

The Concept and Phenomenology of Free Agency

Oisín Deery

1. Introduction

I argue that free actions are a natural kind, by showing how the concept FREE ACTION refers. I also address the role of phenomenology in fixing the reference of FREE ACTION.

2. Three questions

Free will is the ability to act freely, and free actions—including mental actions like choices—are exercises of that ability. Here are three questions we can ask about free agency:

1. The existence question: Do actual human agents ever act freely?
2. The compatibility question: Is the ability to act freely compatible with determinism?
3. The conceptual question: How is the concept of a free action to be defined?

The compatibility question asks whether deterministic agents can act freely. Answering this question is supposed to help answer the conceptual question, since part of what we may want to know in asking how to define the concept is whether free actions are compatible with determinism. The hope is that answering these questions will also answer the existence question. I argue that on a naturalistic approach to the conceptual question, the answer to the existence question is “yes” and does *not* require first asking the compatibility question.

3. Concept

In identifying free actions, we track a set of features in other agents that is useful to identify, including control capacities tracked for same general reasons that we distinguish agents from non-agents, or more intelligent from less intelligent behaviors. For instance, it was presumably important for us to learn to evade predators differently than falling trees (trees cannot chase us) and to distinguish different types of agency, including their relative intelligence (creatures that exhibit more intelligent behaviors tend to be more difficult to hunt, and more difficult to evade if predators). Similarly, we learned to track the most sophisticated agency we encounter—that of other normal humans. FREE ACTION is thus a concept in folk psychology, which serves normative purposes for us.

4. Phenomenology

The conceptual question can be addressed from either of two angles: (a) the control required for responsibility, and (b) our phenomenology of agency. Debates about the compatibility and existence questions focus on (a), whereas I additionally focus on the neglected angle of (b). This angle has been neglected partly because it is not always clear what the relevant phenomenology is, or whether we can reliably introspect it in a way relevant to the conceptual question. It is also unclear whether reliable introspection could justify certain answers to the conceptual question. Finally, even if consideration of phenomenology addresses aspects of the conceptual question, it may not address aspects related to responsibility, and philosophers primarily want to understand the conditions of responsibility. Nevertheless, phenomenology may be a more basic source of many people’s understanding of free will, and of their concern about whether we have it. I argue that to the extent that phenomenology helps to answer the conceptual question and fix the reference of FREE ACTION, it supports a positive answer to the existence question.