

Free Will as Phenomenological Experience: Reconciling Determinism and Human Agency

Introduction

The question of whether human beings possess free will is among the most enduring and consequential in all of philosophy. It is not merely an academic exercise; it touches the foundations of moral responsibility, criminal justice, personal identity, and the meaning we construct around our own lives. Yet the scientific worldview, particularly as shaped by classical physics and its deterministic laws, appears to leave no room for the kind of undetermined, self-originating agency that the concept of free will traditionally demands. If every physical event is caused by prior physical events in accordance with immutable laws, then the decisions we experience as freely made appear, from a strictly physical standpoint, to be merely the playing out of causal chains that stretch back long before our birth.

This paper argues for a radical but philosophically defensible resolution to this apparent conflict. **The core thesis is this: free will is not a substance or faculty that we possess, but a phenomenological experience that we undergo.** The subjective sense of deliberation, of being able to choose otherwise, of bearing responsibility for one's actions, is a genuine and irreducible feature of human consciousness. It does not require that the physical processes underlying decision-making be causally undetermined. Rather, it requires that the experience itself be taken seriously as a real aspect of human reality, one that is neither dissolved by scientific explanation nor dispensable to a complete understanding of human agency.

The argument proceeds as follows.

First, the concept of free will and its philosophical significance are examined, with attention to the central competing positions.

Second, an extended example illustrates the phenomenology of choice in action.

Third, the challenge posed by modern physics, particularly quantum mechanics and the debate over determinism, is considered in some detail, including the possibility of superdeterminism.

Fourth, the phenomenological tradition is introduced, particularly as developed by Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, and Heidegger, to provide the conceptual resources for understanding phenomena as real and irreducible.

Fifth, the experience of choosing is examined as a genuine mental occurrence, neither purely physical nor epiphenomenal.

Sixth, the reconciliation of the deterministic picture with the experiential reality is articulated around the central thesis.

Finally, the implications are drawn in the conclusion.

What is Free Will, and Why Does it Matter?

The concept of free will resists easy definition, in part because it sits at the intersection of metaphysics, ethics, and philosophy of mind. At its most general, free will denotes a capacity in virtue of which agents are the ultimate originators of their actions, capable of doing otherwise than they in fact do, and therefore properly subject to praise or blame, reward or punishment, for what they do. The precise contours of this capacity have been contested since antiquity, and the debates show no sign of resolution.

One of the most influential frameworks for understanding free will distinguishes between libertarianism and compatibilism. **Libertarianism** holds that free will exists and is **incompatible** with determinism. On this view, if determinism is true, we cannot be truly free in the sense required for moral responsibility. Determinism must therefore be false, or at the very least, free will must operate in a way that transcends the deterministic order (Kane, 1996). Libertarians typically look to quantum indeterminacy, non-reductive physicalism, or emergentist accounts to provide the space in which genuinely undetermined choices can occur.

Compatibilism, by contrast, holds that free will is compatible with determinism. On this view, what matters for freedom is not the metaphysical status of the causal chain preceding one's action, but rather the manner in which the action arises from the agent. Harry Frankfurt's famous hierarchical account is one of the most important compatibilist treatments. Frankfurt (1971) argues that a person is free if and only if the desire that moves her to act is a desire with which she identifies at the level of second-order volition. A person whose first-order desire (the desire to do X) is also her second-order desire (the desire to desire to do X) acts freely, even if both desires were causally determined by prior factors. The key is the relationship of the agent to her own desires, not the relationship of the causal chain to external constraints.

Peter van Inwagen (1983) offers a powerful **incompatibilist** argument, perhaps the most rigorous in the contemporary literature. Van Inwagen's argument from causal determinism, often called the "*consequence argument*," runs roughly as follows: if determinism is true, then past states of the world, in conjunction with the laws of nature, determine all future events, including our actions. But we have no control over past states of the world, nor over the laws of nature. Therefore, we have no control over our actions. But free will requires control over one's actions. Therefore, free will is incompatible with determinism. Van Inwagen accepts the conclusion and embraces incompatibilism, but denies that we possess free will in the way common sense assumes. Most of our actions, he argues, are not free in this sense; only certain introspective "*self-forming actions*" might be.

Charles Arthur Campbell (1957) offers a different incompatibilist perspective, rooted in a distinction between the self that chooses and the self that is chosen. For Campbell, genuine free will requires that the self be the author of its own character, not merely the expression of a character already formed. The difficulty is that any attempt to account for the origin of character in terms of prior causes seems to dissolve the authorship that free will requires. Yet the phenomenology of moral struggle, of wrestling with temptation and choosing the harder right over the easier wrong, seems to demand exactly this authorship. Campbell locates free will in those rare but real moments of moral crisis in which the self transcends its established character.

John Searle (2004) approaches the problem from the perspective of philosophy of mind and neuroscience. Searle argues that the free will debate has been confused by a false dichotomy between determinism and randomness. Neither deterministic causation nor random causation can ground free will. Rather, free will is grounded in the **intentionality** of conscious states and the way in which conscious deliberation causally influences neural processes without being reducible to them. Searle defends a position of gentle compatibilism: our decisions are caused by prior events, but the causal role of consciousness is real and irreducible, and it is this that grounds our experience of

freedom.

Ludwig Wittgenstein (1953) would perhaps have been sceptical of the entire debate as conducted in these terms, viewing the concept of free will as embedded in a language game that is distorted when abstracted from its practical context. The grammatical peculiarity of "*free will*" (it does not behave like ordinary noun phrases; we cannot ask "*where is your free will?*" or "*how old is your free will?*") suggests that the concept is not a name for a substance or faculty. Rather, it functions as a way of expressing the conditions under which we hold people responsible. This therapeutic approach does not dissolve the problem, but it redirects attention to **use and context**.

The stakes of this debate are enormous.

If determinism is true and free will is an illusion, what becomes of moral responsibility?

If an agent could not have acted otherwise, then praising or blaming them seems logically unfounded. Yet our entire social and legal infrastructure rests on the assumption that people can choose to act differently than they do. Criminal law distinguishes between voluntary and involuntary acts; praise and blame are woven into the fabric of human relationships. The question of free will is thus not merely a puzzle for philosophy seminars but a matter with profound implications for how we understand ourselves and each other.

An Example of Free Will in Action

To ground the abstract discussion, it is useful to examine what the experience of choosing actually feels like, and what it involves. Consider the following scenario.

A senior manager, whom I will call David, must decide whether to report a colleague, whom I will call Amir, for financial misconduct that David has personally witnessed. David knows that Amir has a family to support and that a report will almost certainly end Amir's career. David also knows that the misconduct was serious and that failure to report it could enable further harm to the organisation. He deliberates overnight. He weighs considerations of loyalty, justice, consequence, and his own professional obligations. In the end, he decides to file the report.

What should we say about this episode? From a strictly third-person, behavioural perspective, David's decision is the outcome of a complex causal process: prior experiences, neural states, hormonal influences, social pressures, and the history of his character formation. All of these factors, in principle, combine in accordance with physical laws to produce the moment of choice. Nothing in this description appears to require, or even permit, a breach of causal determinism.

Yet the phenomenology of David's experience is strikingly different. David **experiences** himself as deliberating. He **feels** that he is weighing considerations, not merely that considerations are being weighed by some subpersonal process. He has a **sense**, however vague, that he could choose otherwise. He could choose loyalty over justice, or cowardice over integrity. He does not experience his decision as externally imposed; he experiences it as **his own**. And he feels the weight of responsibility. He will lie awake wondering if he did the right thing, and this wondering presupposes that he was the kind of being who could have done otherwise.

This phenomenological character of the experience of choice is not easily accounted for by purely deterministic accounts of mind. If the decision was causally determined long before David was conscious of deliberating, then the deliberation appears to be a post-hoc rationalisation, a **story** the mind tells itself about a decision that was already made. But this is not how David experiences it. He experiences the deliberation as causally efficacious, as making a difference. And crucially, the sense of responsibility, of being the one who must answer for the decision, is not a mere epiphenomenon; it is part of the structure of the experience itself.

The example also illustrates why compatibilist accounts, though philosophically sophisticated, may fail to capture something essential. Frankfurt's hierarchical model might account for David's freedom if his first-order desire to report (or not to report) is aligned with his second-order desire to have that desire. But this does not address the deeper question of whether David, as a self, is the author of his own character. Campbell's point is apposite here. The real question is not whether David identifies with his desires, but whether the self that identifies is itself freely constituted. If David's self was itself causally determined by factors beyond his control, then the alignment of first and second-order desires is itself an **accident** of character formation, not something he authored.

The Quantum Problem: Past Light Cones, Causality, and Superdeterminism

The classical picture of physics, from Newton through Laplace, is fundamentally deterministic. Given the complete state of a physical system at any moment, the laws of classical physics uniquely **determine the state of that system** at any other moment. This universality of causal determination seemed to leave no room for the kind of genuinely open future that free will appears to require. If the past determines the future with iron necessity, then human choices, however complex their proximate causes, are themselves determined.

The arrival of quantum mechanics in the twentieth century disrupted this neat picture in ways that are still debated. Quantum mechanics introduces genuine indeterminacy at the level of fundamental physical processes. The evolution of a quantum system is described probabilistically; the famous **wave function** gives only the **probability** of finding a system in a particular state upon measurement, and the collapse of the wave function appears to be genuinely stochastic (Bell, 1987). Some philosophers and physicists have speculated that this indeterminacy might provide the physical basis for free will. If the brain exploits quantum-level indeterminacy in neural processes, perhaps this creates the space for genuinely undetermined choices that are not merely random but genuinely free.

David Bohm (1957) offered one of the earliest systematic treatments of causality and chance in modern physics, distinguishing between deterministic and statistical levels of description and arguing that determinism at the level of fundamental particles need not preclude genuine novelty at higher levels of organisation. Bohm's hidden variable theory, later developed further, sought to restore a deterministic underpinning to quantum mechanics while preserving its empirical success, but it did so at the cost of **non-locality**, the instantaneous influence of distant events on local quantum states.

The **Einstein-Podolsky-Rosen** paradox (Einstein, Podolsky and Rosen, 1935) raised deep questions about the completeness of quantum mechanics and the nature of physical reality. The EPR argument pointed out that quantum mechanics, if complete, implies "*spooky action at a distance*," **instantaneous** influences that seem to violate relativistic constraints on causal propagation. Bell's theorem (Bell, 1987) made the debate empirical: Bell derived inequalities that would be violated in any local hidden variable theory compatible with quantum predictions, and subsequent experiments, most famously by Aspect and others, have confirmed the quantum violations of these inequalities. This result is often taken to **rule out local realism**, the view that physical properties exist independently of measurement and that influences do not propagate faster than light.

Stephen Hawking and Leonard Mlodinow (2010) have argued, however, that the significance of quantum indeterminacy for free will is severely limited. Their model-dependent realism holds that quantum mechanical models are tools for predicting observables, not literal descriptions of ontological reality. Even if quantum mechanics introduces indeterminacy, the randomness it introduces is not the same as free will. Randomness is uncaused; free will, whatever else it is, is not merely randomness. **A free choice is not a dice roll**. The libertarian appeal to quantum

indeterminacy therefore seems to confuse freedom with arbitrariness.

The Conway and Kochen **Free Will Theorem** (2006, 2009) added a new dimension to these debates. Conway and Kochen proved that if humans have free will, then elementary particles must also have something like free will, in the sense that the outcomes of certain quantum measurements cannot be predetermined by any function of past events and physical laws. Their result is striking: it shows that the existence of free will at the human scale entails a corresponding indeterminism at the fundamental physical scale. This does not establish that humans have free will, but it shows that any theory that denies it at the human level must also deny it at the particle level.

Gerard 't Hooft (2012) has offered a different response to these challenges through **superdeterminism**. In a superdeterministic universe, the apparent freedom of human choices is illusory because both the choices and the experimental settings that reveal quantum indeterminacy are themselves determined by the same deep causal history. The 'free' choice of an experimentalist to measure spin in one direction rather than another is, in a superdeterministic framework, itself part of the determined causal chain. There is no genuine independence between the state of the measured system and the settings of the measuring apparatus. Superdeterminism, if true, would close the door on **any** strategy that seeks to ground free will in quantum indeterminacy, because it denies the very independence of observer and observed that the free will theorem presupposes.

What emerges from this brief survey is that the relationship between modern physics and free will is far more complex than either determinist or libertarian interpretations suggest. The classical Laplacian picture of universal determinism has been undermined by quantum mechanics, but quantum indeterminacy does not straightforwardly provide the kind of freedom that free will requires. The Free Will Theorem shows that some form of indeterminism seems unavoidable, but superdeterminism offers a way of preserving a deterministic structure at the cost of trivialising the notion of independence. **The lesson for our purposes is that physics does not settle the question of free will.** Physics describes the causal structure of the physical world; it cannot by itself determine the meaning or reality of the subjective experience of agency.

Phenomenology and the Nature of Phenomena

To make progress on the question of free will, it is necessary to adopt a philosophical framework that can do justice to the reality of subjective experience without succumbing to either physicalism that dissolves it or mysticism that ignores it. The phenomenological tradition, particularly as developed by Edmund Husserl, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Martin Heidegger, provides precisely such a framework.

Husserl's phenomenology begins with a radical methodological move: the **epoché**, or suspension of the natural attitude. In the natural attitude, we assume the existence of the external world and the correctness of our ordinary beliefs about it. In the phenomenological epoché, we bracket these assumptions and attend instead to the structures of experience as such. What appears to consciousness? How does consciousness present things to itself? Husserl's focus is on the **noema**, the object as intended by consciousness, and the **noesis**, the acts of consciousness through which objects are intended. Phenomenology, on this account, is the study of the correlation between noesis and noema, **between the ways we experience and the things experienced** (Husserl, 1913).

This is not a descent into subjectivism or idealism. Husserl insists that **phenomenology is descriptive**, not constructive. The phenomena are what they are; the epoché simply directs attention to their structures. The existence of the external world is not denied; it is simply set aside as a question for separate investigation. What phenomenology reveals is the rich texture of experience that scientific objectivism, by design, leaves out. And what it reveals includes, centrally, the experience of

agency.

Merleau-Ponty (1945) extended Husserl's framework in a distinctively embodied direction. For Merleau-Ponty, the body is not merely a physical object among others, subject to mechanistic explanation; it is **the vehicle of our being in the world**, the medium through which we perceive, act, and make meaning. The body is not simply an object of scientific investigation but the subject of a **lived** relationship with the world. In the phenomenon of the phantom limb, for example, the body is experienced in a way that cannot be captured by anatomy or physiology alone; the body schema, the pre-reflective sense of one's body as a unitary field of agency and sensation, is irreducible to its physical description.

Merleau-Ponty's analysis of movement is particularly relevant to free will. **When I raise my arm, I do not first decide to raise my arm and then cause my arm to rise.** The decision and the movement are unified in the experience of moving. The body 'understands' the world in a pre-reflective, pre-objective way; motor intentionality is a fundamental mode of our being in the world. This is not the free will of libertarian metaphysics, but neither is it the mere execution of predetermined motor programmes. It is a mode of agency that is real but not reducible to either mechanism or magic.

Heidegger (1927) brings a temporal and existential dimension to phenomenology that is equally crucial for the question of free will. **Dasein**, the kind of being that human beings are, is characterized by the structure of existence, or **being-in-the-world**. Crucially, Dasein is always already thrown into a world that is not of its own making; it finds itself in a situation, with a history, a culture, and a set of possibilities that are **given**. Yet Dasein is not merely determined by this 'thrownness'. It projects itself into the future through its choices, taking up or refusing the possibilities that the world offers. The being of Dasein is not a fixed substance but a process of becoming, structured by what Heidegger calls **temporality**.

Heidegger's analysis cuts beneath the free will problem in a fundamental way. The traditional debate assumes a subject that is already fully formed and then asks whether its choices are causally free. But for Heidegger, the self is not given in advance of its choices; it is constituted through them. We are not subjects who then choose; **we become subjects through the process of choosing**. This does not mean that all choices are equally authentic or free; Heidegger distinguishes between authentic and inauthentic modes of being, between choosing that genuinely appropriates one's possibilities and choosing that flees from the burden of self-determination. But it means that the question of free will cannot be separated from the question of what kind of self one is becoming.

The phenomenological tradition, taken as a whole, provides a powerful resource for understanding the experience of free will. It insists that subjective experience is a real feature of the world, irreducible to physical processes without loss. It provides tools for analysing the structures of agency, intentionality, and temporality that constitute the experience of choice. And it refuses to reduce the question of freedom to a question about causal determinacy, recognising that the **meaning of freedom is constituted in the domain of lived experience**, not in the domain of physical law.

Phenomena as Real Mental Experiences in Choice

If the phenomenological tradition is correct, then the experience of choosing is not a secondary reflection on a prior physical process but a primary mode of being in the world. But what precisely is the ontological status of this experience? Is it a real occurrence, or is it an illusion, a by-product of neural processes that have no causal efficacy of their own?

The issue of mental causation is among the most contested in philosophy of mind. The problem, in its standard formulation, is this: **if physical events are causally closed, in the sense that every physical event has a sufficient physical cause, then where does mental causation fit?** Either

mental events are identical to physical events (in which case they have no distinct causal role), or they are causally efficacious (in which case they constitute a departure from physical closure), or they are epiphenomena (in which case they are real but causally inert). Each option faces serious difficulties.

Type identity theory identifies mental states with specific physical or neurophysical states. On this view, the experience of deciding to report Amir is identical to some specific neural state or process. This is a physically respectable position, but it faces the multiple realisability objection: mental states can presumably be realised by different physical systems in different physical realisations, which suggests that they are not type-identical to any particular physical state. Token identity theory, which identifies individual mental states with individual physical states, avoids this objection but faces difficulties in accounting for the causal efficacy of mental properties.

Property dualism, or emergentism, holds that mental properties emerge from physical properties at a certain level of complexity without being reducible to them. On this view, the experience of choice is a genuine emergent property of certain complex neural systems, real but not predictable or explainable solely in terms of lower-level physical processes. This position preserves the reality of mental causation while acknowledging the dependence of mind on brain. The difficulty is that emergent properties seem either to be nomologically **deterministic** (in which case they add nothing to the causal story) or to violate physical causal closure (in which case they seem miraculous).

Epiphenomenalism accepts that mental experiences are real but holds that they have no causal efficacy. Neural processes cause mental states, but mental states do **not** cause further physical events. This position acknowledges the reality of subjective experience while respecting physical causal closure. But it faces the devastating objection that it makes our knowledge of our own mental states inexplicable. If the experience of deciding does not cause any physical events, then it cannot cause the verbal report "*I have decided*," and yet we **do** report our decisions, and these reports are veridical. This seems to require that the experience of deciding be causally connected to the report of deciding, which is a physical event (the movement of air molecules, nerve impulses, and so on). The epiphenomenalist owes an account of this causal connection.

These difficulties suggest that a more radical reconceptualisation of the mind-body relationship is required, one that does not treat the problem as one of fitting mental causation into a pre-existing physical causal framework. The enactive approach in philosophy of mind and cognitive science, developed by thinkers such as Francisco Varela, Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch, offers such a reconceptualisation. **On this view, mind, body, and environment form a mutually constitutive whole; cognition is not the computation of representations by an isolated brain but the embodied activity of an agent engaged with its world. Mental states are not inner representations of an outer world but patterns of relational activity between organism and environment.**

In this framework, the experience of choice is a real pattern of organism-environment interaction, not a ghostly addition to an already complete physical process. It is as real as the neural processes with which it is co-constituted, but it is not reducible to them. The freedom at stake in free will is not the metaphysical freedom of a soul or self that stands outside the causal order, but the practical freedom of an embodied agent that can act otherwise than it does, given the same situation. This is not the libertarian's undetermined self but something more modest, and perhaps more real.

Reconciling the Two: Free Will as Experience Rather Than Substance

We are now in a position to articulate the central thesis of this paper: free will is something we

experience, not something we have. This is not a denial of the reality of free will, nor is it a compatibilist strategy for preserving the concept while weakening it beyond recognition. **It is a phenomenological claim about the nature of what is real in the domain of human agency.**

The distinction between "having" free will and "experiencing" free will is crucial. To have free will, in the traditional sense, would require that there be a substance or faculty within the agent that is the source of undetermined choices. This is the picture presupposed by libertarianism and challenged by compatibilism and hard determinism. But the very framework of "having" may be the source of the confusion. We do **not**, in ordinary life, experience ourselves as possessing a faculty called free will. We experience ourselves as deliberating, choosing, acting, and feeling the weight of responsibility for what we do. These are all experiential phenomena, not things that we possess.

Consider what it would be like to 'have' free will in the substantial sense. It would mean that there is a part of me, a faculty or self, that operates outside the causal order, that initiates choices without being caused by prior events. **But how would I know about this part of myself?** Not through introspection, certainly, because introspection reveals only the experience of deliberating, weighing, and deciding, not the hidden metaphysical mechanism that supposedly generates it. And how would this faculty interact with the rest of me? If it is entirely outside the causal order, then its 'decisions' cannot be transmitted to the rest of the organism. The traditional libertarian account of free will as a substance faces exactly the interaction problem that Descartes faced with mind and body.

The phenomenological tradition provides the resources to dissolve this puzzle. What we experience when we choose is not a faculty called 'free will' but **a characteristic mode of experience**: the sense of deliberateness, of being the author of one's action, of bearing responsibility. These experiences are real. They are not illusory in the sense of being mere by-products of unrelated physical processes. They are the way the relevant phenomena present themselves to consciousness. To say that free will is an experience rather than a substance is to take these experiences **seriously** as experiences, not to dismiss them as hallucinations.

This position has important implications for how we understand determinism. If free will is not a substance, then the question of whether determinism is compatible with it does not arise in the same way. Determinism is a thesis about the causal structure of the physical world. The question of whether my deliberating is physically determined is a question about the physical processes underlying deliberation. This question may have a determinist answer, and this paper does not seek to deny that it might. But the experience of deliberating, weighing, choosing, and being responsible is neither confirmed nor denied by the answer to this physical question. **The experience is what it is, regardless of whether the underlying neural processes are deterministic or indeterministic.**

This point is obscured when we treat free will as a substance. In that framework, if determinism is true, the free will substance is deprived of its causal efficacy, and we do not **truly** have free will. The experience of having free will becomes an illusion. But this is only a problem if we accept the substance framework in the first place. If we abandon that framework and adopt instead a phenomenological one, the relationship between determinism and free will changes completely. Determinism, or its denial, is a thesis about physics. The experience of agency is a phenomenological datum. They operate in different registers and do not, in principle, compete.

This is not a merely verbal resolution. **It has real consequences for how we understand moral responsibility.** On the substance view, moral responsibility requires that the agent have free will in a libertarian sense, and this requires that determinism be false. If determinism is true, we cannot be responsible. But on the experiential view, moral responsibility is grounded in the reality of the experience of responsibility. When David files his report on Amir, the experience of deliberation, of weighing competing considerations, of feeling the weight of the decision, and of knowing that he must live with the consequences, is **not** conditional on the metaphysical status of the underlying

neural processes. These **experiences** are real, and it is on the basis of their reality, not on the basis of any libertarian faculty, that we hold David accountable.

This position is consistent with the insights of the compatibilist tradition, but it goes beyond them. Frankfurt's hierarchical account, for example, correctly identifies the importance of the agent's relationship to their own desires. But it remains within the framework of free will as a property or capacity that can be present or absent. The experiential account holds that the relevant phenomena are not reducible to capacities, properties, or alignments of desires; **they are lived experiences that constitute the texture of agency**. The question is not whether David has the right kind of self, but whether the experience of deliberating and choosing is real in his case. It is, and it is this reality, not the presence of a free will faculty, that grounds responsibility.

Heidegger's contribution here is indispensable. **Dasein is not a substance that possesses free will; it is a process** of existing, of projecting itself into possibilities, of becoming. The freedom at stake in Dasein's existence is not the freedom of an unmoved mover but the freedom of a being that is always already in the world and **always** already choosing. This freedom is not compromised by thrownness, by the fact that Dasein finds itself in a situation it did not choose. On the contrary, freedom is exercised precisely in how Dasein takes up **or** refuses the possibilities that its thrown situation offers. **Authenticity, for Heidegger, is not the exercise of a faculty but the owning of one's choices as genuinely one's own, even when one could not have chosen otherwise in terms of the causal chain.**

Searle (2004) makes a related point when he argues that the free will problem has been distorted by a false dichotomy between determinism and randomness. The experience of free will is not the experience of acting without cause, nor is it the experience of acting randomly. It is the experience of acting for reasons, of being moved by considerations that one recognises as one's own, of knowing that one could have done otherwise in the sense of the space of reasons, not in the sense of a break in the causal chain. This experiential dimension of agency is irreducible to either deterministic causation or random occurrence.

The objection that will be raised at this point is obvious: if free will is just an experience, and if the physical processes underlying that experience are deterministic, then the experience is causally epiphenomenal; it makes no difference to what happens. The neural processes that produce the decision would have produced the same decision regardless of whether there was an associated experience. This is the hard epiphenomenalist conclusion that the experiential account must avoid.

The response to this objection requires a return to the phenomenological principle that the **phenomenon is the reality**. The experience of deliberating and choosing is not a superfluous addition to a complete physical process; it is the way the relevant neural processes present themselves from the inside. To say that the experience is causally inert is to assume that the physical process is already causally complete without it and that the experience is an extra, 'added-on' phenomenon. But this assumption is precisely what phenomenology questions. The neural process and the experiential process are not two things, one of which is real and the other merely apparent; they are two descriptions, one from the third-person perspective and one from the first-person perspective, of the same underlying reality.

This is not a dualism of substances. It is a recognition that the distinction between physical and experiential descriptions operates at different levels of analysis and that neither is reducible to the other without loss. **The neural description captures the causal mechanisms; the experiential description captures the lived meaning.** Both are real, both are important, and neither is complete without the other. The reconciliation of determinism with free will is not a matter of finding a loophole in the causal chain for libertarian freedom; it is a matter of recognising that the causal question and the experiential question are not competing answers to the same question.

Conclusion

The question of free will has been treated for centuries as a problem of metaphysics, a question about whether the self is a cause among causes or whether it stands outside the causal order. This paper has argued for a different approach. Free will is not a substance or faculty that we possess; it is a phenomenological experience that we undergo. **The experience of deliberating, choosing, acting, and bearing responsibility is a genuine feature of human life, irreducible to the physical processes with which it is co-constituted.**

This position navigates between several extremes. It is not libertarianism, because it does not require that choices be metaphysically undetermined. It is not hard determinism, because it does not dismiss the experience of agency as illusory. It is not a merely verbal compatibilism, because it does not reduce free will to the satisfaction of a set of conditions that have nothing to do with the phenomenology of choice. **It is, rather, a phenomenological realism about the experience of agency, one that insists on the reality of subjective experience while acknowledging the insights of physical science.**

The implications of this position are far-reaching. If free will is an experience, then the question of determinism cannot settle the question of free will, because determinism is a thesis about one kind of description (physical) while free will is a thesis about another (experiential). These are not competing descriptions of the same thing; they are descriptions at different levels of a reality that is richer than either can capture alone. **Moral responsibility, on this account, is grounded in the reality of the experience of responsibility, not in the metaphysical status of the agent's causal chain.** David, deliberating over his decision about Amir, is exercising a real capacity for moral agency, not performing a pantomime of freedom for an audience of neurones.

The phenomenological tradition, from Husserl through Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger, provides the conceptual resources for this position. It teaches that experience is not a secondary reflection on a primary reality but a primary mode of being in the world. It teaches that the body is not a machine but the 'vehicle' of our being, and that agency is not the operation of a faculty but the lived expression of an embodied subject. And it teaches that **the self is not a given substance but a process of becoming, constituted through the choices that it makes and that make it.**

The physics of determinism, in this light, is not the enemy of free will. It is a partial and powerful description of the causal structure of the physical world. But it would be a category error to expect physics to provide an answer to the question of the meaning and reality of subjective experience. That question belongs to the domain of phenomenology, of philosophy of mind, of ethics, and of the human sciences. It is a question that only human beings, experiencing themselves as agents, can properly ask and attempt to answer.

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