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ARTICLE

Thinking Reasonably about Indeterministic Choice Beliefs

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Abstract

Recent research suggests that, regardless of the truth of libertarianism about free will, there appears to be a widespread belief among nonphilosopher laypersons that the choices of free agents are not causally necessitated by prior states of affairs. In this paper, I propose a new class of debunking explanation for this belief which I call ‘reasons-based accounts’ (RBAs). I start the paper by briefly recounting the failures of extant approaches to debunking explanations, and then use this as a jumping off point to articulate several alternatives, highlighting the strengths and weaknesses of each.

Keywords: Free will; libertarianism; folk intuitions; phenomenology

One important component for libertarian views of free will is that the choices of free agents are not causally necessitated by prior states of affairs. Recent research suggests that, regardless of the truth of libertarianism, there appears to be a widespread *belief* among nonphilosopher laypersons that the choices of free agents are not causally necessitated by prior states of affairs (Nichols and Knobe 2007; Nichols 2012; Deery, Bedke, and Nichols 2013; Nadelhoffer et al. 2014). In response to this research, philosophers have sought to explain why this belief should be so prevalent (Holton 2009; Nichols 2015). They have largely provided debunking explanations—accounts that explain the existence of a widespread belief in indeterminist choice but that also hold that this widespread belief does not justify accepting libertarian views of free will. In this paper, I propose a new class of debunking explanations for this indeterministic belief which I call *reasons-based accounts* (RBAs). I start the paper by briefly recounting the failures of extant approaches to debunking explanations, and then use this as a jumping off point to articulate several alternatives, highlighting the strengths and weaknesses of each.

1. Failures of the Spinozan strategy

The most popular debunking explanation relies on what I call the ‘Spinozan strategy.’ According to the Spinozan strategy, the folk belief in the indeterminacy of choice is inferred from introspection on the phenomenology of first-person agency.¹ More specifically, Spinozan strategists hold that the introspectively available agentive experience of choosing has the following feature:

¹For ease of exposition, I use the terms ‘indeterministic,’ ‘not causally necessitated,’ and ‘not causally determined’ interchangeably in this paper, while acknowledging that in many crucial cases these concepts come apart (Kissel 2018).

1. Experience does not present one's behavior as causally necessitated.²

Thus, when we attend to the experience of first-person agency, we do not find causal necessitation as part of its phenomenological contents. There is a subtle distinction between this feature of the phenomenology of first-person agency and the following feature:

2. Experience presents one's behavior as not causally necessitated.

The Spinozan strategy holds that (1) is a prominent feature of the phenomenology of first-person agency while (2) is not. Supporters of the strategy argue that it is not even clear what it *could* be like to experience one's behavior as not causally necessitated (Holton 2009 168). Nevertheless, in some cases, the absence of evidence can provide evidence of absence, provided one has appropriate background assumptions.³ On the assumption that *if* my behavior was causally necessitated, then causal necessitation *would* be a feature of my phenomenology, I could justifiably infer that my choices are not causally necessitated on the basis of (1). For this reason, Spinozan strategists have argued that we assume we have complete access to the influences on our choices such that the absence of evidence of causal necessitation becomes evidence of absence (Nichols 2015).

The main worry for the Spinozan strategy is that, if we hold such a background assumption in the case of choices, it is hard to see why we wouldn't hold it in other cases as well. As such, the strategy is liable to overgeneralize. Consider the following analogue to (1).

- 1.* Experience does not present the phenomena as causally necessitated.

I submit that (1*) is a common feature of experience in a good number of cases. Suppose that I see a thrown ball land in a potted plant, followed immediately by the lights in the room turning off. My visual experience presents the events in quick succession but does not present them as causally connected (Siegel 2009, 526). In this case, my visual experience does not present the lights turning off as causally necessitated by the throw of the ball. Contrast this with the following subtly different feature:

- 2.* Experience presents the phenomena as not causally necessitated.

The Spinozan strategy seems to predict that people will infer that the turning off of the lights was indeterministic. But this is clearly absurd. Despite the apparent widespread occurrence of (1*) and the lack of (2*), it seems highly unlikely that people would regularly believe that the turning off of the light was indeterministic on the basis of introspective attention to visual experiences like that of the ball, the potted plant, and the lights turning off.

It may be pointed out that we don't infer indeterminism in the potted plant case because we already assume that lights only turn on or off when something *causes* them to turn on or off. Inferring indeterminism would go against previously held background causal assumptions, so we assume there must be a hidden cause of which we are unaware. But this fails to respond to the overgeneralization worry, as it is unclear why we would have background causal assumptions in other cases, but not when introspecting first-person agentic phenomenology of choice, unless we *already* assume that choices are not causally necessitated.⁴

²This formulation of the Spinozan strategy borrows from Terry Horgan (2012).

³In this context, background assumptions are implicit beliefs that rationalize the debunking inference and not components of the experience of choice. Thank you to an anonymous reader for pushing for clarification on this point.

⁴Despite the overgeneralization worry, the Spinozan strategy is at the same time surprisingly narrow in its scope. The Spinozan strategy is presented in the context of a debunking explanation for why aspects of first-person agentic

The above discussion suggests that, in order to avoid overgeneralization, the account should explain why indeterministic beliefs tend to arise only in the case of choices. Spinozan strategists have tended to implicitly adopt the following conditions of adequacy.

A. *No Overgeneralization*: Explanations of folk beliefs ought not to overgeneralize.

Contemporary Spinozan strategists additionally accept two further conditions of adequacy:

- B. *Reasonableness*: All else being equal, to the extent an explanation of folk belief avoids the attribution of obviously unreasonable inferences, it is to be preferred over those that attribute less reasonable inferences, and
- C. *Scientific Plausibility*: One's explanations of folk beliefs should be plausible in light of our best extant science.

These conditions tend to pull in different directions such that even the best versions of the Spinozan strategy have fallen short of satisfying all three.

The Spinozan strategist makes empirical claims about widespread beliefs. As such, it is not entirely surprising that they should hold that, all else being equal, the explanation of the belief in indeterministic choice ought to be psychologically plausible (Searle 2003; Dennett 1984, 15; Nichols 2015, 49). For this reason, *Scientific Plausibility* has been a driving constraint on the Spinozan strategy.

The *Reasonableness* constraint holds that, all else being equal, we should prefer explanations of folk belief that avoid characterizing a belief's source as *obviously* unreasonable (Dennett 1984, ch. 1; Nichols 2015, 48; Holton 2009, 171). Again, this constraint is not entirely surprising. A minimal principle of charity suggests that we should try to interpret those who believe that choice is not causally necessitated in a positive light. Furthermore, the belief that choices are not causally necessitated appears widespread and apparently cross-culturally robust (Sarkissian et al. 2010). Were the belief obviously unreasonable, we would not expect it to be so widespread across the globe and throughout history. Finally, the belief appears particularly *entrenched* in the sense that it is resistant to revision in the face of reflection. This entrenchment appears easier to explain on the assumption that the inference that supports it is not *obviously* unreasonable. For these reasons, *Reasonableness* has seemed an appropriate constraint to adopt by most Spinozan strategists.

The difficulty for the Spinozan strategist is to provide an explanation that avoids overgeneralization, while also making the belief appear not obviously unreasonable in a way that is consistent with extant science. One example defense, there is some scientific evidence that individuals subject to an "illusion of explanatory depth" (IOED) mistakenly assume they have a greater understanding of the causal influences in a mechanism than they actually have (Kozuch and Nichols 2011). If a person were subject to an IOED in the case of choices, then they could have an inflated sense of their own reflective access to the causal influences on their choices, in which case, the fact that the accessible proximal causal influences on their choice do not appear to necessitate the choice supports the belief that the choice is not causally necessitated *at all* (Nichols 2015, ch. 2). If successful, the approach would appear to satisfy all three constraints.

phenomenology are interpreted as having libertarian satisfaction conditions. Yet the Spinozan strategy only accounts for beliefs resulting from one aspect of first-person agential phenomenology: the lack of causal necessitation. While the Spinozan strategy may explain the belief that behavior is not causally necessitated on the basis of first-person introspection, it remains silent on other aspects of freedom usually attributed to first-person agential phenomenology. These other aspects include (but are not limited to) the sense that choices are "up-to-me," the sense that I am a source of my choice, the sense that I could have done otherwise (all other facts about me held constant), etc. (Nadelhoffer et al. 2014; Horgan 2011b) By not addressing these other aspects of first-person agential phenomenology, the Spinozan strategy provides, in principle, only a partial debunking of apparently widespread beliefs.

Unfortunately, the approach fails. IOEDs that occur in the case of choices are too similar to those in other domains such that they do not block overgeneralization. A stronger IOED in the case of choices could block overgeneralization but is not currently plausible in light of extant science. But the largest concern for this approach lies in the IOEDs themselves. IOEDs occur in cases where we believe the object in question is a causally closed, deterministic system, such as locks, bicycles, and other mechanisms. The approach thus maintains that we believe choices are causally determined mechanisms in order to explain that we believe choices are not causally determined. Though perhaps scientifically plausible, this would be an obviously unreasonable inference.

This discussion is admittedly quick, but I hope it is enough to highlight the problems that the Spinozan strategy faces.⁵ In what follows, I explore several alternatives to the Spinozan strategy that uses the failures of the Spinozan strategy as a jumping off point. Although the Spinozan strategy closely focuses on how we *do not* experience choices, it has surprisingly little to say about how we *do* experience choices. In light of the difficulties faced by the Spinozan strategy, I propose here to explore a collection of alternative approaches that take the phenomenology of choice as a starting point, which I collectively call ‘reasons-based approaches’ (RBAs). In the deliberative context normally associated with making choices, it seems that we often lack an experience of choice as caused *at all*, deterministic or otherwise—that is, mental states in the context of practical deliberation are often not presented as causally efficacious. Rather, experience tends to represent the contents of mental states in the deliberative context as *reasons* that favor choosing a particular way. This marks an important difference between choices and other cases, where the objects of experience may be presented as candidate recipients of causal force. RBAs try to harness this insight in order to explain the widespread belief that choice is indeterministic without overgeneralizing.

Unlike the Spinozan strategy, RBAs do not rely on (1), the claim that experience does not present one’s behavior as causally necessitated, as a *premise* in an inference that concludes with the belief that choices are indeterministic. Instead, the fact that (1) is a widespread feature of first-person agentive phenomenology is merely an *enabling* condition for inferring that choice is indeterministic, according to RBA. Additionally, RBAs exploit the fact that first-person agentive phenomenology presents choices as rational in light of the *reasons* for which they are performed.

The difference between RBAs and the Spinozan strategy can be seen more clearly by focusing on where they identify the source of the mistaken belief. The Spinozan strategy suggests that the belief that choices are not causally necessitated results from a hasty generalization: from the fact that we do not experience the proximal influences on choices as causally necessitating, we mistakenly (and too hastily) infer that *none* of the proximal influences on choices are causally necessitating. In contrast, RBAs suggest a different kind of mistake: in virtue of the fact that we experience a choice as not *rationally* necessitated by our reasons, we conclude that the choice cannot be *causally* necessitated.⁶

While RBAs differ from the Spinozan strategy, they share many guiding principles. RBAs agree with the Spinozan strategy that (1) but not (2) is a feature of the first-person agentive phenomenology of choice, and that this fact is important for explaining the widespread belief in indeterministic choice. RBAs also agree with the Spinozan strategy that, as much as possible, an explanation of the widespread belief in indeterministic choice ought to avoid overgeneralization, it ought to rely on an inference that is *prima facie* plausible, and it ought to be plausible in light of our best science.

⁵For greater details on the shortcomings of the Spinozan strategy, see Kissel (2018).

⁶The particular nature of the inference from rational relations to causal relations will vary, depending on the form of the RBA. It might be argued that RBAs are better understood as examples of the Spinozan strategy with additional machinery bolted on. In light of the differences marked in this paragraph, I think it better to view RBAs as a distinct approach, but I also acknowledge the similarities. Ultimately, I think it is a matter of terminology whether RBAs are a sophisticated subset of the Spinozan strategy or an entirely distinct approach. Thank you to an anonymous reader for pressing this point.

2. Choosing on the basis of reasons

The purpose of the following section is to motivate the following commonsense claim: in the context of practical deliberation, we tend to experience, explain, and think about our choices in terms of the reasons that make them rational. According to the traditional Anscombian picture, when we ask the question “Why are you doing that?” we are asking the agent to produce the reasons that rationalize their action (Anscombe 1958, 11). As such, people often (though not always) explain actions in ways that make the action appear rational on the basis of one’s reasons (even if we never *actually* choose and perform complex actions on the basis of rational reflection). On the classic example, when someone asks “Why did Teresa open the fridge?”, the answer cites *reasons* for acting, often in the form of a belief-desire pair: 1) because she desired a beer and 2) because she believed there was beer in the fridge.⁷ The core idea here is that we often explain actions, both our own as well as the actions of others, by appealing to prior mental states of the agent; more specifically, we attribute mental states that would *rationalize* the agent’s action.

According to this traditional characterization, folk explanatory practices often invoke reasons in the form of prior mental states that rationalize an action. Reasons in this context are not merely facts or mental states that count in favor of performing an action from the perspective of a well-informed observer. Rather, they are *motivating reasons*: reasons that count in favor of performing an action *in the eyes of the agent* (Smith 1994, 95). Thus, when I explain my own action in terms of reasons, I cite the mental states that I take myself to have consciously considered and in virtue of which I acted. Likewise, when we explain Teresa’s behavior in terms of her reasons for acting, we often (though not always) think that Teresa in some way consciously considered her desire for a beer and her belief that there was beer in the fridge, and these considerations motivated and rationalized her opening the fridge.⁸

Why would we explain our actions and the actions of others in terms of the reasons that rationalize those actions? For one, at least in the context of practical deliberation, we tend to *think* about our available options in terms of the reasons that would rationalize them. Choices in the context of practical deliberation are the kinds of things that are made *on the basis of reasons*; we judge what we should or should not do by considering the contents of our mental states. It is a further question, however, whether we think about choices as caused by those very mental states. To be clear, citing prior mental states as influences on behavior does not always involve appeal to reasons. Prior mental states can explain actions merely by causing them, as when a hypnotized individual is caused to act in otherwise strange and irrational ways. Thus, the influence of prior mental states qua rationalization contrasts with influence qua causation. Furthermore, reasons-based explanations are not the only way we explain our choices and the choices of others. In addition to reasons and mere causal explanations, we often explain behavior in terms of long-standing character traits (Teresa has always loved beer), in terms of a causal history of reasons (Teresa comes from a family of beer drinkers), in terms of enabling factors available in the environment (all the beer is in the fridge), etc. Nevertheless, in the context of practical deliberation, we think about and explain the influence of our reasons primarily in terms of the degree to which they make our choices rational.

In addition to explaining and thinking about choices resulting from practical deliberation in terms of the reasons that rationalize them, reasons also play an important *phenomenological role* in the context of practical deliberation. We often feel the “weight” of reasons, when choosing between competing options. In the context of practical deliberation, we rarely feel the weight of

⁷Davidson (1963) popularized accounts of this general form, though he did not clearly endorse the reflective element.

⁸Many philosophers draw a further distinction between motivating and explanatory reasons (Hieronymi 2011). While this distinction is important, I think it will not affect the present discussion, since the motivating reasons I focus on are also explanatory reasons, so for simplicity I will restrict myself to the normative/motivating distinction. From here on, I will use the term ‘reasons’ to refer to motivating reasons, unless otherwise specified.

reasons pulling toward one uniquely rational and required option. Put another way, we feel that our deliberations are guided by ends, or goals, that place constraints on which available options are deemed viable, but within these constraints, there is often more than one option that, if pursued, would bring about one's ends (Bratman, 2009). Because numerous options would bring about these ends, it often appears that there is no rational requirement to prefer one means of bringing about that end rather than some other means. When there is no means that is uniquely preferable given one's ends, we might say that one's ends do not *rationally compel* a unique course of action.

We might develop an example from Anscombe to illustrate the phenomenology here. Suppose you have committed to eating wholesome food. In front of you are a variety dishes that, if eaten, would satisfy your commitment to eating wholesome food. You must choose which dish to eat. This involves reflection on the various reasons in favor of choosing each dish. Perhaps Dish A is packed with protein that promotes muscle growth. Perhaps Dish B contains a variety of unique vitamins. Perhaps Dish C is packed with easily useable energy. Which particular dish you choose remains open, while the end at which your choice aims remains fixed: to eat wholesome food. In this case, there is no rational requirement that uniquely picks out one of dishes A–C. Nevertheless, after some deliberation, suppose you pick a dish (perhaps Dish A).

Now consider the same case but focus on the phenomenology of the decision-making process. It appears that, given your commitments and the reasons available to you, Dishes A–C are all reasonable choices. In light of your commitment to eat wholesome food, your reasons do not present any of the means available to you as uniquely necessary means for attaining the end of eating wholesome food. Thus, when you choose on the basis of your reasons in this case, your reasons do not *rationally compel* your choice. This lack of rational necessitation is often expressed in the first-person agentic phenomenology of choosing. You don't *experience* the weight of reasons pulling you overwhelmingly toward one dish over another.

The above description of the phenomenology draws on a long philosophical tradition of describing the *rational* influence of one's reasons in causal terms. Hobbes describes deliberation as a set of scales that lean one way, then the next, when engaging in practical deliberation (1841, 326). It is common to speak of rational *pressure* and the *weight* of reasons. Although the descriptions involve causal terms, they do not necessarily pick out causal relations between reasons and choices. Rather, they describe the *feeling* that some options are more rational than others given one's reasons. This supports the larger point that our experience tends to present choices as made on the basis of reasons but remains largely silent when it comes to the causal relations, or lack thereof, that obtain between reasons and choices.

The fact that you can pass over one option and move on to another during the process of deliberation also contributes to the experience of a lack of rational necessitation. Were your reasons to rationally compel you to select one unique option, the process of deliberation itself would end. As such, both the process of reflecting on one's reasons as well as the reasons themselves (understood as counting in favor of performing an action in the eyes of the agent) contribute to the experience of a lack of rational necessitation.

It is important to clarify that I am relying here on folk platitudes regarding practical deliberation, and not providing a philosophy of action per se. Historically, philosophers have had a tendency to exaggerate the degree to which rational reflection guides actions. Indeed, the classic philosophical description of humanity is as the "rational animal." This exaggeration bleeds over into philosophical assumptions about folk psychology, where humans are often described as proceeding through life constantly weighing options, considering potential outcomes, and choosing so as to maximize their own goals.⁹ The thinking is that what makes humans *agents* is their ability to act on the basis of

⁹Prominent examples of the kind of view I have in mind are attributable to Aristotle, Mill, Locke, Kant, and the "reflectivist" positions criticized in Doris (2015).

reflection upon consciously considered reasons. It sometimes looks difficult to square this traditional picture of humans as consciously reflective, rational agents with recent psychological work. Confabulation studies, priming studies, automatisms, and many other experimental paradigms in the cognitive sciences have been used to suggest that a good many of our sophisticated actions proceed without the aid of conscious reflection upon reasons (Nisbett and Wilson 1977; Bargh, Chen, and Burrows 1996; Wegner 2003; Doris 2015).

For present purposes, I remain officially neutral on the metaphysics of reasons and choices in the hopes of bypassing disputes in philosophy and psychology about *what it is* for an agent to act. It is one question to ask whether the reflective picture of human agency can do the philosophical work it is forwarded to do. It is quite another question to ask whether the reflective picture of human agency resembles how “we,” (“we” the nonphilosopher folk and “we” the philosophers not sitting in the metaphysics room gripped by theory), generally tend to think about our own action production (Stich and Nichols 2003; Lewis 1973). It is this latter question that is of primary interest for present purposes. According to RBAs, people regularly *think about and experience* their own choices as being made on the basis of reasons, even if this does not accurately track how choices are *actually* made. RBAs try to leverage the former fact into an explanation of the widespread belief in indeterministic choice.

3. Constructing RBAs

In the previous section, I argued that there is a tendency to experience, think about, and explain, choices resulting from practical deliberation in terms of rationalization by reasons and not in causal terms. At this point, one might think that RBAs already have sufficient resources to begin constructing an explanation of the widespread belief in indeterministic choice. The explanation could go as follows:

(RBA1) There is a tendency among the folk to experience reasons as prior mental states that rationalize a given choice. This tendency precludes experiencing those reasons as causes of a given choice. In which case, in the context of practical deliberation, where people tend to view choices as made *solely* on the basis of reasons, people tend to believe that choices resulting from practical deliberation are not caused by those reasons, and so are not caused by anything.

RBA1 suggests that the belief in indeterministic choice results largely from a kind of category mistake. We experience choices as made and influenced by reasons, qua rationalizers, and not caused. Put another way, we experience the relationship between our reasons and the act of choosing as one of *rationalization* rather than one of *causal influence*. In virtue of this fact, we mistakenly think that the act of choosing in question is not the kind of thing that is a candidate for causal force in the first place. Choices are the kinds of things to be *logically justified*, not *causally necessitated*. And since choices are not the right sorts of things to be caused at all, they are not the kinds of things that can be causally necessitated. We might as well ask whether $1 + 1$ causally necessitates $2!$ Or so the story goes.

RBA1 faces a version of the overgeneralization worry. According to RBA1, it is because reasons are viewed as standing in a rationalizing relation to the outcome of our choices that it *precludes* viewing those reasons as causes of our actions. But similarly, theoretic reasons stand in a rationalizing relation to the *beliefs* that result from theoretical deliberation. Given this similarity, it would seem RBA1 would predict a similar preclusion of causal relations in the case of theoretical deliberation. And yet, there does not appear to be widespread belief in the claim that beliefs are formed indeterministically. In fact, there seems to be general consensus that one *cannot choose* what

one believes. In some sense, one *must* believe that which they take themselves to have the most reason to believe.¹⁰

Admittedly, there are many differences between practical and theoretical deliberation that one might try to appeal to in order to avoid overgeneralization here. For one, practical deliberation concludes in a choice (or on some accounts, an intention) while theoretical deliberation concludes in the formation of a belief. By the lights of RBA1, however, it is entirely unclear why these sorts of difference would matter for the purposes of forming beliefs about indeterminism. Provided that reasons are interpreted as influencing beliefs by rationalizing them in the theoretic case, it is hard to see why RBA1 would not predict, contrary to fact, that there *would* be widespread belief in the indeterminacy of theoretic belief formation. Thus, RBA1 may not meet the requirements of *No Overgeneralization*.

More worrisome for RBA1, it is hard to see why the mere fact that experience presents reasons as rationalizing one's choice should preclude the possibility of causal relations between reasons and choices. Indeed, though experience in many cases does not present reasons as causally influencing choices, there is empirical support to suggest that the folk concept of practical reason includes a causal component (Malle 1999; Malle, Knobe, and Nelson 2007). Even if reasons are not *experienced* as causal influencers, people seem to think that, at least sometimes, reasons *do* causally influence some choices. It just doesn't look scientifically plausible that choices are widely viewed as existing independently of the larger causal order.

We can look for additional resources by starting where RBA1 faltered. People tend to *experience* their reasons as merely rationalizing their choices, but they also tend to *conceive* of reasons as being causally efficacious; they believe that reasons are rationalizing causes. This suggests that people see reasons as playing a dual role in practical deliberation: rationalizing and causing. Perhaps the belief that choice is indeterministic could result from conflating the role of reasons as rationalizers presented in experience with the background assumption that reasons are causally efficacious. As a result, the more one feels *rationally* compelled to choose a certain way, the more one is inclined to judge that they feel *causally* compelled to choose a certain way.

To flesh out this possibility, return once again to the phenomenology of choosing between dishes with the end in mind of eating more healthy food. When we reflectively attend to the decision-making process, we find that the phenomenology often (though not always) includes the following feature:

A. Experience presents one's choice as not necessitated by reasons.

The phenomenology of choice presents various options as rationally consistent with one's prior commitments. Put another way, in view of your goals, any of the options appear *open* to you. This is just a way of describing the fact that Dishes A–C each appear rationally viable given your commitments.¹¹

The experience of rational necessitation (and lack thereof) comes in degrees. Sometimes, when one's reasons seem to overwhelmingly favor one option over the other, we feel rational pressure to choose that option. That is, were I to fail to choose this option, I would be doing something highly *irrational* (Consider Martin Luther who says, "Here I stand, I can do no other.")¹² Contrasting the

¹⁰This is a common response to the implausibility of Pascal's wager. We can't *choose* whether to believe in God.

¹¹See Sripada (2016) for discussion of this phenomenology. There may be worries, à la Sartre's example of Pierre not being in the café, how experience could ever represent a negation (Sartre 1956). While the story about *how* such negation is possible may be tricky, I take it as fairly uncontentious that there *is* a difference between the lack of an experience of Pierre being in the café and an experience of the lack of Pierre being in the café, and that both experiences are possible.

¹²These observations may help explain experiences of degrees of freedom. To the extent that I experience rational (though not rationally necessitating) pressure to choose a particular way, I will interpret my choice as less free than a choice where I

experience of rational pressure felt in these cases can help isolate the feeling found in many other cases, where one feels that one's choices are *not* necessitated by reasons.

The degree to which one's choices feel necessitated by reasons depends not only on the options that appear available at the time, but also the goals and ends one hopes to satisfy by way of that act of choice. If the goal is to eat more wholesome food, then perhaps dishes A–C will all appear equally viable options. But when the more specified goal of eating tasty food is considered, then the available options may be reduced, leading to a greater experience of rational necessitation.

Is it ever the case that we feel truly, 100 percent rationally necessitated when engaging in an act of choice? I suspect not. This is due to the fact that, as humans, we have a great capacity for introducing new and alternative goals that complicate the picture (Sripada 2016). Decisions are rarely made with respect to a single end or goal; rather, they are made within the context of numerous goal frames (Baars 1993). Given that the “goal posts” can shift, so to speak, it rarely looks like there is one unique, rationally necessary course of action one must choose. But this observation only reinforces the point that, in some cases, reflective attention on the first-person agentic phenomenology of choice presents the choice as not rationally necessitated.

According to (A), the experience of choosing often presents your actions as not necessitated by your reasons. Additionally, people tend to conceive of reasons as causes of their actions. So, it might seem appealing to judge that since reasons did not necessitate your choice and reasons are causes that *causes* did not necessitate your choice. This line of reasoning could lead one to conflate (A) above with the subtly different following feature:

- B. Experience presents one's behavior as not necessitated by causes.

Since reasons influence choices both rationally and causally, the conflation of (A) with (B) is surprisingly simple given prior intuitive commitments. It involves conflating the influence of the contents of a mental state in virtue of which a choice is more or less rational with the causally efficacious mental state in which those contents are embedded.

While this approach may sound attractive, working out the details of the proposal raises numerous obstacles. We can formulate the present proposal more formally as follows:

(RBA2)

1. Experience presents my choice as not necessitated by reasons.
2. Reasons are causes.
3. Therefore, experience presents my choice as not necessitated by causes.
4. Therefore, choices are not necessitated by causes.

(1) is supported by reflection on the first-person agentic phenomenology of choice. (2) is supported by the fact that people tend to conceive of reasons in the context of practical deliberation as rationalizing causes. However, in order for (3) to seem reasonable on the basis of (1) and (2), we must interpret (2) as an identity claim to the effect that all and only reasons are causes. This identity claim is clearly false; there are innumerable kinds of causes that are not reasons. RBA2 seems to fail the adequacy condition of *Reasonableness* on the grounds that (2) is obviously false.

Perhaps RBA2 can be rehabilitated. In the prior context of practical deliberation, and only in this context, it is conceivable that people constrain their consideration of the causal influences on choices to those prior mental states that also rationalize behavior. In which case, premise (2) might appear acceptable given the context. In which case, one's reasons are the only considered influences

experience less rational pressure. Importantly, however, both choices would still be seen as free, since neither is experienced as rationally necessitated. Thank you to an anonymous reader for pressing me on these kinds of cases.

on choice, causal or otherwise. In the context of practical deliberation, then, premise (2) appears reasonable, since causal influences other than consciously considered reasons are ruled out by the context.¹³

The rehabilitated form of RBA2 suggests that *in the context* of practical deliberation, people tend to view causes as all and only reasons. One upshot of this strategy is that outside of the context of practical deliberation, we should not expect people to accept (2). As a result, we should expect a *decreased* belief that choices are not causally necessitated for choices made outside the context of practical deliberation. At least at first glance, this prediction does not appear unreasonable. Suppose Ashley, unlike Teresa, is a known alcoholic. We explain her choice to grab a beer from the fridge by appealing to her longstanding alcoholism rather than any process of practical deliberation. Since her behavior is *not* the product of practical deliberation, we do not accept (2), and so we accept that there are causal influences beyond the reasons that rationalize her choice to grab a beer. As a consequence, we are less likely to judge that Ashley's choice to grab a beer from the fridge was *not* causally determined. This seems to fit with common sense views about addiction. The choice to drink is no longer in their hands.

The above proposed revision to RBA2 holds that (2) is only accepted in the context of practical deliberation. Even with this restriction, however, the inference fails *Reasonableness* on other grounds. Specifically, RBA2 relies on a fallacy of equivocation. The term 'necessitated' picks out rational necessity in the first premise, but causal necessity in the third premise. Believing that reasons are causes is not the same as believing that the *rational* influence of reasons is identical to the *causal* influence of reasons. So, even if (2) is acceptable, the inference fails to be reasonable.¹⁴

As a final worry for RBA2, it looks like it will suffer from a problem akin to the overgeneralization problem, which we can call the *Symmetry Problem*. Since (2) posits an identity between reasons and causes, inferences from reasons to causes should go both directions. RBA2 holds that we infer that choices are not necessitated by causes on the basis that we experience choices as not necessitated by reasons. But if (2) is accepted in the context of practical deliberation, it would also suggest that if we experience choices as necessitated by reasons, we would infer that the choice is causally necessitated and vice versa. But generally, it does not appear that if we think something is causally necessitated, we think that it is rationally necessitated as well. So, RBA2 seems to make implausible empirical predictions.

I have raised here substantial obstacles for pursuing a fleshed-out version of the RBA. However, we can take lessons from the failures of previous hypotheses in order to direct ourselves toward more promising future hypotheses. RBA1 faces overgeneralization worries and is not sensitive to apparently widespread beliefs about the causal efficacy of reasons. RBA2 fails largely due to problems with (2), the claim that reasons are identical to causes. Rather than thinking that people *equate* reasons with causes, then, we might weaken the claim such that people tend to take rational influence as *evidence* for causal influence. We experience the rational influence of reasons when we engage in practical deliberation. We can *feel* it exerting rational pressure. Despite this rational pressure, cases of *akrasia* and plain old stubbornness suggest that, in the majority of cases, this rational pressure does not secure an action. If this felt lack of rational compulsion were taken as evidence that the choice similarly lacked causal compulsion, then perhaps we could explain the widespread belief in indeterministic choice while avoiding overgeneralization. However, further exploration of this possibility must be left for another day.

¹³This suggestion need not require a standing assumption of introspective access to all of the causal influences on choices. Rather, invoking a reasons-based explanation restricts the explanatory candidates to reasons such that the further question of whether a given choice is causally necessitated is also restricted to this class of reasons. It is within this prior explanatory context that the degree of rational necessitation is then conflated with causal necessitation.

¹⁴There are further worries about the scientific plausibility of the inference generally, as well as the restricted form of (2).

4. RBAs contrasted with other non-Spinozan views

At first blush, there are apparent similarities between the reasons-based explanations I am exploring here and what is sometimes called the *transcendence vision* of decision-making (Knobe 2014). On the transcendence view, explanations in terms of reasons are not explanations in terms of causes. Rather, they are explanations in terms of an agent that transcends the causal talk of the scientific image. On this transcendence vision, "... an agent can do something for a reason when the resulting action was freely chosen and not caused by anything at all" (Knobe 2014, 78). On the transcendence vision, it is a fundamental commitment of folk psychology that human agents are viewed in this transcendent way and not as components of a scientific causal model.

The transcendence view and RBAs appear similar in that they both argue that the belief that choices are sometimes not causally necessitated depends closely on folk views about how reasons influence choices. However, the transcendence vision includes the additional folk commitment that agents are in some sense "distinct from" or "beyond" the normal causal order. Thus, the transcendence vision requires a prior commitment to folk dualism in order to explain why people believe choices are not causally necessitated. On the transcendence vision, reasons do not causally necessitate choices because *agents* make choices, and agents are not subject to causal influence in the same way as other entities.

RBAs do not require the prior assumption that agents are inherently distinct from the larger causal order. Although people sometimes infer that they are not causally necessitated, this need not entail that the agent making the choice is in some sense "over and above" the normal causal order. This is a benefit of RBAs, as the evidence on widespread commitment to the requisite kind of dualism needed to get the transcendence vision of the ground at this point is mixed (Mele 2014, 195; Lindeman, Riekk, and Svedholm-Häkkinen 2015). Although recent studies do suggest that commitment to dualism correlates with belief in free will, the correlation does not distinguish between incompatibilist and compatibilist free will beliefs (Murray, Murray, and Nadelhoffer 2021; Wisniewski, Deutschländer, and Haynes 2019). In which case, even if belief in dualism is widespread, it does not obviously explain the apparently widespread belief that choices are not causally necessitated. Furthermore, RBAs have the additional benefit that they can accommodate the folk viewing reasons as occasional causal influences on choices, as seen in RBA2.

RBAs also share some similarities with Terry Horgan's views on the role of phenomenology in the formation of free will beliefs (Horgan 2011a, 2011b). Horgan presents a rich and complex account of how much of the phenomenology of first-person agency can be interpreted as having satisfaction conditions that are consistent with a deterministic universe. For present purposes, however, we can focus on his account of so-called "recalcitrant data"; that is, his account of widespread beliefs and judgments made on the basis of phenomenology, and the truth of which is NOT consistent with a deterministic universe. The apparent widespread belief that choices are not causally necessitated is a recalcitrant datum.

Horgan offers two resources for explaining away the widespread belief that choices are not causally necessitated. The first resource is the fact that, according to Horgan, we cannot experience bodily motion as simultaneously causally necessitated (i.e., state-caused) as well as "up-to-us" (i.e., actional). He writes

[A]gentive phenomenology and the phenomenology of state-causation are *mutually exclusionary*... it is virtually impossible to simultaneously experience a single item of one's own behavior both as actional and as state-caused. And it is easy to make the mistake of inferring, on the basis of the fact that one cannot *experience* one's own behavior both as action and as state-caused motion, that no item of behavior *can really be* both a genuine action and a state-caused bodily motion. (2011b, 20)

Horgan thinks that experiencing a choice as an action *precludes the possibility* of experiencing it as a state-caused motion.¹⁵ It is unclear, however, how the mere fact that we cannot experience bodily motion as both actional as well as state-caused explains beliefs about the metaphysics of choice. If we do infer the belief that an event is not state-caused from a lack of an experience of state-causation, then we would expect this inference to arise in domains outside of human action. It wouldn't matter if I *necessarily* lack an experience of state-caused motion, as opposed to *merely* lacking an experience of state-caused motion. So, what is important for Horgan's purposes is that I *believe* that my choices necessarily lack an experience of state-causation. Stronger, I must believe that I necessarily lack an experience of state-causation because of some fact about the way I actually make choices. It would be very surprising indeed if there were a widespread belief that choices are *necessarily* experienced as not causally necessitated.

Putting this worry to one side, it is Horgan's second resource that looks similar to the RBA, as it also relies on contextual parameters that restrict explanatory candidates. According to Horgan, the concept of "agency" itself is subject to contextual parameters, and asking philosophical question about freedom pushes these contextual parameters toward libertarian interpretations. He writes

[I]n contexts of philosophical inquiry about the compatibility of the *presentational* content of agentive phenomenology with determinism ... the very posing of such philosophical questions tends to drive the contextually variable implicit parameters governing the judgmental notion of agency to a maximally strict setting—an unusual setting in which the freedom dimension of agency is understood as incompatible with determinism, and in which the self-as-source dimension of agency is understood as a matter of metaphysical-libertarian agent causation, as distinct from state-causation. (2011b, 20)

Horgan's proposal is similar to RBAs in that both depend on limiting contextual parameters to avoid overgeneralization. However, the similarities end here. On Horgan's view, it is the posing of *explicitly philosophical questions about free will* that explain interpretations of the phenomenology such that it is libertarian friendly. On Horgan's view, when we ask if the content of an experience of choosing could be veridical if determinism is true, we prime an agent-causal interpretation of the phenomenology; we push the "contextually variable implicit parameters" to the agent-causal interpretation. So, while we normally think of freedom in compatibilist terms, posing explicitly philosophical questions primes an incompatibilist interpretation of freedom. Although it is unclear how the details work, Horgan thinks this primed interpretation leads us to interpret first-person agentive phenomenology as presenting choice as not causally necessitated.

On Horgan's view, the contextually variable implicit parameters in concepts like 'freedom' and 'agency' lead us to believe that we experience our choices as not causally necessitated. In contrast, RBAs rely on the context of practical deliberation to prime reasons, as opposed to causal, interpretations of experiences of choice. In doing so, RBAs avoid some of the worries facing Horgan's view.

The biggest concern for Horgan's view is that the belief that choice is not causally necessitated seems to be the default view among people, independently and prior to philosophical inquiry. Why would first-year undergrads who have no familiarity with agent-causal libertarian or compatibilist views of free will be subject to implicit parameter shifts prior to entering a philosophy classroom? As an additional worry, it is not at all clear how the step from "agent-causal interpretation" to "not causally necessitated" is supposed to work. While the belief that choices are not causally necessitated is fairly widespread, the belief that choices are agent-caused is a relatively niche view among philosophers. If Horgan's story is correct, we should expect widespread belief in agent causation.

¹⁵Magill (1997) argues a similar line.

If undergraduate difficulties with the concept of “agent causation” is any guide, it seems unlikely that belief in agent causation is very widespread.

5. Conclusion

The positions I have explored here fit into a long tradition of nonlibertarian explanations of the apparently widespread belief that choices are not causally necessitated. While differing from the Spinozan strategy in many respects, RBAs share the assumption that we do not experience our choices as causally necessitated, before inferring both that our choices are not causally necessitated, but also that we experience our choices as not causally necessitated. RBAs also share the commitment to providing a reasonable and scientifically plausible explanation of the beliefs that avoids overgeneralizations. And like Spinozan strategies, RBAs have yet to provide a compelling account that is explanatory while meeting all three constraints.

RBAs differ from the Spinozan strategy in that they take the lack of experience of causal necessitation as an enabling condition, which must be supplemented by experiences of reasons as rationalizing one’s choice in order to explain the belief that choice is indeterministic. By way of closing, it is important to acknowledge one other major flaw that RBAs share with the Spinozan Strategy. While RBAs seek to explain the widespread belief that choices are not causally determined, and even the belief that we *experience* choices as not causally determined, they fail to explain much of the *other* beliefs surrounding free choices. They do not explain why we might experience choices as “up-to-us,” or why we might experience that “we could have done otherwise.” While there is a great deal of work to be done to face the obstacles presented for RBAs earlier in this paper, I am optimistic that they can be met, and that RBAs can be extended to these other experiences.

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