill. Second, an agent may encode mistaken beliefs and desires with respect to the propositional contents of its intentional states. For example, if I wake up in the morning and think about coffee, I may encode the belief, "I want a cup of coffee." However, if I have been trying to refrain from coffee, then what it is like for me to think about it may have been frustrating. Consequently, my belief is inaccurate; a more accurate belief would be, "I am frustrated that I want coffee." Finally, an agent may encode mistaken beliefs and desires with respect to past intentional states, because an agent no longer phenomenally self-

tracks the propositional contents of those past intentional states but rather self-tracks those contents as previously-encoded beliefs and desires. So an agent that encodes beliefs and desires with respect to past beliefs and desires may do so erroneously (Horgan and Graham 2012, 332–333).

Horgan and Tienson sum up their response to the counterargument as follows:

It is important to appreciate that [phenomenality] does not mean that phenomenal intentionality somehow guarantees infallible knowledge about what one's first-order intentional states are. Beliefs about one's own intentional states are *second-order* intentional states, and the Phenomenal Intentionality thesis is compatible with the possibility that such beliefs are sometimes mistaken. . . .What-it's-likeness is one thing; discursive judgments *about* it are another. Such judgments are fallible (as are judgments about most anything), even though humans do possess especially reliable capacities to form accurate introspective discursive/classificatory judgments about their own phenomenology. (Horgan and Tienson 2002, 526)

In short, the PI theorists reject that they unrealistically maintain that, through phenomenality, an agent has infallible knowledge of its intentional states. To the contrary, they claim that such a counterargument erroneously conflates an agent's ability to phenomenally self-track the content of its intentional states (awareness) and an agent's ability to encode beliefs and desires with respect to those contents (knowledge).¹⁴

Now, the representationalists argue that a direct causal relationship between an agent's intentional states and the environment is responsible for an agent having intentional states with determinate content (e.g., Dretske 1995; Tye 1995). So the real task is to offer a theoretical, or even empirical, account of the causal relationship in question. If the representationalists are

¹⁴ I would like to briefly note that if one defines an agent's phenomenal self-awareness as one defines knowledge (justified true *belief*), then an agent's phenomenal self-awareness is as susceptible to misjudgment as any of an agent's other beliefs. Though I lack the space to adjudicate this claim, I believe that the PI theorists must also argue that phenomenal self-awareness is not akin to knowledge formation at all. Pitt seems to have anticipated my belief (e.g., Pitt 2004, 8–10). For an excellent discussion on knowledge and its relation to the first- and third-person perspectives, see (Choifer 2018).

correct, then their view has a distinct advantage over the PI theorists' view: it does not rely on unscientifically explained mental properties like phenomenality.

Nevertheless, the representationalist view is not without its concerns. For example, one can assert that the direct causal relationship between an agent's intentional states and the environment is likely not one-to-one but many-to-one, as Quine argues (Quine 2014, 47). If the representationalists accept this assertion, then one can argue that the many-to-one causal relationship is indefinite in scope such that one cannot remotely begin to scientifically explain it. As Quine suggests, the physical rabbit in the environment may also cause the native to self-track it as "rabbit stage," "rabbit part," "rabbit fusion," or "rabbithood" "*that is in no position for shooting*" (Quine 2014, 35, 47; emphasis mine). In effect, there are presumably combinatorially infinite ways that the rabbit in the native's environment can cause the native to self-track that rabbit as a proposition with determinate meaning, precisely because the number of meaningful thoughts about the rabbit are presumably infinite. So, given that the representationalists rely on an indefinite causal relationship, the PI theorists' view may seem like the more attractive option: the PI theorists may rely on a mental property that has yet to be scientifically explained, but phenomenality is such that one can readily introspect on it and confirm that it determines content.

2.4 Choice Paralysis

Insofar as the PI theorists' view is correct, if Pierre phenomenally self-tracked PC, then the meaning of PC would be determinate for him. Consequently, he would be able to ascertain which of the two courses of action maximally adhered to his beliefs and desires about himself

and the world; he would choose that course of action: to join the FFL. Finally, Pierre's desire to join the FFL would motivate him to act.

Unfortunately, List brackets phenomenality when he brackets the first- in favor of the third-person perspective in order to stay within bounds of his adopted methodology, scientific realism. Consequently, it follows from C1 and C2 of the indeterminacy challenge that Pierre—and any other agent on List's account—may find himself in a permanent state of choice paralysis, a state in which he lacks the ability to act otherwise due to the indeterminate content of his intentional states. In this state, Pierre would be unable to ascertain which of the two possible courses of action maximally adhered to his beliefs and desires about himself and the world. He would fail to choose one course of action over the other. Consequently, Pierre's intentional states would not cause his actions—his desires would not motivate him to act. In conclusion, then, the indeterminacy challenge demonstrates that List's accounts of intentional agency and alternative possibilities fail to explain how an agent with free will interacts with the environment.

3 CONCLUSION

In this thesis, I have argued that the meaning of the propositional contents of an agent's intentional states on List's account is indeterminate. I have further argued that an agent that has intentional states with indeterminate content may find itself in a permanent state of choice paralysis, a state in which it lacks the ability to act otherwise. Through the indeterminacy challenge, I have demonstrated that List's accounts of intentional agency and alternative possibilities cannot adequately explain how an agent with free will interacts with the environment. By undermining List's accounts of intentional agency and alternative possibilities, I have put pressure on his analysis of free will, because List recognizes intentional agency and alternative possibilities as two of "three jointly necessary and sufficient requirements for free will" (List 2019b, 10).

The strength of my argument rests on the following two facts: first, List brackets phenomenality when he brackets the first- in favor of the third-person perspective in his analysis of free will (List 2019b, 11); second, List recognizes that meaning is critical for explaining how an agent with free will interacts with the environment (List 2019b, 50–54). However, the indeterminacy challenge is currently only effective if the PI theorists are correct when they argue that phenomenality determines the meaning of the propositional contents of an agent's intentional states (e.g., Pitt 2004; Horgan and Graham 2012). Insofar as the PI theorists are correct, the indeterminacy challenge demonstrates that List's methodological goal of analyzing free will from only the third-person perspective is self-defeating: he cannot bracket phenomenality and claim in addition that meaning is critical for explaining how an agent with free will interacts with the environment; because meaning, in order to be determinate, requires phenomenality.

I believe that the indeterminacy challenge suggests a more general lesson that one must adopt methodologies derived from both the third- *and* first-person perspectives in order to adequately analyze free will.¹⁵ Philosophers, however, have seemed particularly resistant to analyzing free will—or, more generally, the mind—from the first-person perspective, because phenomenality has resisted scientific explanation. Yet this resistance seems predicated on the belief that truth exclusively falls within the domain of the natural sciences. So, at a higher level, I have tried to challenge this belief in my thesis, because it ill-serves those who would analyze the mind and the role it plays in free will. While drawing the present conclusion may be more than the indeterminacy challenge warrants, I hope at the very least to have demonstrated that one cannot dismiss what it is like for an agent to make meaningful decisions when trying to explain how that agent freely interacts with the environment.

¹⁵ Note that List has offered an account of the first-person perspective in his “many-worlds theory of consciousness” (List 2022). However, I believe that the metaphysical framework with which List develops his theory of consciousness is structurally averse to the metaphysical framework he develops in his analysis of free will. Unfortunately, I lack the space to develop this claim.

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