

The Phenomenology of Agency

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The motion of our body follows upon the command of our will. Of this we are at every moment conscious.
David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 1748

1. Introduction

The phenomenology of agency has, until recently, been rather neglected, overlooked by both philosophers of action and philosophers of consciousness alike. Thankfully, all that has changed, and of late there has been an explosion of interest in what it is like to be an agent.¹ This burgeoning field crosses the traditional boundaries between disciplines: philosophers of psychopathology are speculating about the role that unusual experiences of agency might play in accounting for disorders of thought and action; cognitive scientists are developing models of how the phenomenology of agency is generated; and philosophers of mind are drawing connections between the phenomenology of agency and the nature of introspection, phenomenal character, and agency itself. My aim in this paper is not to provide an exhaustive survey of this recent literature, but to provide a

¹ Useful collections of papers on the topic can be found in Roessler and Eilan (eds.) (2003), Sebanz and Prinz (eds.) (2006), Pockett et al (eds.) (2006) and Siegel (ed.) (2007). Other recent contributions to the debate not otherwise mentioned in this review include Nahmias (2005), Proust (2003), Siegel (2005), White (2007) and Zhu (2004).

guide for the perplexed—a map by means of which newcomers to the debate might orient themselves. The reader should be warned that although my primary goal is to describe positions rather than defend or dismantle them, I do have a horse in some of these races.

2. Identifying the target domain

What *is* the phenomenology of agency? There is no simple answer to this question. In the widest sense one might think of the phenomenology of agency as encompassing all aspects of agentic self-awareness. Consider the following vignette:

You are reaching out in order to open a door, with a view to leaving the room and thus escaping a fire. Something is leaning against the door, and you must strain in order to open it. Finally, the door begins to move—you experience yourself as opening the door, and moving into the corridor. Which way should you turn? Right or left? Suddenly, you remember that the only copy of your half-finished manuscript is in your study, being threatened by the flames. You deliberate for a second: should you go back for the manuscript, or continue down the corridor and out of harms way? You decide to risk it—life without the manuscript would not be worth living.

This vignette contains reference to multiple examples of agentic self-awareness. You are aware of the movement of your arm towards the door as involving your own agency—as something that you are doing, rather than as something that is happening to you. You are aware of your decision to head right (rather than left) as autonomous and free, as not having been forced on you. You are aware of yourself as exerting effort in reaching for the door, and as having control over your body. In reaching for the door, you are aware of yourself as doing something in particular, namely, reaching for the door. You are aware of yourself as deliberating—as ‘making up your mind’—about whether or not to go back for the manuscript.

Whether or not one takes ‘the phenomenology of agency’ to include all the above-mentioned states depends, in large part, on one’s view of whether or not there is such a thing as cognitive phenomenology. Some theorists hold that cognitive states can enjoy proprietary phenomenal character (see e.g. Pitt 2004; Siewert 1998; Strawson 1994); others do not (see e.g. Carruthers 2005; Lormand 1996; Tye 1995). Those who recognize cognitive phenomenology are likely to think that agentic experience might include such state as one’s sense of what one is doing—or at least trying to do—, whilst those who reject the

possibility of cognitive phenomenology will restrict the scope of agentive experience to 'low-level' states. Cognitive phenomenology is too complex a topic to tackle here, and I will restrict my attention to those forms of first-person agentive awareness that might be recognized even by those who reject cognitive phenomenology.² I would include on such a list the experience of a movement (or a mental event) as: an action (of one's own); an action that one is in control of; an action that one is performing with a certain degree of effort; and as action that one is performing freely. Note that I use 'experience' non-factively (that is, intensionally): one can have an experience of something *as* being the case even when it is not the case.

A final introductory issue concerns the importance of agentive experience. Why exactly might it matter? Three motivations can be given for taking agentive experience seriously. Firstly, accounts of agentive experience have implications for debates about the admissible contents of experience – that is, for debates about the kinds of properties and states of affairs that can be experientially represented. Secondly, accounts of agentive experience have implications for conceptions of where in the cognitive architecture experiential states are generated. Finally, accounts of agentive experience may shed some light on the folk conception of agency, if not agency itself.

3. Scepticism

Some are sceptical of the claim that there is a phenomenology of agency. Thoroughgoing sceptics deny that there is anything at all it is like to be an agent; they deny that the phrases 'the experience of acting', 'the experience of deliberating', 'the experience of trying' and so on refer to anything. Scepticism is rarely defended in print, but it is frequently encountered in conversation.

We can distinguish two argumentative strategies for scepticism. The first, the Humean strategy, begins with introspection. The Humean sceptic 'looks inside' and fails to find anything to which 'the experience of doing', 'the experience of acting', or 'the experience

² I will also restrict myself to the phenomenology of physical agency. The phenomenology of mental agency raises a number of important issues, but considerations of space force me to set them to one side here. For some thought-provoking reflections on the experience of mental agency – or rather, the lack thereof – see Strawson (2003).

of being an agent' might correspond. She then argues that since there is no reason to think that she might be uniquely lacking in agentic experience, it is doubtful that anyone enjoys experiential states to which these phrases might refer.

The Humean strategy is vulnerable on two counts. On the one hand, one can challenge the assumption of phenomenal uniformity on which the argument rests. Although we tend to assume that human beings enjoy pretty much the same range of phenomenal states, it is entirely possible that this assumption is mistaken (or at least overblown) – after all, we know that there can be striking individual differences with respect to certain kinds of phenomenal states, such as imagery experiences. On the other hand, one might argue that the sceptic is overlooking features of her own experience. The advocate of agentic experience need not hold that agentic experiences are phenomenologically vivid or easy to discern; indeed, it is common for agentic experience to be described as recessive – as typically confined to the margins of consciousness.

A second argument for scepticism involves the claim that agentic content cannot be experientially encoded – it is not 'experientially admissible.' According to Christine Korsgaard, 'to experience something is (in part) to be passively receptive to it, and therefore we cannot have experiences of activity as such' (1996: 204). I find this claim puzzling: why should the mere passivity of experience prevent agentic content from being experientially encoded? After all, belief is (typically) thought to be passive, and there is no doubt that we can have beliefs about activity as such. More plausible is the claim that the architecture of consciousness might prevent agentic content from being experientially encoded. One might argue that phenomenal consciousness is restricted to the output of Fodorian (1983) perceptual modules. On the face of things, this approach to the architecture of phenomenal consciousness would seem to be at odds with the claim that there is a distinctive phenomenology of first-person agency, for it is far from obvious that agentic experiences are generated by Fodorian modules.

Although more plausible than its predecessor, it seems to me that this argument for scepticism can be disarmed as well. For one thing, there is some reason to suspect that at least some components of agentic experience are subserved by low-level modular systems (see section 11). These modules might be output (action) modules rather than input (perception) modules, but they are modules nonetheless. More generally, the objection is vulnerable insofar as there are independent reasons to resist the assumption

that phenomenal consciousness is restricted to modules. Not only is there much to be said in favour of a proprietary phenomenology of cognition, there is also 'fringe phenomenology' to reckon with: 'tip of the tongue' experiences, déjà and jamais vu experiences, and feelings of recognition, familiarity and significance are just some of the many experiential states that are not obviously produced by Fodorian modules.

The central challenge facing the sceptic is to explain (away) the appeal of such vignettes as the one sketched above. The experience of oneself as an agent is, for many of us, a robust and readily identifiable phenomenon. The sceptic needs to explain why it is so plausible to *think* that there is a phenomenology of agency even though there isn't. Perhaps, the sceptic might suggest, so-called agentive experiences are actually more familiar experiential states that are misdescribed as distinctively agentive. But what might these familiar states be? I can think of two candidates: they could be bodily sensations of various kinds, such as experiences of movement (or the potential for movement), or they could be conscious judgments whose contents concern agency. Let's examine these two proposals in turn.³

Although agentive experiences are intimately associated with bodily sensations of various kinds, I think it is clear that we should not identify agentive experiences with bodily sensations. It is one thing to experience one's body as moving, being about to move, or as capable of moving, but it is another thing to experience oneself as acting, being about to act, or even as being able to act. Such commonplace phenomena as involuntary muscular spasms reveal the gulf between experiences of movement and experiences of agency. The attempt to reduce agentive experience to the experience of bodily movement also struggles to account for the experience of mental agency. Although deliberation, decision-

³ One might argue that this line is an account of what agentive experiences are rather than a form of scepticism about agentive experience – that is, that it ought to be thought of as a form of revisionism rather than eliminativism. There is a sense in which this is true, but the fact that people might have conscious beliefs about X clearly does not show that there is a 'phenomenology of X' in any meaningful sense. If having conscious beliefs about X were sufficient for establishing a phenomenology of X, then presumably there would – or at least could – be a phenomenology of X for every X, which isn't something that we want to say.

making, mental effort and the voluntary allocation of attention presumably involve movements in the head, this is not how these states are experienced.

What about the attempt to reduce agentive experience to conscious judgements about agency? Obviously, one cannot explain away the appearance of agentive experience by appeal to cognitive phenomenology unless there is such a thing as cognitive phenomenology, and as we noted, the existence of cognitive phenomenology is not uncontroversial. But even those who are attracted to cognitive phenomenology might want to resist the suggestion that agentive experience is purely doxastic in nature.

I am inclined to think that a little introspection reveals the inadequacy of the doxastic proposal, but it must be admitted that the dialectical force of this point is limited. A more persuasive response to the doxastic proposal involves an appeal to the cognitive encapsulation of agentive experience. Just as the Müller-Lyer illusion shows that the contents of visual experience can be at odds with the contents of judgment, so too certain disorders of agency suggest that the contents of agentive experience can be at odds with those of judgment.

Consider two disorders of agency: the anarchic hand syndrome (Della Sala *et al.*, 1991; Goldberg & Bloom, 1990) and utilization syndrome (Lhermitte 1983; Estlinger *et al.*, 1991). The two syndromes are similar in that each involves an inability to inhibit stimulus-driven actions. The patient with an anarchic hand (or should we say “the patient’s anarchic hand”?) will take food from another’s plate and undo buttons that have only just been done up; the patient with utilization behaviour will put on multiple pairs of sunglasses, even when she is already wearing sunglasses. These actions need not be part of the patient’s over-arching goals, and – at least in the case of the anarchic hand syndrome – may even be at odds with the patient’s goals. (The patient doesn’t want to take food from his neighbour’s plate.) But despite their behavioural commonalities, these two disorders give rise to very different reports about agency: whereas patients with utilization behaviour show no inclination to disown their actions, patients with an anarchic hand typically describe the hand as “having a will of its own”. This difference is vividly illustrated by a case in which a patient exhibited utilization behaviour with his right hand and anarchic hand behaviour with his left hand: he was unconcerned about the former but troubled by the latter (Marcel 2003)!

Although phenomenologically detailed descriptions of these disorders are hard to come by, it is not implausible to suppose that the agentic reports given by patients with an anarchic hand differ from those given by patients with utilization behaviour because their agentic *experiences* also differ. It is because the patient with an anarchic hand fails to experience himself as the agent of the movements of his anarchic hand that he denies authoring its movements, and it is because the patient with utilization behaviour has normal experiences of agency (or at least, does not have abnormal experiences of agency) that she fails to disown her actions. But it is not hard to imagine that one might convince the patient with an anarchic hand that he is acting even though he doesn't experience himself as acting, nor is it hard to imagine that one might convince the patient with utilization behavior that she is not acting despite the fact that she experiences herself as acting (or doesn't experience herself as not acting). A patient simultaneously manifesting an anarchic hand and utilization behaviour might believe that both (or neither) of the movements in question constitute action of theirs, but none of this will change his or her agentic *experience*.

Of course, all of this is consistent with the claim that certain *components* of agentic awareness might involve (or simply be) beliefs or judgments. Consider one's experience of what one is currently doing. It seems implausible to suppose that one could believe that one is performing one type of action (say, waving to a friend) by means of a particular physical movement whilst at the same time experiencing oneself as performing another type of action (say, practicing a dance movement) by means of that same physical movement. One's awareness of what one is doing seems not to be subject to cognitive encapsulation, and hence might well qualify as a judgment of a certain kind.

4. The structure of agentic experience

Let assume that there is a proprietary phenomenology of agency. How should we conceptualise this phenomenology? There are two general issues to be addressed: one concerns the *structure* of agentic experience, the other concerns the *contents* of agentic experience. I take them in turn.

One possibility is that agentic experiences are *descriptive* (or *thetic*). On this view, agentic experiences are in the business of saying how things are; they have veridicality conditions and a mind-to-world direction of fit. Descriptivism is of a piece with the trend

towards representationalism in the analysis of phenomenal character generally. Roughly speaking, representationalists unpack phenomenal character in terms of how the state in question represents the world as being.⁴

Some theorists seem to assume that descriptivism is the only game in town. For example, Horgan et al (2003) move directly from the claim that there is a phenomenology of agency to the question of what its veridicality conditions might be. But things are not quite that straightforward, for it is possible to hold that agentic experiences are intentional but not descriptive. In other words, one might hold that agentic experiences have satisfaction conditions but not veridicality conditions. Searle (1983) appears to hold such a view. According to Searle's treatment of agentic phenomenology, experiences of acting say how the world should be rather than how it is. I will call this the directive (or telic) account of agentic experience. I return to the directive account shortly.

A third position in logical space holds that agentic experiences have both a mind-to-world *and* a world-to-mind direction of fit. To use Millikan's (1996) term, agentic experiences might be *pushmi-pullyu* representations. Of course, the notion that a single representation might have two directions of fit is not completely unproblematic. One might attempt to make the proposal more palatable by suggesting that pushmi-pullyu representations have multiple contents, with each direction of fit characterizing a distinct content. However, this proposal is of little help here, for the attraction of the pushmi-pullyu proposal is that it promises to explain the intuitive pull that one and the same content – something akin to <this movement is an action> – has both a world-to-mind direction of fit and mind-to-world direction of fit.

The directive and pushmi-pullyu accounts of agentic experience both flout the letter of representationalist analyses of phenomenal character, for on neither account is agentic experience unpacked in terms of how the world is represented as being. However, both approaches fall within the *spirit* of representationalism, for they both accept that the analysis of agentic phenomenology can be carried out with reference to intentional content. A fourth approach to agentic experience takes issue with this assumption. According to what we might call the "raw feels" account, agentic experience involves

⁴ See the essays in Gendler and Hawthorne (2006) for a thorough examination of the representationalist approach to the phenomenal character of perception.

raw phenomenal feels, non-intentional phenomenal properties. I know of no defence of such a view, but those who are attracted to a raw feels account of sensations are likely to be attracted to a similar treatment of agentic experience. To my mind, the most convincing case for the raw feels account concerns the experience of effort. Think of what it's like to concentrate on a problem, resist temptation, or complete a set of press-ups at the gym. It is not obvious that the experiences of effort that one enjoys in these scenarios can be assessed for success, but it is less clear that one's experience of effort can also be similarly assessed.

So we have four accounts of agentic experience: the descriptive account, the directive account, the pushmi-pullyu account, and the 'raw feels' account. The last two accounts have not been developed in any detail, and I will leave them for others to pursue. In the next section, I examine Searle's version of the directive approach.

5. The directive account

In his seminal discussion of agentic experience in *Intentionality*, Searle argues that at least one kind of agentic experience – 'the experience of acting' – is directive.⁵ Searle contrasts experiences of acting with visual experiences.

As far as *Intentionality* is concerned, the differences between the visual experience and the experience of acting are in the direction of fit and in the direction of causation: the visual experience stands to the table in the mind-to-world direction of fit. If the table isn't there, we say that I was mistaken, or was having a hallucination, or some such. And the direction of causation is from the object to the visual experience. If the Intentional component is satisfied it must be caused by the presence and features of the object. But in the case of the experience of acting, the Intention component has the world-to-mind direction of fit. If I have this experience

⁵ Although the following paragraph contains a clear endorsement of the directive account, there are other passages in which Searle appears to leave the door open to a 'raw feels' conception of the experience of acting. In one place, Searle says that experiences of acting are intentions in action 'with certain phenomenal properties' (1983: 91f.). The implication seems to be that these phenomenal properties are something over and above the intentions themselves, and hence that whatever intentional content agentic experiences might have does not exhaust their phenomenal character.

but the event doesn't occur we say such things as that I *failed* to raise my arm, and that I *tried* to raise my arm but did not succeed. And the direction of causation is from the experience of acting to the event. Where the Intentional content is satisfied, that is, where I actually succeed in raising my arm, the experience of acting causes the arm to go up. If it didn't cause the arm to go up, but something else did, I didn't raise my arm: it just went up for some other reason. (Searle 1983: 88, emphasis in original; see also 1983: 123f.)

According to Searle, experiences of acting just are intentions of a certain kind, what he calls 'intentions in action.' Searle distinguishes intentions in action from other intentions – prior intentions – in two ways: (i) some actions, such as spontaneously pacing around a room, occur without the formation of prior intentions, whereas all actions involve intentions in action; (ii) prior intentions cause actions, but intentions in action are components of actions (1983: 84).

What does Searle mean by 'the experience of acting'? Does he mean to identify the experience of acting with the experience of *having* a certain intention-in-action or with the experience of *satisfying* an intention-in-action? Given that Searle grants that intentions in action are, roughly, tryings (Searle 1991: 298), it seems to follow that the experience of acting involves the experience of having an intention in action. But is this all there is to the experience of acting? Searle's treatment of the experience of acting suggests not, for he makes much of William James's example of the patient who is asked to raise his anesthetized arm. The patient's eyes are closed, and unbeknown to him his arm is prevented from moving. Upon opening his eyes, the patient is surprised to discover that his arm has not moved. What is the content of the patient's experience? Searle describes it as an experience of *trying* but *failing* to raise one's hand (Searle 1983: 89). It seems to me that this answer is wrong. Intuitively, the patient's experience is one of *raising one's hand* – he experiences himself as having just *realized* his intention to raise his arm. After all, the patient is surprised to discover that his hand is not raised. Why would he be surprised if he experienced himself as merely trying to raise his hand? Searle himself points to a parallel between experiences of acting and visual experiences without appearing to notice that the parallel is at odds with his own account (see 1983: 87). Searle's account appears to entail that what it's like to experience oneself as merely trying to do something is identical

to what it's like to experience oneself as actually doing something, and that seems highly implausible.⁶

One possibility is that 'the' experience of acting actually has two components: an experience of trying to do something (which has directive structure), and an experience of actually doing that thing (which has descriptive structure). This proposal might be accepted by those, such as O'Shaughnessy (2003), who identify experiences of trying with tryings themselves. Such an identification would rule out the possibility of a person experiencing themselves as trying to do something that they are not trying to do.

(However, there would still be space for the possibility of someone trying to do something that they do not experience themselves as trying to do.) The descriptive account of trying, by contrast, must allow for the (in principle, at least) possibility that experiences of trying can be non-veridical – that one can experience oneself as trying to do something when one is not trying to do anything at all. Most people, however, seem to regard such a state of affairs as conceptually impossible, although just how much this should weigh against the proposal is an open question.

6. The descriptive account

We can distinguish two central projects for the descriptivist. The first project is that of giving an account of the contents of agentic experience. Just how demanding this task is depends, to some degree, on the richness of agentic content. We can position theorists between two ends of the following spectrum. At one end are those who subscribe to an *austere* conception of agentic experience. According to such theorists, the contents of agentic experience contrast sharply with those of other perceptual modalities, such as visual experience. Whereas visual experience presents to us a richly tapestried world, replete with colours, shapes, sizes, movement, textures and (arguably) much more, the world that is presented to us in agentic experience is 'bare'; agentic experience can

⁶ Searle's view of experiences of acting cannot be extended to account for experiences of performing an action, for an intention in action couldn't provide the intentional content of both the experience of having an intention in action and the experience of satisfying an intention in action. Might the experience of satisfying an intention in action simply be the state of performing the action in question *consciously* – that is, with certain phenomenal properties? No; as we have just seen, one can have an experience (as) of acting even when one is not acting.

represent oneself as acting, as being in control of one's actions, and as acting with effort, and that's roughly it. At the other end of the spectrum lie those who endorse an *expansive* conception of agentic experience. Expansionists hold that the world presented to us in agentic experience might not be as rich as that presented to us in visual experience, but they certainly think that the contents of agentic experience can – and typically do – exceed the mere representation of agency, control and effort. My sympathies lie towards the expansive end of the scale, but I will not attempt to argue for that position here.⁷

The second project on the descriptivist agenda is that of determining how accurate agentic experiences are. We tend to suppose that most types of agentic experience are highly reliable. We assume that when we experience ourselves as acting we are acting, and that when we experience ourselves as acting in a certain way – say, with effort, or freely – then we are indeed acting in the relevant way. But perhaps these assumptions are misplaced.

Let us distinguish two kinds of error to which agentic experience might be subject: *superficial* error and *deep* error. Superficial error occurs when the mechanisms that generate experiences of agency 'misfire'. This is the sort of thing that occurs in the Jamesian vignette discussed earlier: the patient experiences himself as acting despite not moving. It would not be particularly surprising to discover that the mechanisms responsible for agentic experience are subject to superficial error – after all, few representational systems are infallible. Deep error occurs when the mechanisms responsible for agentic experience produce non-veridical representations even when functioning normally and in normal environments. Some hold that the mechanisms of colour experience are subject to deep error, in that even in normal conditions colour experiences represent objects as having properties that they lack. (Colours, some say, are experienced as simple, intrinsic properties of objects, but so-understood there are no colours.) Similarly, one might argue that agentic experience involves deep error to the

⁷ There are two ways to hold an expansive view of agentic experience. On the one hand, one could take agentic experience to encode a rich array of agency-related properties and relations. On the other hand, one could take agentic experiences to be directed towards a rich array of bodily (and perhaps mental) states and events. Of course, these two options are not inconsistent; one could hold that agentic experience is rich in both of these ways.

extent that we experience ourselves as having (say) libertarian free will, even though no one has (or perhaps even could have) libertarian free will.

Of course, the question of how reliable agentic experience is cannot be divorced from the question of what its content includes. The more that is packed into the content of agentic experience, the greater the threat of error ('the more you say, the more you can be wrong about'). In light of this, we might expect those who regard agentic experience as riddled with error as buying into an expansive conception of agentic content, and, correlatively, we might expect those who regard agentic experiences as largely trustworthy to be sympathetic to a rather more austere conception of the contents of agentic phenomenology. Let us examine how these general issues play out with respect to three components of agentic experience: the experience of mental causation, the experience of the self, and the experience of free will.

7. Mental causation

As folk, we appear to be deeply wedded to a conception of mental states according to which they not only rationalize our actions but also cause them, and their causal efficacy is dependent on their content. This conception of folk-psychology is not uncontested, but it is widely endorsed. Is it also a component of agentic experience?

A number of theorists – particularly those within the cognitive sciences – assumes that it is. According to what we might call 'the causal account', the experience of purposive goal-directed behaviour involves (or perhaps just is) an experience of mental causation (Hohwy 2004). In its simplest incarnation, the causal account says simply that to experience one's movements as one's actions involves experiencing them as caused by mental states (which one experiences as one's own). This sketch of an account can be embellished in various ways. One might suggest that the experience of agency involves the experience of causal relations between mental states. Consider again the vignette with which I opened this paper: one experiences oneself as opening a door, as leaving a building, as escaping a fire, and so on. Does this scenario include an experience of causal relations as nested? Does one experience one's intention to flee the fire as causing one's intention to leave the building, and in turn experience that intention as causing one's intention to open the door, and so on? If one accepts that the basic experience of agency includes an experience of one's intentions as causing one's movements, then there is at

least a *prima facie* case for thinking that one can also experience some of one's mental states as causing the formation of one's intentions.

But what should we say about the basic causal proposal, *viz.*, that the phenomenology of agency involves the experience of one's movements as caused by one's intentions? Some theorists will reject the causal account on the grounds that causation cannot be – or at least *is not* – experienced. I don't have much sympathy with this criticism, for it seems evident to me that causal relations can be experientially encoded. (One sees the bat as *causing* the ball to ricochet away.) A more potent objection to the causal thesis comes from conditions in which the normal experience of autonomous agency appears to be lost or at least disrupted. According to many, the pathological quality of agentic experience in addiction and Tourette's Syndrome *consists in* the experience of mental causation. And – so the argument goes – if the experience of mental causation characterizes pathological agentic experience, then it cannot also characterize non-pathological agentic experience. This account of these disorders would demonstrate that it is *possible* to experience one's own mental states as causally efficacious, but it would at the very same time undermine the idea that the *normal* experience of agency can be understood in terms of mental causation.

Do pathological experiences of agency really involve the experience of mental causation? This is unclear. Addicts may describe themselves as feeling overwhelmed by their urges, but it is not entirely clear that this experience brings with it a sense of being caused to act by one's urges. Perhaps the phenomenology of addiction involves just the sense that one has no, or little, control over having the urges that one does. Or perhaps we can characterize the experience of addictive compulsion simply in terms of the phenomenal strength of desire rather than its perceived causal efficacy. And even those with Tourette's syndrome experience their tics as being under their control (Bliss 1980; Cohen and Leckman, 1992).

Furthermore, even if these cases do involve the experience of mental causation, it is not clear that this is what accounts for their pathological nature. One might argue that their pathological nature resides in the kinds of mental states that are experienced as causally efficacious. Perhaps the difference between the normal case and the pathological case is that in the normal case one experiences one's *intentions* as causally efficacious whereas in the pathological case one experiences one's *desires* (or emotions or urges) as causally

efficacious. Or perhaps the difference resides in the fact that in the normal case the causally efficacious mental state is experienced as one's own, whereas in the pathological case it is experienced as alien in some way. Neither of these suggestions is obviously right, but both are worthy of serious consideration.

Perhaps the most potent objection to the causal account is that it simply misrepresents the nature of agentic experience. O'Connor (1995), Horgan et al (2003) and Wakefield & Dreyfus (1991) all deny being able to find anything that might answer to 'the experience of mental causation' in themselves. These authors grant that they experience their movements as *realizing* their intentions and as *satisfying* their desires, but they deny that they experience their movements as caused by their mental states. (They claim, instead, to experience their actions as caused by, or at least having their source in, themselves.)

Although there seems to be *something* to this line of criticism, it is not difficult to make the causal view attractive. Suppose that Malebranche is right, and that mental and physical events are not related by direct commerce but only by a sort of pre-established harmony: either by divine will or cosmic coincidence, it just so happens that whenever I am aware of intending to open a door my hand moves towards it. I think there is some reason to suppose that there would be something misleading about the phenomenology of agency in a Malebranchian world. Arguably, we wouldn't be so concerned to make the world safe for mental causation if the causal thesis weren't true – or at least widely assumed to be true.⁸

An interesting variant on the causal thesis, endorsed by both Searle (1983) and Mossel (2005), holds that experiences of agency represent *themselves* as causing the target movements. I find this suggestion puzzling: it certainly does not seem to me as though my *experiences* of acting are causally implicated in my movements. The experience I have of myself as raising my arm might cause me to believe that I am raising my arm, but it doesn't seem to me that *it* – that is, the agentic experience itself – causes my arm to move. Searle is drawn to the view that experiences of acting are causally self-referential because (as we have seen) he regards experiences of acting as intentions, and he regards

⁸ It is interesting to ask whether the accounts of mental causation that are advanced by (e.g.) Davidson (1970) and Jackson and Pettit (1988) might also be at odds with the phenomenology of first-person agency.

intentions as representing their own causal efficacy. Obviously, this argument for the causally self-referential conception of agentic experience turns on a commitment to the directive account of agentic experience, and will have no grip on those who prefer alternative conceptions of agentic experience. In fact, one might be inclined to turn this argument on its head, and take the fact that agentic experiences aren't causally self-referential to give us a reason to reject the directive account of agentic experience.

8. The place of the self

A second focus of debate concerns the way in which the experience of oneself enters into the phenomenology of agency. Although most theorists agree that the self is represented in agentic experience in some way or other, there is much disagreement about exactly how the self is agentially represented.

A deflationary account of the role of the self in agentic experience accords the self a 'place-holding' role in agentic experience. On this view, agentic experience brings with it a distinction between things that one does and things that happen to one, but that's all. A number of authors have argued that we need to go beyond deflationism in one (or both) of two ways. Some argue that agentic experience brings with it a particular conception of the relationship between the self and its acts. According to what we might call the 'agent causal account', the phenomenology of agency includes an experience of the self as a cause, where the causal role of the self is not to be understood as derivative on or reducible to the causal role of the self's mental states. Ginet (1990), Horgan *et al.* (2003) and O'Connor (1995) each express some sympathy with this view, although they do not necessarily endorse agent causation as an account of free will.⁹ (Note that the agent causal account, as I construe it here, does not demand the representation of oneself as an *unmoved* mover.)

Some have rejected the agent causal account on the grounds that the very notion of agent causation is incoherent (Searle 2001: 82). It is not at all obvious that the notion of agent causation is incoherent, but even if it is, it doesn't automatically follow that the agent causal account is false. Experiences of pictures of impossible objects – such as Escher

⁹ Horgan *et al.* (2003) use the expression 'self as source' rather than 'self as cause', but it is not completely clear to me what the distinction between cause and source might amount to.

drawings – provide at least some support for the claim that experiences can have impossible content. Others reject the agent causal account on the Humean ground that they fail to discern any such content in their own experience. They admit that the experience of intentional agency involves a representation of oneself, but they deny that this representation brings with it the notion of the self as a primitive cause. According to such theorists, one experiences oneself as a cause only insofar as one experiences one's mental states as causally efficacious. Such a view seems to comport well with the experience of causation in general. Consider watching a dog cause a child to run away by barking at it. One experiences the dog as causally efficacious in virtue of barking; it is the dog *qua* barker that is experienced as causing the child to run, not the dog simpliciter. Similarly, it seems plausible to say that it is the self *qua* bearer of certain mental states that is experienced as causally efficacious. On this view, the experience of the self as a substantial cause is parasitic on, and perhaps reducible to, the experience of event (or state) causation. Agent causationists, of course, would not be happy with this proposal, for they hold that agents are, or at least can be, primitive causes of their movements, where the force of the 'primitive' indicates that the causal relation between the agent and the movement cannot be reduced to relations between events (Chisholm 1982; Taylor 1966).

A second sense in which we may need to go beyond deflationism concerns the kind of object agentive experience represents the self as being (Bayne 2006). It is sometimes suggested that in acting we experience ourselves as "homunculi" – as "ghosts in the machine" or "uncontrolled controllers" (Preston & Wegner 2005; Wegner 2005). This view is naturally paired with an agent causal account of the phenomenology of mental causation, but the two proposals should not be conflated. One could argue that although we experience ourselves as agent causes, this experience is silent about our identity conditions, and that the experience of agent causation allows that the agent is none other than an organism (Bishop 1983).

I am not at all convinced that we ever experience ourselves as homunculi, strictly speaking, but I do think that there is something to the idea that in acting we experience ourselves as *things* – as substances rather than bundles. Bundle theories of the self might be correct as accounts of the self's ultimate nature, but they do not seem to have much going for them as accounts of how the self is represented in agentive experience. It's not

just that the experience of the self is neutral on the question of whether or not the self is a bundle – instead, it seems to be flatly inconsistent with such a view. The experience of exerting will-power and self-control seem to be particularly problematic for such conceptions of the self (Bayne & Levy 2006; Holton 2003). Consider what it's like to resist the temptation to have another helping of dessert, to maintain one's focus on a problem, or to stay awake at the wheel. It is natural to say that in such cases we are presented to ourselves as entities that strive against the members of a certain subset of our mental states. The content of our agentic experience appears to be at odds with those accounts of the self that would identify the self with the totality of introspectively-accessible mental states. Of course, one could say that in these cases one experiences oneself as identical with a certain sub-set of our mental states – say, for example, those that we have consciously-endorsed, or the like – but such a move does not have an air of phenomenal plausibility about it. Even more startling in this regard, I think, is the experience of 'making up one's mind'. Whatever exactly the representational content of this state is, it seems to represent oneself as a thing rather than as a bundle of events.

9. The experience of freedom

A third focus of recent discussion is the experience of freedom (or free will) (Nahmias 2004; Strawson 1986). It is clear that there is some intuitive sense we can – and often do – experience ourselves as acting freely, but it is quite unclear what the satisfaction conditions of such experiences might be.

A central question here is whether the satisfaction conditions of experiences of freedom are compatibilist or incompatibilist in structure, where incompatibilists regard free agency as inconsistent with determinism and compatibilists regard free agency as compatible with determinism. Libertarians have often assumed that experiences with incompatibilist satisfaction conditions are possible, if not altogether common. C.A. Campbell asks,

why do human beings so obstinately persist in believing that there is an indissoluble core of purely self-originated activity which even heredity and environment are powerless to affect? There can be little doubt, I think, of the answer in general terms. They do so, at bottom, because they feel certain of the existence of such activity from the immediate practical experience of themselves (1967: 41).

More recently, Galen Strawson has argued that there is a sense of “radical, absolute, buck-stopping *up-to-me-ness* in choice and action”, a sense that seems “indissociable from the ordinary, sane, and sober adult human sense of self” (2004: 380 and 394; emphasis in original; see also Strawson 1986). Others who argue that some form of incompatibilism is experientially encoded include Foster (1991), Ginet (1990), Pink (2004), and Searle (2001). Such views are not universally shared. Compatibilists do not merely reject incompatibilist accounts of freedom, they typically also reject incompatibilist accounts of our *experience* of freedom.¹⁰

It is not easy to know what to make of this disagreement. Are the proponents of one (or both) sides of this debate misdescribing their experiences of freedom? Do compatibilists and incompatibilists enjoy different experiences of freedom? (If so, are these differences theory-induced, or are they independent of theoretical commitment?) How might we resolve this debate? The difficulties that confront us in attempting to articulate what it is like to experience oneself as a free agent are not unique – other forms of experience pose similar problems – but they are particularly imposing.

One might attempt to gain some traction on these issues by asking whether it is *possible* to experience oneself as having libertarian freedom. One can believe that one’s actions are not determined by the prior state of the world, but not everything that can be represented in judgment can be represented in experience. But the question of whether it is possible for libertarian content to be experientially encoded threatens to be as intractable as the question of whether we actually experience ourselves as libertarian agents. One might, on the one hand, argue that we have no reason to reject the possibility of libertarian experience if we allow (as we should) that causal relations can be experientially represented. But, on the other hand, one might also argue that experiential systems might not be capable of inserting a negation quite where it needs to be inserted in order to represent libertarian freedom. In order to represent an action as free in a libertarian sense

¹⁰ What about the folk? What do those without an investment in the free will debate say about their experiences of freedom? Nahmias *et al.* (2004) provides limited support for claim that the folk represent their experiences of freedom in compatibilist rather than libertarian terms, but see Nichols (2004) and Turner and Nahmias (2006) for evidence that the folk also harbour libertarian inclinations about free will, if not about experiences of freedom per se.

one must not only represent it as undetermined by one's prior psychological properties but also as undetermined by one's physical properties – or indeed any physical properties.¹¹ And it is not obvious that experiential systems have that kind of representational power.

There is much of interest in the phenomenology of freedom even if we leave incompatibilism to one side. What kind of compatibilism might be consistent with, or even entailed by, our experiences of freedom? Is our experience of freedom the experience of being unconstrained by external forces of a certain kind? What kinds of forces? What exactly is it to experience a force as external? Compatibilist accounts of freedom are typically offered as accounts of either free will itself or of our concept of freedom, but one might well ask how well they capture the content of our *experience* of freedom.

It is sometimes suggested that there are constitutive connections between the possession of freedom and the experience of freedom (see e.g. Strawson 1986). Perhaps one must experience oneself as free in order to be free; or, perhaps, one cannot act freely if one experiences oneself as not acting freely. These are important proposals, for it is far from obvious that they are met by standard compatibilist – or, indeed, incompatibilist – accounts of freedom. Compatibilists have said little about how the experience of oneself as an agent might be implicated in the kinds of agentive control demanded by free agency.¹² But although *prima facie* plausible, it is not clear that these proposals should be accepted. Consider the phenomenology of 'flow' that one enjoys at moments of effortless physical or creative activity. Here, one might say, one loses any sense of oneself as a free agent, but one nonetheless retains true freedom of agency. Of course, the objection is far from decisive, for the phenomenology of flow experience is somewhat inscrutable. One *might*

¹¹ In his discussion of the experience of freedom, Searle (2001) fails to distinguish the question of whether it is possible to experience one's actions as not having fully sufficient psychological causes from the question of whether it is possible to experience one's actions as not having fully sufficient causes of any type.

¹² Even those theorists who are most concerned to ground freedom in a theory of human agency, such as Fischer and Ravizza (1998), have said very little about why the phenomenology of freedom – or, indeed, the phenomenology of agency more generally – might be necessary for free agency itself.

argue that flow experience is characterized by an experience of freedom, albeit one that is recessive (that is, not the subject of attentional focus). It may not be possible to pronounce on the above proposals without a better conception of both the experience of freedom and freedom itself. Until we have such accounts in hand, these proposals should remain firmly on the table.

10. The functional role of agentic experiences

What is the functional role of agentic experiences? In asking this question, I do not mean to ask about the biological function of agentic experiences – although this is certainly a question well worth asking – but about their place in our cognitive architecture. What does agentic experience contribute to the agent's cognitive economy? Broadly speaking, two answers to this question have some plausibility.

Firstly, one might look to locate agentic experience in practical reason. Perhaps one cannot perform actions unless one experiences oneself as an agent. There may well be something to this idea, but any defence of this view must reckon with the fact that at least some forms of agency appear capable of existing in the absence of agentic experience. We needn't appeal to such unusual forms of agency as that seen in the anarchic hand or utilization behaviour to make this point – consider what it's like to navigate a busy road while engrossed in a conversation. Crossing the road involves a kind of agency, yet it is doubtful whether it is accompanied by agentic experience in such a case. But perhaps complex (should one say, 'more autonomous?') forms of agency demand certain forms of agentic experience. There is some temptation to think that certain kinds of plans or high-level intentions cannot be executed in the absence of the sense that one is executing them and keeping them on track. The psychologists' distinction between willed intentions and stimulus-driven intentions might be of some assistance here; perhaps willed intentions must be accompanied by agentic experiences, even if stimulus-driven actions need not.

A second (and not unrelated) role for agentic experience is in theoretical reason. One might argue that first-person agentic experience is a route – perhaps the primary route – to first-person knowledge (better: belief) of agency. My agentic experiences not only tell me that I am trying to do something, they also tell me what I am trying to do, how I am trying to do it, and whether or not my tryings are successful. When my experiences are misleading, so too are my beliefs (unless corrected by independent information).

If this approach is on the right lines, then one might expect that unusual beliefs about one's own agency might be grounded in unusual agentic experience. A number of authors have suggested that this is exactly what happens in the schizophrenic delusion of alien control (Davies et al 2001; Frith et al 2000). Patients with this delusion believe that certain of their actions are under the control of an alien force – God, the government, an experimenter, and so on. “My fingers pick up the pen, but I don't control them. What they do is nothing to do with me”; “The force moved my lips. I began to speak. The words were made for me” (quoted in Mellors, 1970: 18). Although distortions of agentic experience might not provide a full account of why patients with delusions of alien control form their delusional beliefs, it is not implausible to suppose that they will play an important role in such accounts. They also seem to support the idea that a function of agentic experience is to ground knowledge of one's own agency. Perhaps we believe that we are in control of our own bodies in large part because we experience ourselves as controlling them; when this experience is lost so too is the corresponding belief.

11. The aetiology of agentic experiences

A final issue concerns the aetiology of agentic experiences. How are agentic experiences generated? This question has only recently received any attention, and even then in only a sporadic way. A few theorists have offered accounts of how particular components of the phenomenology of agency might be produced, but there has been no attempt to put together a comprehensive theory of the genesis of agentic experience.

Broadly speaking, we can identify two approaches to the aetiology of agentic self-awareness. Some invoke a “central” interpretive system to explain our awareness of our own agency (Carruthers 2007; Roser & Gazzaniga 2006; Wegner 2002). Such a conception naturally falls out of a Dennettian approach to self-understanding, according to which first-person mind-reading involves taking up the intentional stance towards one's own behaviour. This approach has also been invoked to account for the schizophrenic delusion of alien-control. According to Stephens and Graham (2000), patients with delusions of alien control experience their actions as no longer their own because they are sensitive to a mismatch between what they are doing and their narrative self-conception.

An alternative approach to the aetiology of agentic self-awareness invokes dedicated sub-personal comparator systems that are concerned with motor control and production

and are largely encapsulated from one's narrative self-conception (Haggard 2005; Haggard 2006). There is a large amount of evidence that such systems play an important role in the generation of certain aspects of agentic experience. For example, Sarah-Jane Blakemore and colleagues found that patients with delusions of alien control are able to tickle themselves, unlike normals and schizophrenic patients with other delusions (Blakemore et al 1998).

Exactly how narrator and comparator systems might conspire to produce the full range of agentic experiences that we enjoy is very much an open question (Bayne and Pacherie, in press). One possibility is that one's narrative self-conception has some influence on the high-level contents of agentic self-awareness (such as the kinds of actions that one takes oneself to be carrying out), but that the low-level contents of agentic self-awareness – what I have called the contents of agentic *experience* – are generated exclusively by low-level comparator systems. Obviously this is only one of the many answers that might be given to this question, and we might expect competing models of the interaction of comparators and narrators to be developed in future years.

12. Conclusion

My goal here has been to provide those who are approaching the phenomenology of agency for the first time with a map by means of which they might orient themselves. As will be apparent, I have been able to chart only a small portion of the terrain confronting us: vast regions of agentic self-awareness remain unmapped, and much work remains to be done before we have a clear idea of exactly what it is like to be an agent. There is good reason to do this work, for a better understanding of agentic experience promises to illuminate some of the deepest questions about both consciousness and agency.¹³

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