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Freedom and Temporal Perspective

Domenico Mancuso

Abstract

The contemporary debate on free will is essentially constructed around an opposition between determinism and indeterminism, and the possibility of reconciling either ontology with freedom itself. The present paper is an attempt at circumventing this ontological *aut-aut* by introducing the principle that the observer's temporal perspective is relevant to whether an action is regarded as free, and by arguing that the two rival views share the same perspective. I then proceed to expound the theoretical advantages of this time-sensitive approach, which allows a fresh look on specific points of the free will debate that have long reached a deadlock, as well as some of its most significant shortcomings. Dealing with the latter, I sketch out an original conception of free agency which I describe as *rational creation*, and briefly underscore some aspects of this view that would deserve further investigation.

It is typical of philosophical antinomies to always allow for more than two ways out. Besides subscribing to either alternative, other strategies may be attempted for explaining how two seemingly incompatible theories turn out to be equally unacceptable (or equally plausible).

One such strategy consists of considering the underlying premises of the conflicting accounts. An opposition of two theses – just like an argument between two people – could not even be set up without a 'common ground' of implicit assumptions: insofar as this dialectical basis is missing, the two views are simply not mutually intelligible. When the dispute results in an antinomy, it may be conjectured that the set of shared presuppositions is particularly broad; by questioning some of these presuppositions, we might be able to bring out a deeper antithesis between the two horns of the dilemma, taken together, and a radically different third option, and thus possibly get out of the deadlock.

In the case of free will, the antinomy is well known and concerns determinism and indeterminism: both theories seem patently inadequate for representing our intuitions about metaphysical freedom. Yet, what could we take to be the common premises? One natural hypothesis, which has occasionally been explored,[1] is that *causation* is the notion to be dispensed with: even though indeterminism stresses that voluntary acts (or some of them) have *no causes*, by doing so it implicitly reiterates the *need* for a cause, and hence, the validity of the underlying explanatory model.

In these pages, I will develop another tentative response, which has almost no literature in the age-old debate on free will: the idea that the kinship between the rival theories might reside in the *temporal perspective* we assume when judging a voluntary action. Although such perspective is usually left unexpressed, it is quite plain that both determinists and indeterminists implicitly place themselves *after* the action has taken place – or else, which is the same, they take a 'bird's-eye' view over the whole timeline. Therefore, it is reasonable to ask how the picture would change if we adopted a different temporal standpoint.

The first two sections of the paper will be devoted to laying out the basic antinomy of free will and critically examining some proposals for an intermediate approach between the two competing theories. In sections 3 and 4 I shall illustrate the idea of a dual temporal perspective, discuss its theoretical significance and the reasons for introducing it, and assess how it affects the concept of *explanation* of a voluntary act. Section 5 will present what is perhaps the most conspicuous philosophical advantage of the double viewpoint, namely, the possibility of accounting for a number of *prima facie* shortcomings of libertarianism; by contrast, the two following sections will deal with some theoretical difficulties that are peculiar to my approach.

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1. The fundamental antinomy

The problem of free will has a clear starting point, which could be described as a sort of inner perception or intellectual insight: the feeling, hazy yet unquestionable, that I have an active capacity of directing my own behaviour, other than by just applying a pre-established set of rules, and thus of modifying the course of events through my will; that I can always (somehow mysteriously) take a leap from deliberation into action; shortly, that I possess that intangible *quid* which philosophers have called *liberum arbitrium* or 'metaphysical freedom'.

This unspoken assumption, and the conviction that it reflects something deep and important about the human condition, is at the root of the whole debate on the concept of free will in the Western tradition, from Greek Stoicism to the present day: were it not so, it would be hard to explain how a notion so riddled with logical difficulties can still subsist and be a vital source of philosophical discussion.

Few classical authors have openly stated this pre-theoretic intuition. One remarkable example is Descartes: "we have such close awareness" he writes in the *Principles* "of the freedom and indifference which is in us, that there is nothing we can grasp more evidently or more perfectly;"[2] similar (and more elaborate) appeals to introspective evidence may be found elsewhere in his writings.[3] Other references to the inner perception of freedom appear in Thomas Aquinas, Reid, Hegel[4] and – most systematically – Maine de Biran, who explicitly compared it to a Cartesian *cogito*.[5]

Many centuries earlier, the same idea had found a poetic outlet in Lucretius' *De rerum natura*:

> Iamne vides igitur, quamquam vis extera multos
> pellat et invitos cogat procedere saepe
> praecipitesque rapi, tamen esse in pectore nostro
> quiddam quod contra pugnare obstareque possit?[6]

Lucretius brings to light a significant feature of the libertarian intuition, namely, its subtle and elusive character: there is 'something' we feel in ourselves, which we cannot easily identify, but which is certainly not reducible to the necessary order of nature.

Perhaps, rather than as a definite concept, it would be more correct to think of freedom of the will as a sort of tacit requirement, arising from our subjective experience as voluntary agents; the task of philosophy is precisely to give a coherent formalization to this wordless intuition. The 'free will problem' is therefore twofold: on the one hand, there is the ontological question concerning the existence of metaphysical liberty; at the same time, we need to identify the exact object of the enquiry, i.e. 'whatever it is that we call freedom', in such a way that the formal notion be sufficiently faithful to the inner evidence.

It is clear that the whole plan, so conceived, has something inherently circular. This is to some extent inevitable, given the deeply subjective character of the original insight, which does not allow an outward description even in general lines (or rather: any such description would already belong to the stage of formalization). Yet, slippery as it is, the intuition has at least a couple of features upon which there is widespread consensus, especially among present-day writers.

The first is *causal openness*: the idea of a voluntary action is naturally entwined with the assumption that the outcome is, so to speak, a blank page; any word that has been written ahead is an obvious constraint on the agent's will.

This requisite is frequently expressed in terms of *alternative possibilities* – especially since the publication of Frankfurt's much-discussed 1969 essay. Such a wording is too narrow, as it commits to the thesis that possibilities exist prior to action, supposedly as discrete and denumerable options, and that freedom boils down to choosing among these pre-ordained paths. This is certainly the most common form of libertarianism,

but not the only one: more radical views are possible − and have been proposed[7] − highlighting the *creative* role of the human will, which is not captured by the notion of choice; these approaches, amongst other things, avert part of the difficulties of standard indeterminism, which I will expound later. It is preferable, therefore, to adopt a neutral concept such as that of causal openness, in order to encompass all views concerning the status of possibilities.

The other condition associated with the intuition of freedom is the subject's *authorship* of his own volitions[8] – and consequently of his acts. Again, there is an alternative notion (agent *control*) which is at least just as common in the current debate, and yet needlessly restrictive, for the same reasons as above: underscoring the selective function of the agent amounts to depicting him as a passive administrator of inputs coming from the outside. Conversely, the idea that the subject is the *author* (or the *source, origin*, etc.) of his deeds, implies an all-round appreciation of every aspect of voluntary agency.

It is worth remarking that, although both requisites have only been systematically discussed in the last few decades, their genesis dates back to the very beginning of the debate about human freedom – more specifically, to Aristotle and his exegetes, such as Alexander of Aphrodisia. Alternative possibilities are overtly defended by Alexander as a *conditio sine qua non* for free agency;[9] as for authorship, it is mirrored both in the Aristotelian description of man as ἀρχὴ τῶν πράξεων and – with a different nuance - in the notion of ἐφ᾽ ἡμῖν ('up to us'), which is how Greek authors usually referred to freedom.[10] The former corresponds precisely to the modern concept of origin or source, whereas the latter emphasizes an idea of *dependence* of an action on the person who performs it.

The contemporary discussion on free will is polarized on the opposition between determinism and indeterminism. I will not venture into the *vexata quaestio* of how to define determinism; for the present purpose, it will suffice to characterize it in very

general terms, as the doctrine that regards any event to be necessitated by some previous state of affairs. In the case of voluntary agency, the relevant states of affairs will be the agent's *motives*, which may in turn be traced back to pre-existing conditions – psychological or external – and so on, in a continuous chain. As for indeterminism, it is simply the denial of determinism, *viz*. the thesis that the premises of a deliberation are not sufficient grounds for inferring its outcome.[11]

Although both theories are severely at odds with the intuitions about free agency, I will only give an overview of the problems concerning determinism, whereas I shall dwell in detail on indeterminism. The reason is that, on this occasion, I have no interest in criticizing the theories as such, but only in examining those elements of the free will debate which may be affected by a change in temporal perspective. Deterministic explanations clearly do not count among these, since they presuppose a static conception of time, a four-dimensional framework where the very notion of temporal perspective is meaningless, as no instant of the timeline is a legitimate vantage point – the only correct description of events being, so to speak, 'from above'. Conversely, an indeterministic approach is potentially sensitive to the viewer's standpoint: in fact, as we will see, changing the latter may considerably shift the balance when assessing the plausibility of the theory.

The conflict between determinism and causal openness is hardly denied even by compatibilists: most of these authors have sought ways of reconciling human liberty – or at least, some interpretation of it – with metaphysical necessity.[12] The reason is plain: however we choose to characterize determinism, it will inevitably involve the *uniqueness* of any event, given its premises; therefore, no room is left for alternative possibilities, unless their definition is trivialized to the brink of self-contradiction. Historically, this has been done by G.E. Moore (1966, §6) through the process known as 'conditional analysis', whereby statements implying a power or possibility are broken down as logical inferences: a sentence like 'I could have performed action A' (say, instead of B) translates as 'I would have done A *if* I had wanted to' (*ibid.*, pp.

103, 112). If the indeterministic challenge is iterated, by asking whether I *could* have made that choice, Moore's response − indeed, the only possible response – is to analyse the protasis just like the original sentence: I could have chosen to do A if I had chosen to make that choice, that is, if I had induced myself into it (*ibid.*, p. 114). It is easy to see that the strategy ultimately fails, as it gives rise to an infinite regress.

Things stand quite differently for the second requirement of freedom mentioned above, *viz*. authorship. Unlike causal openness, this is not generally acknowledged as a problem by compatibilists, on the grounds that my will is *always* a direct causal antecedent of my actions, even if it depends in turn on alien factors. A similar argument had been developed by the Stoics, who claimed that universal necessity does not rule out freedom of action, as long as the last impulse before acting rests within ourselves.[13]

The rationale behind this approach is transparent: 'zooming in' on the last link of the causal chain that leads up to a voluntary act − i.e. the relation between the will and the act itself − and ignoring all the previous steps, since it is precisely in the final link that the subject has an active role. Yet, why should we accept a perspective that magnifies a single detail of the picture and views it out of context?

Clearly, the whole move is little more than a rhetorical device; or else, to put it semantically, a 'minimalist' *ad hoc* definition of authorship. Not surprisingly, compatibilists are very keen on the lexical distinction between *proximal* and *ultimate* control – respectively, the 'good guy' and the 'bad guy'. It is significant that no such duplication of meaning is easily at hand for any of the other notions corresponding to the second requisite of freedom: 'authorship', 'origin' and 'source' all suggest the idea of the first link in a chain, and can hardly be adjusted to a 'proximal' reading.

The least that can be said, therefore, is that the minimalist interpretation strains the meaning of the insight which is at the root of the authorship condition: the distinctive

quality of free agency, drawn from subjective experience, would boil down to the causal relation between willing and acting! Of course, as I have observed, the libertarian intuition is elusive and its content largely discretionary; still, one requirement that such content should certainly meet is to be distinctive of human agency, as opposed to other forms of interaction with the outer world. As the adversaries of Stoicism pertinently stressed, in a deterministic world "our part will be like that of animals and babies" (Plotinus, *Enneads* III, 1.7, 12-18), which are prompted to action by their own instinct and yet may not be called free, unless we are ready to grant that title to whatever "is brought about by something in accordance with its own nature" (Alexander of Aphrodisia, *On Fate*, §38).

One underlying motivation for identifying free will and indeterminism could be the remark that freedom is essentially a negative concept, designating an absence of constraints. Ideally, then, if all possible constraints were lifted (including all reasons that incline the will), we would be left with freedom in its purest form: a gratuitous act, performed for its own sake, outside any causal or teleological framework.

This inference at infinity may be intuitively plausible, but it is far from being logically rigorous. In fact, several authors have pointed at an obvious contradiction involved in the boundary case of perfect liberty: as Leibniz wrote in the *Theodicy* (§45, p. 148), "even supposing one takes a certain course out of caprice, to demonstrate one's freedom, the pleasure or advantage one thinks to find in this conceit is one of the reasons tending towards it". A similar reflection appears in Hume's *Treatise*: "whatever capricious and irregular actions we may perform; as the desire of showing our liberty is the sole motive of our actions; we can never free ourselves from the bonds of necessity."[14]

The objection – considered in its logical structure – is an offshoot of the notorious refutation of scepticism stating that the denial of every truth is itself set forth as a truth. Though dialectically a clever move, the hidden-reason argument is in turn quite

vulnerable as a systematic assertion. The situation evoked by Leibniz and Hume is a very peculiar one, where a person deliberately sets out to act without a logic: even granting that in such cases a paradox truly arises, this does not *per se* rule out the possibility of irrational behaviour occurring in different circumstances.

Even though the thesis that an indifferent will is logically contradictory seems to be untenable in general terms, a slightly weaker claim – namely, that such a will is incompatible with action – has been historically defended with remarkable success. The basic idea is that, in the unlikely event of a forking path with two genuinely equivalent alternatives, we would be utterly incapable of deciding in either direction, until some new element breaks the balance. The most famous graphic depiction of the argument is the image of Buridan's ass, starving to death rather than choosing between two identical sheaves of hay; the thesis, however, was known long before,[15] and had even inspired a tercet of Dante's *Paradise*:

> Intra due cibi, distanti e moventi
> d'un modo, prima si morria di fame,
> che liber'omo l'un recasse ai denti.[16]

A little attention is sufficient to realize that Buridan's anecdote is less of a real argument than a straight metaphysical axiom (no acting without reasons), dressed up in an intriguing narrative clothing. Far from *proving* anything against indeterminism, it can at best help *illustrating* a deterministic perspective which is assumed *a priori*.

Interestingly enough, the impression of circularity fades away if we analyse the contrapositive of Buridan's claim: supposing a deliberation *is* eventually made, the options on the table *could not* be entirely equivalent. Let us consider the standard example of a crossroads: I am standing in front of path A and path B, which are identical under every respect, and I finally pick, say, path B. Here, the very existence of the final act of will is sufficient to establish an asymmetry between A and B, which

may not be overlooked: since the deliberative process is explained *ex post*, all facts of the matter must be taken into account, the first of which is evidently the outcome of such process.[17]

The argument may not sound entirely convincing: after all, what I have done is just replacing an implication with a logically equivalent one. May this alone turn a question-begging inference into a consistent one? I will come back to this point in the second part of the paper.

A different critical approach to indeterminism consists of questioning its *significance* for free will: *even if* there existed such a thing as complete indifference, would it count as a genuine instance of freedom? Let us get back to our crossroads: I was forced to make up my mind and settled on path B, without any special reason for doing so. Could I rightfully assert that my choice was *free*? Intuitively, it seems I could not; a decision made in such circumstances would appear nothing different from a purely aleatory event, and I could hardly regard it as 'my own' – not more than I could lay the same claim on the result of a coin toss, just because it was my hand that flipped it in the air.

This *prima facie* impression can be immediately explained if we consider the two requirements connected to the intuition of freedom: in the case of a motiveless choice, the key issue is the agent's authorship of his own act (or even of his decisive volition). This is clearly missing if Buridan's thesis is true: given that perfect indifference can only produce a paralysis of the will, an external element has to be introduced in order to escape the deadlock. This *Deus ex machina* can be, literally, an actual deified entity, such as the Romans' *Fortuna*, or it can take the elusive shape of an impersonal concept – chance, contingency, or any other linguistic contrivance that may give the appearance of an ontological solidity – albeit minimal – to what is in fact a pure absence of causes.

On the other hand, if no such device is used – if we reject Buridan, and allow that action can truly stem from indifference – we fare no better in terms of the authorship condition. Borrowing Gide's enthusiastic words (2007, p. 10; 1925, p. 21), a motiveless act would really be an act 'without a master', but this does not amount to calling it *free*, for authorship evidently requires that a free decision *do* have a master, and that it be precisely the agent!

This sort of objection – that an indifferent will is essentially passive – is probably the most significant stumbling block for indeterminism. Historically, it has been raised on several occasions by modern and contemporary authors, under slightly different perspectives. Thus, Priestley (1777, p.70) argued that, even if it were possible, action without a reason "cannot be anything but a mere *random decision*, which may be good or bad, favourable or unfavourable, like the chance of a die". Similarly, Hegel (2008, *Introduction*, §15, *addition*, xxxix) stressed the idea that the subject in such circumstances is merely *acted upon*: "In caprice it is involved that the content is not formed by the nature of my will, but by contingency. I am dependent upon this content". William Hamilton (2001, vol. II, p. 624) put indifference on a par with determinism, judging them equally debasing "morally and rationally", while Popper (1973, p. 277) went so far as to say that – with respect to our subjective experience of free agency – libertarianism "satisfies even less" than its counterpart.

Freedom of indifference may also be challenged on phenomenological grounds: even if a motiveless choice were rationally conceivable, it would hardly fit in with the subjective experience of voluntary agency, for at least two important reasons.

To begin with, the behaviour we display in front of the most difficult choices testifies to a sort of 'self-constraint' to determinism: rather than escaping from necessity, we seem to be constantly seeking for it. Whenever a deliberation does not have an obvious outcome, because none of the options is *prima facie* preferable, we do our best to investigate and lay out all their respective pros and cons, until the balance is

visibly leaning on one side. And if we do make a decision before such process is over, we are left with the feeling of having been hasty and impulsive, forcing a conclusion which was not yet mature instead of scrutinizing every facet of the problem.

The second reason is that, despite appearances, cases of perfect indifference are irrelevant to the debate on freedom of the will. The true paradigm of free choice is not a fork with two identical paths, but one where the options have nothing in common: they are (or seem to be) *completely heterogeneous*, and hence offer no grounds for comparison. A student choosing between a degree in physics and one in chemistry will have plenty of rational arguments on both sides to rely on; conversely, if the alternative is between physics and the Academy of Fine Arts, the benefits of either choice will be too diverse to be weighed up against each other. As we all know from real-life experiences, this kind of choice may become dramatic when it concerns important issues (and sometimes even when it does not): whichever path we take, we will never be able to evaluate precisely what we have left behind us.

2. Searching for a compromise

All the arguments I have sketched so far lead to an obvious conclusion, which is shared by several contemporary authors,[18] and which I cannot vindicate extensively here: the philosophical enquiry on free will (especially as it has been laid out in the last century) is caught in a deadlock. Even though the debate springs from a solid subjective intuition, it ends up drifting between the Scylla of determinism and the Charybdis of indeterminism: two diametrically opposed models that exhaust – so it seems – the whole spectrum of possible theoretical attitudes, and neither of which provides an appropriate formal translation of the inner perception of freedom.

As it often happens in front of an antinomy, there has been a number of attempts at solving the dilemma by somehow combining the conflicting theories: this is invariably done by construing the relationship between motives and actions through some weak notion of causality.

Historically, the most notable instance of this approach is due to Leibniz. Although he obviously could not address present-day theories of freedom, he did aspire to finding a compromise between the possibility of an indifferent will and the thesis that motives necessitate human actions: the former was admitted, with some provisoes, by Descartes, while the latter had a strong advocate in Spinoza. Leibniz consistently upheld the idea that reasons 'incline without necessitating': the formula is spelt out repeatedly in his works,[19] from the early writings up to the *Theodicy* where it surfaces on countless occasions.[20]

A contemporary translation of Leibniz's view is the theory (or rather, the set of theories) known as *probabilistic causation*. The key contention is that causes *raise the probability* of their effects (instead of squarely bringing them about); after Reichenbach's 1956 pioneer work, full quantitative models built on this principle were developed between the 60's and the early 70's by I.J. Good, Patrick Suppes and Wesley Salmon.[21]

Theories based on probability, rather than on mere inclination, are more ambitious as they aim at precisely quantifying the influence of causes on their purported effects. Nonetheless, I believe both approaches may be refuted by a straight question: is weak causation compatible with the hypothesis that the less likely outcome eventually occurs? To put it differently: is it legitimate to surmise that I choose one course of action despite having reasons that incline me towards another? If it is not, then my reasons are *de facto* necessitating; otherwise, the alleged motivations turn out to be ineffective, and therefore nothing distinguishes my choice from an indifferent one. This is exactly the case with probabilistic explanations: no matter how high a percentage I attach to A (as opposed to B), there will still be nothing that discriminates the two events from the standpoint of empirical justification.

Leibniz's solution, on the other hand, follows the first route. As he often reiterated, inclining reasons never fail to hit their target: it is *certain*, albeit not *necessary*, that

the preferred action will be performed.[22] Evidently, the most difficult challenge was to argue that some leeway does exist between certainty and necessity − which Leibniz ultimately attempted to do by appealing to a principle of moral perfection.

Weak causal theories of agency are also entertained by some present-day libertarians, with the explicit purpose of overcoming the antinomy of free will. These theories are more complex than the ones based on inclination or probability, since they break down deliberation into different stages, which makes it possible to 'distribute' over time the two components − deterministic and indeterministic − of a voluntary act, instead of simply superposing them. This is generally done by locating the chancy element of a decision in its premises, i.e. in the random 'coming to mind' of motivations which are later rationally processed, although there are authors who prefer to shift the indeterminacy after the elaboration of reasons.[23]

Both these strategies hinge on the questionable belief that the requisites of freedom may be somehow 'hoarded up': since determination by reasons carries agent control and chance carries causal openness, perhaps a combination of the two will result in both conditions obtaining together.

This approach has two flaws. The first is in the assumptions: while libertarianism does guarantee openness, compatibilism may hardly be credited with genuine (i.e. ultimate) authorship. Moreover, even if the assumptions were correct, it must be remarked that the requirements of freedom are *mutually exclusive*: each of them is fulfilled exactly *insofar* as the other fails to hold. To the extent to which an act is determined by its (mental) antecedents, it is truly an act of the subject, but it must be viewed as causally closed; to the extent to which it is undetermined, it is open but may not be ascribed to the agent. Any attempt at conflating the two properties is simply an 'optical illusion', stemming from a failure to discern the deterministic and the indeterministic component in a deliberation − a failure which is all the less justifiable when such components have been explicitly allocated to different temporal stages.

All forms of compromise introduced so far may be described as 'quantitative': a motive is a cause that *partially* determines an act, hence a deliberation has two distinct components − a deterministic one and a random one − which may be simultaneous or consecutive, measurable or not.

An alternative route consists of construing motives as *qualitatively* different from causes: on one hand, they should explain *completely* (and not partially) why someone behaved in a certain way; on the other hand, the explanation should not have a causal nature. *Intentionalist*[24] theories of action attempt to convert these two negative tenets into a positive model, by resorting to notions such as intentions, reasons, motivations, or purposes, which are interpreted in different ways but invariably assumed to constitute a self-standing explanatory framework, irreducible to the causal one.

Although I shall obviously not embark here in a discussion of intentionalist theories − no matter how sketchy − I believe one general feature of these views is worth mentioning: however reasons are conceived (pragmatic ends, moral principles, and so on), they must necessarily be *plural*[25] if they are to remain distinct from deterministic causes. Supposing I perform action A, and that I retrospectively find a good reason for it, I must presume that I could have similarly justified at least some alternative actions B, C, etc.: were it not so, the reason for A would operate exactly like a necessary cause, as no other conclusion would be compatible with it.

On the other hand, if plurality is warranted, we are left with a set of actions that are equally justifiable *a posteriori*: how should we account for the fact that one of them has obtained instead of another? Once more, it seems that the alternative to determinism is pure chance, with no margin for intermediate options.

In the pages that follow I shall examine one possible way out of the deadlock, namely, the explicit introduction of tenses in the description of voluntary agency.

3. The temporal perspective

Despite all the ink that has been spilled on the problem of freedom, very few writers – ancient or modern – have paid any attention to the importance of the temporal dimension. Evidently, I am not referring here to the trivial fact that a voluntary action unfolds in time, nor to the undisputed claim that any such action may only be aimed at the future, since the past is unalterable; what is generally overlooked is rather the temporal nature of the *discourse* on liberty. A philosopher illustrating and assessing an allegedly free act takes a standpoint with respect to it: he ideally places himself either *before* or *after* the event has taken place.

My contention will be that such a perspective might be relevant to the analysis of the voluntary act, more specifically, that the very same act might turn out to be genuinely undetermined from an *ante factum* point of view, and genuinely determined if considered *post factum*. In terms of *reasons* for acting, this approach amounts to regarding them as a peculiar kind of causes which may only be conceived retrospectively.

As we will see, the dual temporal framework provides an escape from the fundamental antinomy of free will. At the same time, it brings about a new kind of paradox which may not be easily defused.

An occasional hint to a double perspective associated to free will may be found in a passage by Fichte (1975, p. 39), where the acting and the reflecting self are clearly separated: I may act freely, but as long as I become aware of my act, I turn it into a product. Similarly, Gentile (1922, p. 256; 1920, p. 219) declares: "The thinking (*il pensare*) is activity, and what is thought (*il pensato*) is a product of the activity, that is, a thing"; only the former deserves the name of freedom.

The significance of the temporal standpoint is pervasive in the third part of Bergson's *Time and Free Will*, although it is rarely the object of an overt statement.[26] The tacit

assumption becomes an explicit thesis in Vladimir Jankélévitch, who was deeply influenced by Bergson: "there is no free act" he writes in *Le sérieux de l'intention* "about which we may not retrospectively claim that we could have predicted it."[27]

Jankélévitch's analysis is more extensive and penetrating than his predecessors'. Bergson, as well as Fichte and Gentile, construes the opposition of perspectives asymmetrically, annexing the action in progress (and the related libertarian intuition) to the point of view of the past, which is consequently designated as the *locus* of free will.[28] Jankélévitch sets out with the same approach, but eventually puts the past on a par with the future: freedom before the act, he argues, is simply causal openness, which by itself leads to the paralysis of Buridan's ass. On the other hand, when we transcend such openness and make a definite choice, the act ceases to be free, and becomes engraved into a changeless *fuisse*. Thus, past and future freedom are equally deceptive, whereas freedom in progress is real but intangible:

> Since its *pre-taste* is an illusion and its *after-taste* is a mistake, will freedom at least have a *taste* on the instant, and in the present? Alas! It is exactly "during" a decision, and in the present, that freedom is perhaps at its most unseizable.[29]

Leaving aside such interpretive differences, it is evident that, for the authors quoted above – and very few others – a judgment on the degree of freedom of an act is sensitive on the temporal standpoint of the judge. The vast majority of philosophers follow a different route, and describe voluntary acts from a neutral perspective, without identifying with any temporal agent, or else, as it were, 'from above', overlooking all events at once.

On the face of it, the two approaches are equivalent; yet, I believe the choice of a neutral stance entails *ipso facto*, and despite contrary intentions, a precise temporal standpoint, *viz.* a posterior one: seeing an event 'from outside' requires a separation

from the object of the analysis, which can only be achieved if the event in question has come to an end.

One could still argue, of course, that such an inference descends in turn from a theoretical bias, as it seems to hinge on the unstated presupposition that there has to be *someone* describing the events, i.e. on a primacy of the first-person perspective. Besides, the subject and the object of such description are assumed to be the same person: *I* must be the judge of my own deeds, which is why temporal discontinuity is essential – one may only disown an action, and regard it as alien from his present self, once it has finally receded into the past.

I shall make no attempt here at denying such contentions, nor will I venture into showing that a first-person bias has any theoretical advantage over a third-person one (although I believe it does). What is truly important, in this context, is that it has an *explanatory* advantage: it gives a plausible justification for the antinomy involving libertarianism and compatibilism. The root of the contradiction would lie in the false assumption that the two models are diametrically opposed; in fact, they share an important attribute, which is precisely the *post factum* viewpoint. Both theories typically describe voluntary actions in the past tense, through sentences like "A *has done* X because of such and such reasons" (or else "without any reason"), "A *could* (or *could not*) have done Y instead of X", and so on. An objective approach would fail to underscore this crucial analogy between determinism and indeterminism: all attention would be drawn on the one thesis that keeps them apart – namely, the existence of alternative courses of action – thus endorsing the false impression of a genuine and all-round opposition.

Furthermore, it is important to stress that the common *post factum* approach is not neutral: it is peculiar to determinism. This may be argued for analytically, in the form of a double implication.

On one hand, a deterministic account of an event predicates the existence of a causal relation between the event itself and some alleged premises; since no causal relation may be established if one of its terms fails to have a content, the presumed effect – here, the voluntary act – must already have come into being.

Conversely, let us suppose that a deliberative process is explained *a posteriori*. As I remarked while assessing freedom of indifference, the presence of a final outcome provides additional information which may not be neglected, for it results in an asymmetry between the actual sequence of events and any alternative scenario. Thus, the retrospective view is not compatible with a theory that treats possible actions as equivalent, whereas it is appropriate for one that singles out a specific path, as determinism does.[30]

The first inference (determinism entails a *post factum* view) ensures that a given temporal perspective is the natural setting for a particular metaphysical thesis. The reverse implication takes one step further, showing that, when the rival thesis borrows the same perspective, it does so inappropriately, and somehow contradicts itself.

The incongruous temporal framework underlying the indeterministic model might help explaining its numerous fallacies. Perhaps, a theory that purports to be the mirror image of determinism should oppose – as far as possible – its implicit presuppositions as well as its explicit tenets.

An indirect endorsement for this claim comes from the psychological experience of freedom in act. It is well known that libertarianism has the ambition of formalizing such experience as faithfully as possible; therefore, if some aspects of it may not be rendered in a *post factum* perspective, the formal model will have to abandon such perspective.

As it happens, this problem arises with a distinctive feature of free agency which I have previously labelled as 'causal openness': that is, the feeling that I can truly shape my future, as a sculptor moulds a statue out of nothing, and that such a future literally *does not exist* before I bring it about. A similar feeling may apply to some extent to events which do not depend on my will: if I am watching a football match, the interest I take in it comes largely from not knowing how it will develop. Were the match recorded, and the result known, the tension of the game would vanish, and the subjective experience would be completely altered. Likewise, if a past action of mine – for example, a difficult decision – were replayed in front of my eyes, the witnessed scene would be different from the original experience under one crucial respect – it would not be *free*; every stage of the process may well be the same, but none has the *openness* which characterized it in the first instance. Once a path has been traced, and designated as the 'true' course of events, any perception of openness is irreparably lost, and can no longer be retrieved.

The association between a double temporal stance and a double ontology (deterministic and indeterministic) may be interpreted as part of a wider correspondence between the same ontologies and two perspectives on the *agent* – an internal and an external one.

As we have seen, a causal explanation requires a retrospective view (or a view 'from above', which is equivalent). Yet, the latter constitutes an *outsider's* standpoint, for it implies a separation from both terms – the accomplished act and its premises.

On the other hand, the intuition of freedom demands that the act be related while *in progress*, in order to account for the subjective feeling of causal openness that goes with it; for the same reason, and even more cogently, the description has to adopt the outlook of the subject himself: it has to be given *from the inside*.

Even in this wider form, the double perspective on agency has rarely been explored by contemporary philosophers. Once again, a significant exception is Bergson: the dichotomy he sets up between the accomplished act and the act in progress is based precisely on the fact that the former is perceived from the outside, through the spatialized time of mathematics, whereas the latter unfolds in the time of consciousness or *durée réelle,* which is continuous and non-measurable.

Besides Bergson, a passing reference may be found in one of Schopenhauer's early writings,[31] where motivations are portrayed as a special kind of causes which we have direct knowledge of, for we can perceive them 'from within' as they operate. Schopenhauer's suggestion is spelt out more extensively in Collingwood's *The Idea of History* (1946, pp. 213-7, 282-301), where human actions are differentiated from natural events in virtue of their having an 'inside' as well as an 'outside' – the former being nothing else than "the thought in the mind of the person by whose agency the event came about" (*ibid,* pp. 214-5). Still, neither Schopenhauer nor Collingwood connects the inner-outer opposition with a difference in temporal perspective; in particular, Collingwood deems it possible to mentally re-enact past thought (one's own or someone else's), while at the same time evaluating it from a critical distance. In other words, we could assume at once – and *a posteriori* – the subjective and the objective standpoints.

Bergson, who regarded either standpoint as irreducible, had already ruled out the possibility of such a 'two-level' awareness:[32] it is not conceivable to identify with someone else's thought, and perceive it from a first-person perspective, without relinquishing one's own conscience and identity. "We shall be led by imperceptible steps to identify ourselves with the person we are dealing with, to pass through the same series of states, and thus to get back to the very moment at which the act is performed" (Bergson 1910, p. 189; 1959, p. 124). Describing an action 'from the inside' means, literally, *being* the person who makes it happen *when* he makes it happen: in Bergson's view, there is no third way between the spectator's and the

actor's point of view, and this is largely due to the fact that the latter is connected to a specific temporal perspective.

Finally, it should be mentioned that the inner-outer distinction has occasionally surfaced in present-day debates on free will; nevertheless, it is generally disjoined from any temporal outlook, just as in Collingwood,[33] or else it seems to privilege – if any – the external point of view.[34] Such is the case with Thomas Nagel, whose celebrated *The View from Nowhere* does recognize the independence and legitimacy of the subjective approach, but points at the objective one as the ideal limit that all reflection on freedom should tend to.

4. The origin of reasons

As I hinted earlier, the introduction of a dual time-perspective entails an interpretation of reasons for acting as *post factum* causes. On one hand, this contradicts the intentionalist thesis that motivations are qualitatively different from efficient causes: *within* the retrospective account of an action, the consequence relation between antecedents and their effects is exactly the same as in natural events. Nonetheless, reasons do differ from causes in one important respect, for they cannot even be identified before the act has been performed; they are, so to speak, irreducibly one-sided.

Given these premises, the question on the *nature* of reasons – which is at the heart of the causalist-intentionalist debate – is superseded by a different question regarding their *origin*. Granting that the motives behind an act apparently begin to exist with the act itself, should we assume that they are literally *created* by the posterior explanation? Or should we say that they were somehow 'concealed' – maybe necessarily so – and that the explanation merely brings them out? Equivalently: which is the correct perspective on a voluntary act? The *ante factum* view, with its feeling of contingency, or the *post factum* reconstruction with its corollary of causal connections?

This interpretive ambiguity is manifest in the words of two authors, very dissimilar in their intellectual background, and even more in their approach to the problem of freedom. In "The dilemma of determinism", William James (1979, p. 122) writes:

> Do not all the motives that assail us, all the futures that offer themselves to our choice, spring equally from the soil of the past; and would not either one of them, whether realized through chance or through necessity, the moment it was realized, seem to us to fit that past, and in the completest and most continuous manner to interdigitate with the phenomena already there?

Sixty-six years later, in "Actions, reasons, and causes", Donald Davidson (1980, p. 16) declares:

> What emerges, in the *ex post facto* atmosphere of explanation and justification, as *the* reason frequently was, to the agent at the time of action, one consideration among many, *a* reason.

The two passages seem to portray a similar scenario: any action looks contingent before it is performed; once it has obtained, it will be sustained by some necessitating motive. Still, a few clues clearly reveal our authors' conflicting theoretical options. Davidson points out that contingency is relative to the agent, whereas the privileged reason 'emerges', as if it had been simply hidden from our comprehension. James reverses the picture: a multitude of motivations 'spring' (objectively) from the past, while the one that we choose to follow merely 'seems to us to fit': its uniqueness is deceptive. On first impression, his reading is a distinctly indeterministic one, where the *ante factum* view is taken to convey the veracious image of reality, just as the *post factum* view on Davidson's account.

Knowledge of the context of both quotations, as well as of the general philosophical leanings of their authors, fully confirms the impression: Davidson was a causalist and

a determinist, whereas James did not simply assert the contingency of human actions, but extended it to natural events.

Such 'reductionist' accounts of the origin of reasons would ultimately bring us back to the fundamental antinomy. Moreover, they would make the dual temporal perspective superfluous: in one case, the inner necessity of a rational explanation appears as a posthumous forgery which is superimposed on the original contingency of an act; in the other, the same necessity is projected backwards onto the past and becomes the sole legitimate reading of events.

A possible 'third way', distinct from both James's and Davidson's approaches, is the thesis that reasons are simply not conceivable outside of a *post factum* framework. In other words, such framework is *constitutive* of explanation, just in the same sense as Kant's *a priori* forms are constitutive of knowledge: asking whether motivations may exist before action means indulging in a category mistake.

A model built along these lines has been proposed by G.H. von Wright (1984, pp. 142 ff.). His starting point was the alternative between creation and discovery of reasons, in a special case which he dubbed 'conversion', that is, the case of an agent disavowing the motives he previously averred for a past behaviour of his, and replacing them with different ones.

Von Wright rejects the two obvious solutions: the 'new' reasons may not have come into existence with the conversion, or else they could not have operated as reasons while the act was in progress; nor could they have been entirely concealed at that moment, for otherwise they would not have been reasons *for the agent*.

That said, he proceeds (*ibid.*, p. 144) to outline a different account for those actions involving – in his own words – a "complex motivational background":

> The complexity may not consist only in the fact that there are *many* reasons, or reasons *for* and *against*, or reasons of various *strength* […]. "Complexity" can also mean that the background is *opaque.* And here "opaque" does not signify merely that we cannot see through the web of motives but that the motives *are*, in fact, confused. The opaqueness is, so to speak, 'ontic' and not (only) 'epistemic'. When we then explain the action in the setting of its reasons (motives) we actually *create* an order where before there was none.

The reference to explanations 'creating an order' is particularly noteworthy, as it is strongly reminiscent of Kant's gnoseology. Yet, as he elaborates on his suggestion, von Wright ends up somehow diminishing its strength: the original action – he stresses – is described differently "not because new facts about its reasons have come to light but because facts already there are connected (arranged, articulated) in a new way" (*ibid.*, p. 144). Apparently, this fits very well with the Kantian paradigm: 'facts' are the *matter* of the subject's self-understanding, whereas 'connections' or 'relations' provide the *form*; further reflection, however, shows that the analogy is objectionable. The premises of an action, which von Wright refers to, are not brute matter, but 'facts', i.e. conceptual constructions with a certain degree of complexity; furthermore, these facts concern 'reasons', whose *relevance* to the action under scrutiny has been pre-emptively ascertained. So understood, the background may well be 'opaque', but it has a theoretical structure – a sketchy one at least – *prior* to any rational interpretation. Despite his efforts to walk on the watershed between the rival theories, von Wright seems to be falling on the side of determinism.

How, then, should the 'motivational background' be conceived in order for the posterior perspective to be truly constitutive of reasons? Evidently, we should assume that – unless an explanatory framework has already been introduced – there are quite literally no such things as reasons or premises leading to a voluntary act – or at any rate, nothing *distinct*: we can imagine the antecedents as making up a sort of *substratum* of future rational explanations, a magmatic, undifferentiated reality not yet quantized into discrete notions.

Such a view has the obvious merit of not being reducible to either libertarianism or compatibilism, and therefore of representing a true alternative to both – at least as far as the origin of reasons is concerned. At the same time, it presents two important shortcomings.

First, the ontological divide between the *prius* and the *posterius* of the same act implies the existence of two incompatible perspectives, with untranslatable languages (provided that the view preceding the event does have a language at all). By assuming the *post factum* approach to be constitutive of motives, and that these motives are not arbitrary constructions but have a bearing on the previous act, we essentially *stipulate* that the perspectives may be reconciled, but that *how* this happens is – by necessity – beyond our comprehension. (Again, one can't help drawing a parallel with the *Critique of Pure Reason* and its presuppositions about the *noumenon* and how it relates to the objects of our knowledge). The strategy has a sort of a question-begging feeling: the need to bridge the divide through a rational explanation is itself laid out as an explanation; the question is converted into a response.

Moreover, freedom of the will is naturally associated to the *ante factum* perspective: as mentioned above, this connection may be justified by resorting to the feeling of causal openness which is peculiar to that perspective, and which forms an essential part of the libertarian intuition. But then, if reasons for acting may only be meaningfully articulated *ex post*, the *substratum* solution amounts to confining freedom in an ideal space, a dimension which we may perhaps access as practical agents, but which we may not intelligibly talk about. In other words, the best we can hope for is a *negative* account of liberty, which may hardly be deemed satisfactory.

If the intermediate solution is to be rejected, all that remains seems to be the *real duality* of time perspectives, that is, the full acceptance of their separation: *before* acting, it is true that my will is undetermined and the outcome is open; *afterwards*, it

is true that the same outcome was (retrospectively) necessitated. Both accounts are legitimate, relative to their standpoints; neither is true *simpliciter*, in a timeless sense – for there is no such thing as timeless truth – nor can we devise a broader explanatory scheme where the conflicting views would find their place. A life event, it might be said, is like a page in a book: it has a *recto* and a *verso*, which are inseparable, but which can never be looked at together.

As I will show later, upholding real duality does not imply renouncing any rational justification for the validity of both approaches; it only means that such justification will in turn be framed *within* the boundaries of either account. However, before proceeding any further in the analysis of foundational issues, it will be worth illustrating one considerable advantage of the new model: namely, that it provides some convincing answers to anti-libertarian objections.

5. Indeterminism revisited

In the last part of section 1, I have shortly discussed the main theoretical problems brought about by the idea of freedom as perfect indifference. Looking at voluntary acts in a temporal perspective, some of these difficulties will be simply dissolved, while others will acquire a novel meaning and reveal some important mutual connections.

The thesis that a deliberately capricious action could always be subsequently rationalized belongs to the first group. I have already pointed out that such an argument – expounded, among others, by Leibniz and Hume – may hardly be endorsed in general terms, even from a timeless point of view. Once the temporal dimension is brought into the picture, the argument bears its own refutation: rational explanations are always *subsequent*, hence they do not invest the *ante factum* standpoint, where liberty belongs.

Another objection that may be defused is the argument derived from Buridan's ass. As we have seen, the original thesis can be rephrased in negative terms: if path B is ultimately preferred to path A, the two options could not be perfectly equivalent, since the outcome itself constitutes an asymmetry. While the original argument is a *petitio principii*, this version surprisingly seems to stand on solid ground – surprisingly, because the two theses are perfectly equivalent from a logical point of view.

The explanation lies once again in the choice of an *ex post* perspective: the asymmetry may only be inferred once the act has been performed. Thus, the negative implication is still question-begging, in a subtle and indirect way, as it gratuitously assumes a specific temporal standpoint.

Arguments of a phenomenological nature seemingly reinforce each other: the choices we regard as truly free are those where the options, far from being undistinguishable, are strongly heterogeneous; *furthermore*, in such situations, we strive to see things *sub specie necessitatis*. Not only does the experience of free agency fail to support indeterminism, but it almost appears to incline towards the rival theory (if anything as a normative ideal).

In a diachronic setting, the two objections turn out to be two sides of the same coin. Heterogeneity corresponds to the *ante factum* view, i.e. to the situation perceived by the agent at the beginning of the deliberative process; the reduction to determinism is the *post factum* interpretation, which is the goal of this process. It must be stressed that such reduction is not *logical*: the two perspectives are independent and complementary, and neither translates *by itself* into its counterpart (despite what the second objection seems to suggest). Rather, the distance between them may only be bridged by an agent's conscious *effort* to rationalize the scenario which is before him, by detecting – or rather: providing – a 'minimal intersection' among a set of possible choices which are *prima facie* incommensurable. The common ground typically takes the form of *contrastive reasons,*[35] justifying the choice of a given option *over* any

other one: each reason corresponds to a vantage point under which one particular preference appears to be necessitated.

Quite often, though, this first step is not sufficient, since different alternatives may be underpinned by different motives, and these could be in turn heterogeneous; a further comparison is then required through *second-order* reasons, that is, reasons for acting on a given first-order reason, rather than on another. Potentially, the process can be reiterated at each level, thus defining an infinite hierarchy of motivations.[36]

Let us imagine, for example, that an overweight man wakes up in the middle of the night with a craving for ice cream. His first impulse is to walk straight into the kitchen and open the freezer; the motive – quite trivially – is gluttony: call it $\mathbf{M}_a^1$ (motive of type *a* and order 1). Opposite to this stands the determination not to break the diet he began the day before ($\mathbf{M}_b^1$). The initial desire may be sustained by rational considerations ($\mathbf{M}_a^2$), such as the persuasion that the game is not worth the candle, based on the previous experience of ineffective diets, with plenty of sacrifices and disappointing results. If unchallenged, this argument wins out; but it could also be matched by competing second-level reasons ($\mathbf{M}_b^2$): for example, the diet has been suggested to the man by his doctor, because of a serious risk of heart disease. Or else, he has a glimpse of himself in the mirror and is suddenly disgusted by his physical aspect. Since the second-order motives are heterogeneous, the deadlock may only be broken by moving one step further up: thus, the man could finally pick an apple and go back to sleep not just because of the diet, but in order to strengthen his will-power, for he is aware that past efforts were unsuccessful precisely because of his weakness of will. In this case, the reason at work is a *third-order* one, which countervails $\mathbf{M}_a^2$ instead of acting directly on the basic volition.

When does the regress terminate? In general, it is plausible to think that this happens if all reasons of a given order lie on the same side, i.e. they are associated with a

single first-order desire. If that is the case, the deliberation is *closed*: the leading reasons trigger a chain effect that propagates step by step down the hierarchy, and ultimately entails that the basic desire they support must prevail, and dictate action. Conversely, so long as motives of the highest order give conflicting indications – or even if they converge in the same direction, but the agent expects to find an opposite motive – the deliberation is *open*, and whatever conclusion it has reached may be reversed at any moment.[37]

6. Bridging the gap

The infinite regress of reasons achieves one important result: it lays out the *ante factum* and *post factum* perspectives in a formally homogeneous way, by using two conceptual models which are closely related – the sole difference being the fact that the chain of reasons is finite in one case, and infinite in the other. Still, it is a major difference, for it leaves intact the logical gap between a causally open description of reality and a deterministic one: the two ends may have moved closer, but no contact has been established.

Therefore, the key question that needs to be addressed concerns the *transition* between the two states. Since experience shows that agents continuously move from open to closed deliberations, how can that be accounted for? How do we come to transcend the level of speculative reflection and take a leap into action? Put differently: how do we resolve to truncate the regress of reasons, which is potentially infinite, and assume a motivation of a finite order – or a set of motivations – as the leading ones?

To be sure, the process is not a necessary one; the passage from incommensurable reasons to a deterministic account may not be itself governed by deterministic laws. Were it so, we would fall back into a compatibilist view: the heterogeneity pertaining to the initial perspective would reduce to a confused subjective perception of a reality which is *not* heterogeneous (in von Wright's words, the opaqueness would be

'epistemic' and not 'ontic'). Moreover, the agent's deliberative effort would turn out to be an illusion.

Thus, the suggestion made above (that the regress comes to an end when all reasons of order *n* point in the same direction) does not entail that such an outcome is inevitable. Even when all higher-order reasons stand on the same side, and regardless of their strength, nothing prevents contrary motives from subsequently coming to the surface: at no stage may the hierarchy be declared to be unamendable.

On that account, the closing of the deliberation would seem to depend on a discretionary act of will rather than on the evidence of reasons: at a given moment, when the situation is sufficiently clear, the agent cuts the Gordian knot and identifies with a specific volition, although nothing – strictly speaking – compels him to do so.

This view was explicitly endorsed by Jankélévitch,[38] who was well aware of the problem of transition and favoured a radical solution, based on the primacy of the will. Even though a free deliberation, seen *ex ante*, produces a sequence of nested desires, he contended that the decisive volition must be of a different nature: not a *Velle Velle* where "the second will, which is willed by the first and depends on it, reduces to an ordinary activity"[39] but a "straight *Velle*, the will considered absolutely, purely and simply,"[40] "in the naïvety of an undivided decision."[41] Such primitive *Fiat*, which is self-supporting, implies at once all higher-level reasons:

> In the flashing instant of decision all coincides, omega and alfa, willing and being-able-to-will, willing and the innumerable instances of willing-to-will that are broken down and linked up by a meticulous, painstaking, and hair-splitting analysis.[42]

While a determinist would explain the transition by choosing reason over will, Jankélévitch takes exactly the opposite route. Still, his approach converges with determinism in denying the significance of the infinite regress: since the *crux* of the

deliberation lies in a simple act of will, the whole apparatus of higher-order volitions turns out to be redundant.

Jankélévitch (1980, pp. 55-7) openly acknowledged this consequence of his views: the hierarchy of motivations, he claimed, is only acceptable as a conceptual tool for expressing the boundless potentiality of the will; taken as a truthful model of rational deliberation, it is a sophistry which may well be compared to Zeno's paradoxes.

7. Circularity and regress

Once more – as in the case of the origin of reasons – two opposite interpretations must be rejected as incompatible with the hypothesis of a dual temporal perspective. But then, what could be a plausible answer to the riddle of transition?

Perhaps there must simply be no answer: in fact, if 'real duality' is taken seriously, the question should not even be posed. The basic tenet of the double perspective is precisely that each reading of events – the *ante factum* as well as the *post factum* one – is true *from its own premises*; outside of these, it is meaningless. Hence, no transition is possible: the premises (the temporal standpoint of the subject) are an absolute precondition of discourse, which may not be suspended at the moment of the *fiat*, nor can they fade into each other like the sequences of a film.

Furthermore, each of the two standpoints is so pervasive that it can incorporate the opposite view, and justify it *within* its own explanatory framework. Let us consider an open deliberation: as yet, there is no fact of the matter concerning its outcome; once a decision is reached – *whatever* decision – it will yield a posterior justification portraying it as pre-determined. Apparently, the *post factum* necessity depends on the contingency of the *ante factum* choice.

On the other hand, suppose the deliberation is over: there is only one possible choice, and it is the one which has been made; the volition that brought it about is itself

included in the deterministic account. From this point of view, the concrete act of will – with its presumed contingency – is subordinate to the necessity of the theoretical framework.

As it seems, there is a mutual entailment between *ante factum* and *post factum*, will and reason, acts and their explanations. The duplication of perspectives allows us to sidestep the problem of transition, only to substitute it with a new conundrum of *circularity*, which arises under both standpoints and concerns the compatibility of the two representations.

The circle in question has a clear affinity with the so-called *argument of logical connection*. According to the latter, while an effect stands in an empirical relation to its cause, a voluntary act entertains a double logical implication with the *intention* that accounts for it: it is a consequence of that intention, which in turn is only intelligible as an intention *for* that act.

The argument is due to Melden (1961, p. 153) and was later retrieved by von Wright (1971, pp. 94-5), who formulated the second entailment in slightly different terms, leaving aside the theoretical definition of intentions, and focusing rather on the role of subsequent acts in *attributing* such intentions to an agent. In fact, both Melden and von Wright were just rephrasing an idea outlined by Bergson in the third part of *Time and Free Will* (1910, p. 190; 1959, p. 125): writing about the connection between an action and its antecedents (a general term which may cover intentions, reasons, motivations, and the like), he remarked that the latter determine the former but may not warrant a prediction, since each antecedent acquires a value precisely in relation to the accomplished act.

Getting back to *ante factum* contingency and *post factum* necessity: can we break the circle by taking either perspective as primitive? Intuitively, it seems reasonable to

privilege contingency: if anything, the concrete act precedes the explanation from a chronological point of view; were it not performed, there would be no circle at all.

Let us suppose that the asymmetry is legitimate; still, retrospective necessity is not dismissed, and the act of will is affected by it. In what sense, then, shall we say that it was 'contingent'? Only in the sense of a 'second-order' contingency: by deliberating, an agent does not simply choose a particular course of events; he chooses the whole (deterministic) explanatory framework that goes with it. Had he accomplished a different action, it would have turned out to be just as necessary, for it would have been part of a different framework; it would have been, so to speak, an alternative *necessity*, as opposed to the alternative *possibilities* of traditional libertarianism. Using a spatial metaphor: if contingency is at the root of the explanatory circle, it can only come down to 'jumping' – since the beginning – into a different circle.

Of course, this is not the end of the story. Just as second-order contingency, a second-order necessity may easily be devised. Granted that I can perform action X or action Y, and that either choice would bring about a solid deterministic justification *ex post*, I will eventually end up performing *one* action only. Suppose it is X; then, from the deterministic perspective that follows, I could rightfully ask if there exists any explanation for my decision of 'jumping' into the circle of X rather than into the circle of Y. In other words: why did the set of motives necessitating X ultimately become *effective*, whereas those necessitating Y did not? If an answer exists – and nothing in principle seems to rule it out – then we are confronted with a second-level necessity.

Again, it might be observed that what holds for one alternative must hold for both: if I had happened to carry out action Y instead of X, a similar second-order justification should have existed *from within* the perspective of Y. The analogy establishes a contingency of third degree. Such contingency may be neutralized by a necessity of the same degree, underpinning the choice of X, and so on, indefinitely.

Far from offering an easy escape on the side of contingency, the problem of circularity gives rise to an infinite regress, distinct from the regress of higher-level reasons but somehow connected to it: saying that action X enjoys a necessity of order *n* means precisely claiming that the reasons of order *n* standing behind it are unchallenged; likewise, contingency of order *n* implies that competing reasons of the same degree exist for Y.

A corresponding regress, also involving ascending levels of necessity, may be developed from the initial circle without any reference to alternative choices, simply in terms of a dialectic of reason and will concerning the action that is concretely performed.

The starting point is once again the mutual implication between a voluntary act and its explanation. On one side, in order to be free, the former must be a *creative* act, an absolute beginning with no premises, since these would resolve into deterministic causes (as previously argued, compromise solutions are unfeasible). At the same time, it must be supported by a rational justification, otherwise it would be comparable to a random event.

Because the act has no antecedents, the explanation may only be retrospective: from an *ante factum* viewpoint, the object to be explained does not yet exist. But then, while the act proper will be necessitated, the same will not be true of the *position of reasons*: this is in turn a voluntary act, distinct from the original one and logically (if not chronologically) subsequent – which is why it is not covered by the deterministic framework it sets up. The posterior reconstruction will then appear capricious, in the sense of a second-level contingency, unless further reasons are posed – *reasons for reasons*, or second-order reasons. This separate interpretive act, which restores necessity, will again be outside its own explanatory range, thus instantiating a contingency of third order, and so on. It is not difficult to see that the process must be iterated at infinity.

8. Rational creation

The dual temporal perspective, which I have introduced in section 3, has made it possible to meet the challenge posed by some powerful anti-libertarian arguments. At the same time, it seems to fall short of an answer to those theoretical problems involving a transition from a *prius* to a *posterius*: specifically, the question on the *origin* of retrospective accounts of an act, and the one regarding the missing link between the open and the closed deliberation, i.e. the discontinuance of the infinite chain of reasons.

Such apparent failure descends from a misconception: if the idea of the double framework is interpreted correctly, questions about transition are simply illegitimate, because they entail the assumption of a superior vantage point encompassing both the initial and the final picture. Instead, we are faced with a different dilemma which is peculiar to the new approach, and concerns the circularity of the explanation *within* each framework; ultimately, the circle leads to an infinite regress.

Does this mean that the diachronic view has to be rejected as contradictory? I believe not. The regress of higher-order necessities, especially in its second formulation, need not be understood as a destructive paradox; in fact, it outlines a *positive* model of free agency which is worth a few more words. I shall call this model *rational creation*.

Let us consider a voluntary act which has just been accomplished. Assuming the whole ascending chain of posterior necessities described above, what image do we get of this act?

In a sense, it will have a strong explanatory structure: not only is it sustained by reasons, but these rest in turn on contrastive or second-order reasons, and so on, at infinity; in fact, it enjoys the fullest possible rational justification. At the same time, all these sets of reasons are created *by the act itself*, and come about together with it.

On this account, the act of will is *primitive*, for it admits of no antecedents, but not *arbitrary*, contrary to indeterministic agency – or to Jankélévitch's *fiat*. The latter is a pure volition overruling at once all motivations; conversely, an act of rational creation is *self-justifying*: it posits its own motivations. Furthermore, although they follow the act, these are not a belated smokescreen for a capricious behaviour, because they are connected to that behaviour by a circular implication, which may not be resolved into a unilateral dependence. The circle is a distinctive feature of the act of will as an absolute commencement, where the opposition between the act itself and the supporting reasons is no longer significant.

On the whole, the model I have sketched may seem a rather eccentric way of accounting for free will, and perhaps an unnecessarily complex one. Yet, at a closer look, it is not so distant from a 'mainstream' theory such as agent causation, with its conception of the agent as a *causa sui* – or, in Roderick Chisholm's words, as a *prime mover*:

> If we are responsible, and if what I have been trying to say is true, then we have a prerogative which some would attribute only to God: each of us, when we act, is a prime mover unmoved. In doing what we do, we cause certain events to happen, and nothing – or no one – causes us to cause those events to happen.[43]

Laid out in these terms (which is how it was framed until the Sixties), agent causation is a formally simpler model. Nevertheless, I believe my own proposal presents two considerable assets.

The first is that it underscores the creative role of the subject even more radically. Besides being the ultimate source of a concrete act (and therefore a source of *reality*), the will brings into existence all the modal attributes pertaining to that act: necessity of any order, as we have seen, but also, *a fortiori*, possibility and all compound modalities.

Secondly, rational creation resolves a theoretical weakness of agent-causal views: acts performed on these views appear to be just as arbitrary and unwarranted as under indeterminism. Later authors, and most notably O'Connor (2000, §6) have attempted to accommodate reasons for acting into the basic model (which has become considerably more complex as a result). Yet, unlike the reasons discussed above, these are supposed to exist prior to the action they support, and therefore they restrict the subject's freedom rather than enhancing it: however these reasons are construed, their presence results in a conflict between their own influence 'from below' and the causal power of the agent 'from above'. Typically, the outcome of the conflict is in favour of the latter, which intervenes as a cause at the very moment of acting, when all motivations have been laid on the table.

In particular, if reasons are interpreted in causal terms – which usually means in terms of probabilities – they will impinge on an agent's relative inclinations towards behaving in one way or another.[44] Yet, the agent will eventually 'rise above' inclinations, endorsing or disavowing them with the same legitimacy; hence reasons appear to be causally irrelevant. If we think of the conflicting motives as weights placed, one after another, on the pans of a scale, the will may always alter the balance by exerting an appropriate force on the chosen side.

On the other hand, even a non-causal interpretation of reasons (such as the *teleological* one upheld by Taylor in his early writings[45]) does not suffice to dissolve the conflict: despite being ontologically heterogeneous, reasons and the agent-cause must necessarily converge into a single action, and therefore somehow interact along the deliberative process.

One remarkable aspect of the parallel with agent causation is Chisholm's explicit reference to God; in fact, the image of the prime mover is plainly borrowed from Aristotle's representation of deity (and all subsequent medieval exegesis). Likewise, rational creation could easily be transposed on a theological level.

Leaving aside the many possible analogies (which would deserve a study of their own) between the arguments I have developed in this paper and the problems of divine agency, it will suffice to refer to the idea sketched above, *viz*. that of a primitive act where will and reason converge, and the very notions of necessity and arbitrariness lose their ordinary meaning. Such a description would seem particularly appropriate for a rational account of the creation of the universe (with its standards of good and evil), which may hardly be viewed as either capricious or outright necessitated. Indeed, the attempt to conjugate somehow reason and will, perfection and omnipotence, is one of the key themes in the long-standing theological debate (both inside and outside the Christian tradition) on the nature of God's creative activity.

The question is, rather, whether it is reasonable to apply a similar scheme to human agency, as I have been trying to do. In principle, I think the answer may be in the affirmative, provided our libertarian intuitions are interpreted in a sufficiently strong sense: that is to say, provided freedom is conceived in terms of *creation*, rather than in the reductive framework of a *choice* among pre-existing options. However, there are at least two specific difficulties that need to be dealt with.

The first is the fact that we supposedly elaborate an infinity of reasons with every voluntary act (equivalently: an infinity of desires, intentions, etc.), not simply in a hypothetical or counterfactual sense, but as positive thoughts. This seems inconsistent with the limited temporal duration which is associated to each of our actions.

I do not see this point as a major obstacle. Even without resorting to Zeno's paradoxes, and the difference between the infinite and the unlimited, an answer could be given by simply observing that positive thoughts need not be *explicit*; and certainly, an infinite sequence of implicit thoughts poses no significant theoretical problem.

The other shortcoming is more substantial: while the creative act of God is unique and extra-temporal, human freedom is generally construed as being *continuously* exerted in a temporal context. If a volition is a self-contained act that does not rest on any premise, then every volition represents a complete break with the past. As a result, an agent's personal history would appear to be scattered with discontinuities, where his life experiences would presumably be 'reset' at each time.[46]

The issue is too complex to be addressed here, but I will hint at what I believe to be a possible approach for a solution: the alleged break with the past could be seen as a comprehensive *reinterpretation* of the latter in the framework of *post factum* explanation, and perhaps at a higher level of awareness. A solution along these lines would address, *inter alia*, a seemingly counterintuitive feature of rational creation, *viz.* the fact that the *ex ante* view is empty: this could be amended by admitting that reasons or intentions are formulated prior to acting yet *do not* represent a constraint on the action itself, which is transcendent on those intentions and incorporates them into a new perspective constructed *ex nihilo*.

The paradigm case of such process is the conscious development of 'trains of thought': rather than as a continuous flux, it might be described as a growing sequence of discrete concepts, each encompassing the whole content of previous thought within its own horizon. Elaborating on this idea would require a philosophical analysis 'from the inside' of the processes that govern conscious thinking, and more particularly, of the ways through which such thinking may indefinitely transcend itself, taking at any moment unexpected turns, and yet preserving a subtle logical thread with its past. But this will have to be the subject for another enquiry.

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***Minerva - An Internet Journal of Philosophy 17* (2013): 121-170**

NOTES

[1] Cf. for example James 1979, p. 122 , or "The possibility of error", in Royce 1988, pp. 52-3.

[2] *Principia philosophiae*, I, XXXIX, CMS I, p. 206 (A.T. VIII-1, p. 20).

[3] See for instance *Principia*, I, XLI, CMS I, pp. 205-6 (A.T. VIII-1, p. 19); *Meditationes*, IV, CMS p. 240 (A.T. VII, p. 57).

[4] Cf. St. Augustine, *De animae quantitate*, XXXVI, 80; Reid 1846, §1, p. 604 and §6, p. 616; Hegel 2008, *Introduction*, §4 (*addition*), xxxi.

[5] See for example *Nouveaux essais d'anthropologie*, II, I, in Maine de Biran 1949, vol. XIV, p. 270 and p. 275.

[6] "Do you not therefore now see that, albeit a force outside pushes many men and constrains them often to go forward against their will and to be hurried headlong on, yet there is something in our breast, which can fight against it and withstand it?" (Lucretius 1947, *De rerum natura*, II 277-280)

[7] See for instance Oakeshott 1975, p. 43; Bergson, "Le possible et le réel", in Bergson 1959, pp. 1334, 1343, *et passim*.

[8] Throughout the paper, I will *not* use the term 'volition' in the technical sense of an intermediate step between deliberation and action, as is often done in recent literature; rather, I shall follow in the footsteps of modern philosophers such as Leibniz or Reid, and designate as 'volition' simply any kind of stimulus acting on the will, whether rational (such as *motivations* or *reasons*) or not (*desires*, *inclinations*, etc.).

[9] See for example Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, III, V, 1113b, 6-9, and Alexander's *On Fate*, §27, on the possibility of acting or not acting.

[10] For both expressions, see *Nicomachean Ethics* III, 1112a 15-19 and 31-34, 1113b 6-9; *Eudemian Ethics* II, 1223a, 2ff.

[11] Indeterminism and *libertarianism* are strongly connected, but conceptually distinct. The former is an ontological thesis about the universe, with no immediate implications for human freedom; libertarianism is the same view *plus* the claim that liberty exists and is inconsistent with determinism. An even wider discrepancy exists between *compatibilism* and determinism, since the former, strictly speaking, does *not* assert that determinism is true, but only that it is consistent with free will.

[12] A very explicit claim to this effect is laid out in *Leviathan*, II, XXI, Hobbes 1839-45, vol. III, pp. 197-8. See also Locke 1690, II, 21, 51-52.

[13] The Stoic thesis is known through secondary sources, such as Alexander of Aphrodisia. For more recent versions of the argument, see for example *Leviathan*, *cit.*, pp. 197-8, or Priestley 1777, p. 16.

[14] *Treatise* II, 3.2. See also Alexander of Aphrodisia, *On Fate*, §29; Schopenhauer 1999, p. 38 (Schopenhauer 1919, vol. IV, p. 43).

[15] The earliest literary reference that we possess is a passage from Aristotle's *De caelo* (Aristotle 1960, II, 13, 295b32-34), which proposes an example like Dante's (*infra*). The text was certainly known to Buridan, who commented on it in a manuscript.

[16] "Between two viands, distant and attractive in equal measure, a free man would die of hunger, before he would bring one of them to his teeth". (Alighieri 1952, *Paradise* IV, 1-3).

[17] An argument along these lines may be found in *Time and Free Will* (Bergson 1910, p. 178; Bergson 1959, p. 117).

[18] Cf. for example Melden 1961, p. 202; Popper 1973, p. 228; Chisholm 1982, pp. 24-8; van Inwagen 2002, p. 169.

[19] See for example *De necessitate et contingentia*, Leibniz 2004, p. 1449; *De libertate et gratia*, Leibniz 2004, p. 1456; *Discourse on Metaphysics*, article XIII (heading); *New Essays*, II, XXI, §13.

[20] Cf. *Theodicy*, Leibniz 1990, §43, p. 147; §45, p. 148; §46, pp. 148-9; §132, p. 203; §371, p. 347.

[21] Cf. Good (1961, 1962), Salmon (1965, p. 136, and 1971), Suppes 1970.

[22] See for example *De libertate a necessitate in eligendo*, Leibniz 2004, p. 1452; *New Essays*, II, XXI, §13; *Theodicy*, Leibniz 1990, §43, p. 147; letter to Arnauld, July 14th, 1686, in Leibniz 2003, p. 125 (Leibniz 1875-90, vol. II, p. 52).

[23] The latter approach has been exhaustively developed by Laura Ekstroem (2000, §4, esp. pp. 106 ff.); Robert Kane's theory of conflicting efforts of will (Kane 1996, chs. 7-10) may also be somehow classified under the same heading. 'Prior' indeterminism, which I think is more faithful to psychological experience, was suggested – ironically – by a compatibilist (Dennett 1984), and later articulated by Alfred Mele (1995, ch. 12.2; 2006, ch. 1.2); though a believer in free will, Mele is agnostic on its connection to determinism, and has elaborated a parallel compatibilist proposal (Mele 1995, chs. 9-10; 2006, ch. 7).

[24] 'Intentionalism' is an umbrella term which pays tribute to G.E.M. Anscombe's ground-breaking monograph, published in 1957; other significant contributions have come from Melden (1961), Kenny (1969) and von Wright (1971). The opposite view, whose leading figure is Donald Davidson, is named *causalism* and states that reasons may be cashed out in terms of causes.

[25] It is significant that Anscombe (1957, p. 75) and Davidson (1980, p. 16) agree on this particular point.

[26] A notable exception is the definition of freedom in Bergson 1910, pp. 219-20 (Bergson 1959, pp. 143-4).

[27] "… il n'est donc pas d'acte libre qu'on ne puisse se flatter rétrospectivement d'avoir pu prévoir." (Jankélévitch 1983, p. 53).

[28] This choice is never explicitly argued for, but it is consistent with an intuitive view of deliberation as a temporally extended process culminating in the intentional act – which is therefore contiguous with its past, but not with its future.

[29] "Puisque son *avant-goût* est une illusion et son *arrière-goût* une erreur, la liberté aura-t-elle au moins du *goût* sur le moment, et au présent ? Hélas ! c'est « pendant » la décision et au présent qu'elle est peut-être le plus insaisissable." (Jankélévitch 1980, p. 17). This view of freedom is laid out extensively in Jankélévitch 1980, pp. 13-8, and Jankélévitch 1983, pp. 52-4.

[30] The implication from an *ex post* perspective to determinism is more problematic than its converse. In principle, the same perspective could be consistent with an indeterministic model equipped with an explanation of the asymmetry mentioned above. One way of constructing such a model, which I have already explored, is through a notion of weak causality. Another strategy is to introduce *contrastive reasons* in order to break the balance among conflicting first-order reasons: as I will show later, this ultimately leads to a paradoxical conclusion.

[31] Cf. Schopenhauer 2007, pp. 53-4 and 170-1 (Schopenhauer 1919, vol. I, pp. 47-8 and 144-5).

[32] Cf. Bergson 1910, pp. 186-9 (Bergson 1959, pp. 122-4). Collingwood (1946) never cites *Time and Free Will*, but he describes a thesis similar to Bergson's (pp. 283-4) and then rejects it (pp. 289-302, esp. 297-8).

[33] An important exception, albeit not a very recent one, is provided by Campbell 1951, pp. 462-5.

[34] Contrary to this trend, Mario De Caro (2004, §5) uses an abductive argument from social sciences in order to defend the priority of the agential perspective in the explanation of human behaviour.

[35] Within the model I am about to describe, 'reasons' must be interpreted in the widest possible sense, so as to include motivations which are not completely rational. The infinite regress might as well be characterized, as it has been done, in terms of 'desires' or 'volitions'. I am personally inclined to refer to reasons or motivations, mainly – but not exclusively – because each lower-order reason may be supported by several *distinct* higher-order ones.

[36] The idea of a higher-order volition appears in an embryonic form in G.E. Moore (1966, pp. 113-4). By far, its fullest exposition is due to Harry Frankfurt, who devoted two detailed articles (1971, 1987) to describing this model and discussing some of its implications on free will. For an alternative analysis, see also Lehrer (2004).

[37] It might be noticed that the mere existence of motivations in the context of the open deliberation – regardless of their effectiveness − apparently contradicts my earlier claim that reasons may only be devised *a posteriori*; furthermore, the model of *rational creation* I am about to sketch will again obliterate prior reasons. How to account for these fluctuations? I think the best answer is that the double perspective must not be intended as an accomplished view on free agency, but rather as a strategy for overcoming a stalemate: as such, it involves some provisionary assumptions that may later be superseded. This is the case with *ante factum* reasons, which are admitted hypothetically

but will eventually be cast aside, as a consequence of further arguments brought about by the infinite regress I have just described. In turn, the no-prior-reason view is liable to be replaced by a more sophisticated approach (as outlined in the last two paragraphs of the paper).

[38] Cf. Jankélévitch 1980, pp. 54-9; Jankélévitch 1983, p. 57.

[39] "le second vouloir dépendant du premier, voulu par le premier, n'est plus qu'une activité quelconque" (Jankélévitch 1980, p. 58).

[40] "le *Velle* tout court, le vouloir considéré absolument, purement et simplement" (*ibid.*).

[41] "dans la naïveté d'une décision indivisible" (*ibid.*).

[42] "Dans l'instant-éclair de la décision coïncident l'oméga et l'alfa, le pouvoir-vouloir et le vouloir, le vouloir et les innombrables vouloir-vouloir dédoublés et redoublés par une dialectique analytique, scrupuleuse et pointilliste." (*ibid.*).

[43] Chisholm 1964, §11 (for a historical antecedent of the idea of man as a prime mover, see Pomponazzi 1957, book III, 6, 8). The excerpt gives a concise and exhaustive description of the main tenet of agent causation: a voluntary action has an antecedent, contrary to libertarian claims, but it is not an event in the mind of the subject, as compatibilists assert; it is *the subject himself*. The thesis is due to Thomas Reid (1846), and has been revived in the twentieth century by Chisholm and by Richard Taylor (1966), both of whom have subsequently recanted it; recent advocates include Timothy O'Connor (2000, 2005), Randolph Clarke (2003) and, outside the analytical *milieu*, Roberta De Monticelli (1998, 2009).

[44] Cf. Clarke 2003, pp. 135-7; O'Connor 2000, §§5.1 and 5.4; see also Chisholm 1964, §13.

[45] Cf. Taylor 1966, pp. 141-52 *et passim*; similar views have been recently defended by De Monticelli (1998; 2009, §6) and by O'Connor, who admits teleological reasons as an integration of his basic probabilistic account (cf. O'Connor 2005, §III.2, as opposed to §III.1).

[46] Incidentally, this is a feature that rational creation shares with the theory of agent causation. For an influential critique of this aspect of agent-causal views, see Broad 1952, p. 215. In principle, a thorough assessment of the problem would require an explicit discussion of the way both the agent and the act relate to time; in most cases, advocates and opponents of the theory tacitly presuppose that the former is timeless while the latter has a specific temporal location.

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Domenico Mancuso is a teacher of Maths and Physics in secondary schools in Turin, Italy. He holds a PhD in Philosophy from the universities of Urbino and Paris IV.

Email: albatros91@yahoo.com