

Gregg D. Caruso: Free Will and Consciousness: A Determinist Account of the Illusion of Free Will

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Free Will and Consciousness is an effort to deal with a series of complex topics such as social and cognitive psychology, neuroscience, philosophy and their relationship with consciousness and free will in a small number of pages. Caruso offers a determinist account of human action, by showing that free will is an illusion and that our subjective feeling of freedom is created by some aspects of our consciousness (p. 5). To this end, he appeals to empirical results from studies of Libet, Wegner, Bargh and others, that lead us to doubt free will. Additionally, he applies David Rosenthal's high order thought (HOT) theory of consciousness in order to explain where our phenomenology of agentive experience comes from. This book is therefore a good example of interdisciplinary research.

In order to make sense of the thesis according to which free will is an illusion, Caruso adopts the 'hard-enough-determinism' standpoint. According to it, the libertarian free will does not exist and all human actions and choices are the results of neural and psychological processes beyond the person's control. Thus, they form part of a causally determinate system (p. 4). As a consequence, no human action or choice is free. Furthermore, Caruso makes a distinction between his hard-enough-determinism and the traditional hard-determinism. The first leaves open the possibility of low-level indeterminism that does not affect human behavior, while the second denies any possibility of indeterminism at all (p. 4). However, this distinction seems to be useless because, according to Caruso, indeterminism is insufficient to explain any action, since it would then be random and chaotic (p. 40).

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Caruso devotes the first three chapters to present the traditional free will debate and its implications vis-à-vis moral responsibility. In the first chapter he presents the classical debate among compatibilists and libertarianists, and since he proposes that free will is an illusion, he must show that both fail in their attempts to make sense of free will.

In the second chapter, *Against Libertarianism*, Caruso claims that libertarianism posits a kind of agency that has causal power not determined by physical laws; the agent possesses a non-physical substance that is free of determination. This is the agent-causal theory, which Caruso rejects because it requires either substance dualism or radical emergentism, neither of which can account for mental causation, a necessary condition for free will. According to Caruso, libertarianism cannot show how free will is possible since it cannot be shown how a non-physical substance can causally interact with a physical substance (p. 35). Although Caruso quotes Timothy O'Connor several times, he does not discuss O'Connor's agent-causal event theory (O'Connor 2000, 2002), in which O'Connor makes the same critical points about Reid, Chisholm and Taylor's agent-causation theories, but proposes an alternative agency theory based on reason explanations and which avoids precisely Caruso's objections. Caruso seems to assume that O'Connor's agent theory is another radical emergent libertarian one (p. 22).

Another kind of libertarianism tries to make sense of free action without postulating *sui generis* kinds of agency or causation. Here, Caruso mentions Robert Kane's libertarianism based on the event-indeterminist theory in which Kane aims to avoid the mind-body problem and present a naturalized version of the libertarian free will. For Kane, a free action is caused by the effort of an agent's will when two or more options of action are activated in the neural network. According to Caruso, the theory nevertheless fails because it cannot account for the intelligibility question: What does it mean that "a quantum jump in the brain is an act of deciding or an effort of agent's will"? If there were such a neural indeterminacy, there would be no good reasons to think that the agent could control it in choosing what to do. Neural indeterminacy does not allow us to know how control by an agent is possible (pp. 46–49).

Caruso concludes that libertarianism both in agent-causation and event-indeterminist theories are inconsistent with a scientific and naturalistic world view. Both positions violate the physical causal closure principle, and are incapable of accounting for mental causation; moreover, their consequences are arbitrary, capricious, random, irrational, uncontrolled and inexplicable actions (p. 52).

In the third chapter, *Against Compatibilism*, Caruso wants to show that compatibilism is a revisionist theory. The compatibilist concept of free will is weaker than the traditional view: it only requires that decision making be caused by an agent's beliefs and desires. To offer support for this revisionist strategy, compatibilists maintain that their concept is in fact more suitable than the "folk" concept of free will. However, Caruso reviews recent work in experimental philosophy of free will, referring to Nichols and Knobe's empirical research showing that common intuitions about free will are not compatibilist; instead they are libertarian, involving free agents capable of acting independently of causal laws. Caruso concludes that the compatibilist strategy is not empirically adequate.

Caruso dedicates the rest of the chapters, four through seven, to the relationship between free will and consciousness. In the fourth, *Consciousness and Free Will (I): Automaticity and Adaptive Unconscious*, he explores the empirical literature concerning adaptive unconscious and the ‘priming’ paradigm of research. This research shows that there are factors that modify behavior, but they are beyond the conscious spectrum. Additionally, when people are asked about them, the most common answer consists in constructing them or simply denying their effects. For instance, being exposed to words related to old age make people slower at walking, being exposed to words related to professorship make people careful in a Trivia game, being sat in a table with a business suitcase improves performance in negotiation tasks, and so on. These results allow Caruso to claim that there is another kind of determinism that undermines free will, i.e., determinism by unconscious processes and unnoticed features of the environment. It seems paradoxical to claim that we have free will if we are not conscious of the factors that guide our behavior.

In the fifth chapter, *Consciousness and Free Will (II): Transparency, Infallibility and the Higher-Order Thought Theory*, Caruso explicitly embraces David Rosenthal’s version of a HOT theory of consciousness. According to these theories, the phenomenal feature of certain mental states is due to being related in some specific way to another mental state of higher order. What is this relationship? The higher order thought must have as content the first order thought, allowing us to explain some striking issues of phenomenal consciousness. For example, we can fit the evidence on adaptive unconscious within its framework: there are mental states having a causal influence on our behavior but there are no HOTs related to them, thus they are not conscious. Phenomenal consciousness, from this perspective, is an extrinsic feature of some mental states, a relational property. Being conscious or not, it is not an internal aspect of the mental state, it is just a matter of relations among mental states. After a short description (and defense) of this theory (pp. 154–159), Caruso defends why HOT theory can explain why we have the illusion of free will.

The illusion of free will is due to three aspects of the nature of consciousness and the folk understanding of it: (1) the commonsense belief in the transparency and infallibility of mind, (2) the conscious awareness of our intentional states as uncaused states, and (3) the phenomenology of our own existence as a metaphysical unity.

Transparency of the mind is the Cartesian thesis that there is nothing in our minds of which we are unconscious. We know everything that happens in our minds. Caruso claims that although transparency is a feature of a commonsensical understanding of the mind, we are not consciously aware of many factors which have a causal influence on our behavior, such as environmental factors, brain states, some cognitive bias, etc. For those reasons, the commonsense does not take into account such factors. Thus, the only factors which have causal power, for folk psychology, are the conscious intentional states.

It seems to be a good argument and Caruso himself admits that he needs more to explain the illusion of free will, but we have certain doubts that a commonsense view implies transparency of the mind. Certainly, this is an empirical issue and must be resolved on empirical grounds, but we find certain common expressions that allow us to think that it does not necessarily follow. For example, it is common as a

way to excuse certain actions that people say something like: “I do not know why I do that” or when people express that they have forgotten something: “I know that, but I cannot remember.” We think that these expressions reflect how common sense accepts the existence of things in the mind beyond our consciousness. Of course, we need more than this to support our doubts—here is a potential experimental philosophy project.

Other considerations that explain the illusion of free will seem more compelling to us. In chapter six, *Consciousness and Free Will (III): Intentional States, Spontaneity, and Action Initiation*, Caruso argues that the phenomenology of intentional states is another reason for the illusion of free will: “[F]rom a phenomenological point of view, we’re not conscious of where our conscious beliefs, desires, and intentional states come from, as well as how our mental states become conscious and because of this we incorrectly conclude that there are no causal antecedents” (p. 182). We experience the intentional states as uncaused, while we experience sensory states differently. Our sensory states, e.g., the perception of a tree, are always accompanied by certain experiences of the cause producing the state, e.g., there is a tree in front of me. But, the experience of intentional states is not accompanied by the experience of its cause. We feel those states as spontaneous and uncaused states. Thus, it is understandable why we have the phenomenological illusion of being uncaused agents.

In the final chapter, *Consciousness and Free Will (IV): Self-Consciousness and Our Sense of Agency*, Caruso shows how the metaphysically unified self, required by the view that free will is the author of behavior, is just another illusion. Basically, the illusion is explained by the way in which HOTs represent the first-order mental states having content. For example, the perception of a tree is the first order mental state, but this perception is only conscious when a HOT represents it in this way: “I am in [perception of a tree] state”. Every HOT has the essential mental indexical “I”, and for this reason “tacitly represents its target state as belonging to the individual that thinks that very HOT” (p. 225). The existence of the indexical “I” inside the content of every HOT creates the illusion of the existence of a Self. Additionally, there is a lot of evidence that this illusion is easily dispelled: phenomena such as delusions of control, alien limb syndrome, split brain cases, Dissociative Identity Disorders, and others.

Overall, this book is highly recommend for upper undergraduate courses, graduate students, and researchers. It is tightly organized. The vast amount of literature reviewed by the author makes it a good introduction to the metaphysics of free will and the debate about cognitive illusion of free will. The arguments featured were both robust and convincing with the author achieving a successful concatenation of them in order to uphold his deterministic account.

References

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