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# LIBERTARIAN CHOICE

Stewart Goetz

In this paper, I develop a noncausal view of agency. I defend the thesis that choices are uncaused mental actions and maintain, contrary to causal theorists of action, that choices differ intrinsically or inherently from nonactions. I explain how they do by placing them in an ontology favored by causal agency theorists (agent-causationists). This ontology is one of powers and liabilities.

After explicating how a choice is an uncaused event, I explain how an adequate account of freedom involves the concept of choosing for a reason. Choosing for a reason is a teleological notion, and I set forth what is involved in making a choice for a purpose.

Libertarianism or agency theory is a central thesis in many positions in the philosophy of religion. For example, in philosophizing about the problem of evil, many theists advocate the thesis that human free will (choice) is an essential component of any defense or theodicy. Though I am sympathetic with the position of these theists, the role of free will vis-a-vis the problem of evil is not my concern in this paper. Rather, the issue of choice *per se* is what concerns me. Theists who address the issue of freedom and incorporate it in their theistic philosophy have routinely thought of libertarianism in terms of agent-causation. Thus, in his advice to Christian philosophers, Alvin Plantinga maintains that “[w]hat is really at stake in [the discussion of libertarianism versus determinism] is the notion of agent causation”.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, in his discussion of duty and divine goodness, Thomas Morris says that “[a] great many theists favor a libertarian (agent-causation) analysis of free action.”<sup>2</sup> Finally, in her discussion of Hell, Marilyn Adams asserts that a realistic picture of human agency includes the idea that “[w]e adults with impaired freedom are responsible for our choices . . . in the sense that we are the *agent causes* of them.”<sup>3</sup>

Contrary to what these Christian philosophers suggest, agent-causation is not required for constructing an adequate libertarian account of freedom. Elsewhere, I have argued that agent-causation is actually superfluous for this purpose,<sup>4</sup> and in this paper I develop a non-causal account of libertarianism in which a choice is essentially an uncaused mental action done for a reason, purpose, or telos.<sup>5</sup> Libertarians have



argued in the past,<sup>6</sup> and continue to argue,<sup>7</sup> that a libertarianism in which a free action is an uncaused teleological event is ultimately indefensible. In opposition to these causal agency theorists, I defend a libertarian view in which it is a conceptual truth that a choice is essentially an uncaused purposeful mental action.<sup>8</sup>

In Section I, it is argued that understanding a choice as an uncaused mental action satisfies a desideratum of any libertarian theory, namely, that it be able to explain how mental actions differ from mental nonactions or mere happenings. This noncausalist view of choice is developed in an ontology where a mental power is an ultimate and irreducible property of an agent. To perform a mental act is to exercise a mental power. To choose is to exercise the mental power to choose.

Section II consists of a discussion of how an uncaused choice relates to the issue of being free to choose otherwise. While the lack of causation is necessary for the freedom to choose otherwise, it is not sufficient. In addition to the lack of causation, an adequate account of freedom must involve the concept of choosing for a reason. Explanation of a choice by a reason is teleological or purposeful explanation and the nature of purposeful explanation is examined and defended in Section II.

It is important to emphasize that the purpose of this paper is not to argue against proponents of non-libertarian views of choice such as compatibilism. Rather, the goal is to construct a positive and coherent libertarian account of freedom. One reason often given for rejecting libertarianism is that it is not an internally consistent view. Because of this, it is all the more important for a libertarian to articulate a coherent account of freedom.

## I

A desideratum which any libertarian or agency theory must satisfy is that of being able to explain how it is that mental actions such as choices differ from mental nonactions or mere happenings.<sup>9</sup> Like their nonagency opponents, many agent-causationists give a causal explanation: mental actions differ from mental nonactions in terms of their causal ancestry. They are not intrinsically different. However, while it is true that a choice occurs in the context of and is dependent upon the occurrence of antecedent events (e.g., the coming to have reasons to act and thinking about means to an end), it is plausible to think that a choice does not derive its active character from these other events.

How can a choice be intrinsically active? In the following way: (i) a choice is the *exercising* by an agent of his mental *power* to choose, where (ii) the exercising of a mental power is essentially an uncaused event. Consider (i). A mental power is an ontologically irreducible property which is exhibited by an entity.<sup>10</sup> Corresponding to a mental power is the exercising of that power. Exercising a mental power is acting. One kind of mental power an agent has is the mental power to choose. When an agent exercises it, he chooses. Another mental power an agent has is the mental power to reason or think about propositions and their logical relations. When an agent exercises this power, he actively directs his

attention to propositions and seeks to become aware of their implications in logical space.

Carl Ginet has recently defended an account of mental action which maintains that any mental act differs intrinsically from passive mental events. According to him, a mental act's intrinsic active nature consists in its having an 'actish phenomenal quality'. This actish phenomenal quality lacks the complex structure of a causal relation and, by itself, is enough to make a choice an action.<sup>11</sup> However, it is unwise to characterize the intrinsic active nature of a mental act as a phenomenal quality. Such a characterization suggests that a mental act has a certain *quale* or feel about it which makes it intrinsically active and distinguishes it from a passive mental event. This is a mistake. The exercising of the power to choose, like any mental act, has no intrinsic feel to it. Thus, while I may feel tired after exercising my power to think, which I do when I think at length about free will, this active thinking itself has no intrinsic *quale* any more than choosing does. The active nature of a mental event consists solely in the exercising of a mental power.<sup>12</sup>

If a mental action is an event which is the exercising of a power, what is a mental nonaction or mere happening? It is what I will call the *actualization* of a mental *liability*. Like a mental power, a mental liability is an ontologically irreducible property which is exhibited by a subject. When a subject's mental liability is actualized, he is a patient. Something is being done to him. One mental liability a subject has is the liability to believe. When his liability to believe is actualized, he believes a proposition and he is a patient with respect to believing that proposition.<sup>13</sup>

In summary, there are two types of mental properties, namely, powers and liabilities. These two kinds of properties are inherently different from each other and each is an ultimate category in our ontology. Corresponding to these two kinds of mental properties are two kinds of events, namely, the exercising of a mental power and the actualization of a mental liability. Like the properties themselves, these two kinds of events are inherently different from each other such that any token or instance of the kind 'being the exercising of a mental power' is intrinsically distinguished from any token or instance of the kind 'being the actualization of a mental liability'.

Support for (ii) is conceptual in nature. An event which is efficiently caused is produced by that cause and as such is an occurrence with respect to which its subject is essentially passive.<sup>14</sup> An event is being made to occur to the subject and it is not active with respect to that event. Since an exercise of mental power is active in nature, it is not produced and, thus, cannot be caused.

The intrinsically active and uncaused nature of choosing is confirmed by the epistemology of action. In commenting on causal theories of action, Harry Frankfurt makes the following point about an agent's knowledge of his action:

They [causal theories] are therefore committed to supposing that a person who knows he is in the midst of performing an action cannot have derived this knowledge from any awareness of

what is currently happening but that he must have derived it instead from his understanding of how what is happening was caused to happen by certain earlier conditions. . . . This is what makes causal theories implausible. They direct attention exclusively away from the events whose natures are at issue, and away from the times at which they occur.<sup>15</sup>

Frankfurt's remarks suggest the following point about mental action such as choice. It is an epistemological feature of an agent who knows that he is making a choice that he knows this *while* he is choosing. Given this fact, it is natural to think that he knows that he is choosing by being aware of the choice which he is making. However, if he knows in this way that he is choosing, it seems to follow that choosing is intrinsically different from a mere happening or passive event and that he is aware of this difference. On a causal theory of action, however, an agent who knows that he is choosing cannot possess this knowledge in virtue of his awareness of the choice itself. This is because on a causal theory of action a choice is not intrinsically different from a mere happening. In themselves, the two are indistinguishable. Therefore, an agent can know that he is choosing only by being aware of causal differences which distinguish the two events.

According to Frankfurt, a causal account of action implies that the agent's attention must be directed away from the mental action which he is performing in order for him to know that he is acting. Thus, a causal theory is unable to account for a significant epistemological feature of mental action. However, while Frankfurt has directed our attention to an important epistemological feature of mental action, he unnecessarily obscures his point by suggesting that the problem with a causal theory of action stems from what it implies about the temporal distance separating a mental action from its cause. Thus, Frankfurt not only maintains that a causal theory entails that an agent who knows that he is choosing must derive his knowledge from an awareness of what causes his choice, but also he maintains that the cause is a certain *earlier* event. Because it is, the agent, who knows that he is choosing must be directing his attention away from the *time* at which he is choosing.

If the problem with a causal theory of action pointed out by Frankfurt were essentially linked with this temporal issue, the causal theorist would have a rather obvious response. He could merely stipulate that the cause which distinguishes his choice from a passive event happens simultaneously with the choice.<sup>16</sup> Because the cause occurs simultaneously with the choice, there is no epistemological problem of the kind noted by Frankfurt. It is true that the agent who knows that he is choosing must look to a causal antecedent, but the causal antecedent is, in virtue of its simultaneity with its effect, known immediately by the agent.

The epistemological problem with a causal theory of action pointed out by Frankfurt is not essentially linked with temporal considerations. Rather, it arises in light of the fact that agents who know that they are performing mental actions possess this knowledge by being aware of the actions themselves, without reference to any cause of them. In the case

of a choice, the exercising of the power to choose by the agent is essentially uncaused and intrinsically active and the agent knows that he is choosing by being aware of the choice itself.

Recently, William Rowe has suggested that the exercising of a power be regarded as an intrinsically uncaused active event. For example, in elaborating on Thomas Reid's theory of agency Rowe says that "[n]ot all events have efficient causes. In particular, any event that consists in an exertion of active power will lack an efficient cause."<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, Rowe does not develop an account of choice which accords with the one being developed here. Thus, he claims that an agent makes choices or acts of will but these are caused by his uncaused exertion of his active power to cause his act of will.<sup>18</sup> On the view of choice which is being developed in this paper, an agent does not cause his acts of will (choices). Choosing is the exercise of the power to choose and the exercise of this power is essentially uncaused and intrinsically active. There are two considerations which recommend this view over Rowe's.

First, while I am aware of choosing (exercising my power to choose), I am never aware of exercising my active power to cause my choice.<sup>19</sup>

Second, if one is convinced of the reality of mental powers and their exercisings as uncaused events, what is to be gained in a libertarian account by positing a power to cause acts of will? Why not just say that acts of will are exercisings of the power to choose and, because they are, they are essentially uncaused?<sup>20</sup> This view is simpler and exemplifies all of the virtues of the competing account.<sup>21</sup>

## II

In addition to providing an explanation of how a choice is active and not passive in nature, there is another reason for defending the view that an act of choice is an essentially uncaused and intrinsically active exercising of the power to choose. This additional reason is that the occurrence of such an event helps to account adequately for the freedom to do otherwise which has seemed to agency theorists to be a necessary condition of moral responsibility. If an agent's choice is not caused (or determined in any other way), it is the case that a necessary condition is fulfilled for being free to choose otherwise. However, it must not be thought that an exercising of the power to choose is fortuitous or random because it lacks a cause. When an agent chooses, he has a reason which explains that choice and a reason which would explain not making that choice or making another choice. This reason-giving structure provides the context for choosing and choosing for a reason means that a choice does not occur chaotically or randomly.

To illustrate how an uncaused choice can be made in a nonrandom but responsible way, consider the following example. An agent *P* is considering whether or not to begin a relationship with a handsome and successful colleague at the office. *P* desires that she begin this relationship. Moreover, *P* has been having marital difficulties with her husband. He is out of work, depressed, etc. *P* strongly desires that she go home with her colleague one night (call this act 'C') but believes that

performing such an act is morally wrong. She believes not only that it is right for her not to do *C* but also that it is right for her to do *B*, which is continuing to support her husband emotionally, sexually, financially, etc., through his difficult time. Thus, *P* has a reason for doing *C* (to satisfy her desire to begin a relationship with her colleague at work) and a different reason for doing *B* (to fulfill her marital commitment to her husband). We can say that *P*'s reasons constitute a set of background psychological conditions for either choosing to do *C* or choosing to do *B*. These reasons are neither sufficient for the occurrence or nonoccurrence of choosing to do *C* nor for the occurrence or nonoccurrence of choosing to do *B*. *P* will be free and responsible for either choice. Given this situation, the making of either choice will cohere with or will be nonrandom in the light of the existing psychological conditions of *P*. The reasons *P* has for doing either *C* or *B* underdetermine both choices, yet the making of either would not be random.

In light of the above considerations, there is a distinction between a choice's being random and there being no cause of (or determining condition for) its occurrence. A choice with respect to which an agent is free and responsible has no cause of its occurrence. However, since it is made for one of the reasons constituting his psychological make-up, it will cohere with or be orderly in the context of those reasons. The choice which is made because of a reason is not caused by the latter, and the agent can either make or refrain from making that choice. If the critic insists that a choice performed under the conditions just described is nevertheless random because there is no causal, deterministic, lawlike or necessitarian explanation of its performance, then his concept of a random choice is equivalent to the concept of a choice which is uncaused, nondeterministic, nonlawlike or nonnecessitated. The advocate of a noncausal theory of choice can plead guilty to the charge that his view involves the making of random choices of this kind.

Galen Strawson recognizes that a libertarian "is likely to locate our freedom in our possession of a power to choose."<sup>22</sup> However, he argues that the concept of a choice which is made for a reason cannot be part of an adequate account of freedom. Two arguments which are similar in nature are given by Strawson in support of his position. First, he asserts that the claim to explain freedom in terms of a choice made for a reason fails because such a concept entails an impossible regress of choices. Such a regress is allegedly entailed because in order for an agent to be responsible for his choice, he must be responsible for having the reason for which he made the choice. But, in order to be responsible for having that reason, he must have chosen to have it. And, in order to have chosen to have it, he must have had a reason for choosing to have it, *ad infinitum*. Strawson concludes that libertarian freedom which involves a choice made for a reason is impossible.

In response, the libertarian denies that an agent, in order to be free with respect to his choice, must be free to choose to have the reason for which he makes the choice. An agent cannot just choose to have a certain reason for acting in a specific way. This is because an agent's reason-giving structure is not something over which he has any direct con-

trol. While it is true that an agent, in virtue of making certain choices, can determine some of the reasons he will have in the future for performing certain kinds of actions, this is only an indirect control over his reason-giving structure.<sup>23</sup> At some initial point, the reasons which an agent had for making a choice will not be a matter over which he has any kind of control. An agent must start with some reasons for making choices, where those reasons were not themselves chosen. To maintain otherwise would require that an agent, at some initial point, choose *ex nihilo* (for no reason at all) to have reasons for acting. Given the plausible principle (call it the 'principle of universal explanation') that every event has an explanation, this is impossible.

Strawson's second argument against the view that an agent's freedom resides in a choice made for a reason claims that a choice made for a reason is rational and non-random (in the sense that it is adequately explained by that reason) only if the agent makes that choice in light of some further principle or reason which recommends that he choose for that reason.

[I]f it [the agent] has no such . . . principles of choice governing what decisions it makes in light of its initial reasons for action, then the decisions it makes are rationally speaking random: they are made by an agent-self that is, in its role as decision-maker, entirely non-rational in the present vital sense of 'rational': it is reasonless, lacking any principles of choice or decision.<sup>24</sup>

In Strawson's second argument,<sup>25</sup> the claim is not that the agent who chooses to perform act *A* for a reason *R* must have chosen to have *R*, but that he must have a principle *P* for choosing to perform *A* for *R*. Otherwise, the choice to perform *A* for *R* will be random. At this point, it is important to distinguish two senses of randomness. The first sense is that of being non-rational or being made for no reason at all. The second is that of being neither rational (made for a good reason) nor irrational (made for a bad reason). Consider, again, the woman who is thinking about becoming involved with her colleague at the office. Suppose that she chooses to remain faithful to her husband, *B*, in order to fulfill her marital commitment to him (in order to act morally, as opposed to immorally), *R*. Strawson's claim seems to be that unless some *P* exists in light of which choosing to do *B* for *R* is justified or unjustified, good or bad (let *P* be "One ought always to act morally, for good reasons, and not immorally, for bad reasons"), then the woman's choosing to do *B* for *R* is random or reasonless in the sense of being neither rational nor irrational, even though it is not non-rational.

If we assume, as seems plausible, that *P* exists, then Strawson proceeds to raise the following objection:

The actions are now once again performed for, and are truly explicable just by reference to, [principles]. But, by the same token, the original objection regarding the fact that the agent cannot be self-determined with respect to these [principles]



applies once again with full force.<sup>26</sup>

In other words, Strawson seems to believe that if *P* is not chosen by the agent for some reason, then ultimately the agent cannot be free and responsible for his choice to do *A* for *R*. But for the agent to choose *P*, he would have to have an additional principle *P'*, in virtue of which he chooses *P*, *ad infinitum*.

This argument is a reformulation of the first objection, and the answer to the latter is applicable here. There is no more reason to think that an agent has control over and is able to choose *P*, than there is reason to think that he has control over and is able to choose *R*. Moreover, there is no reason to think that he must have this kind of control and choice in order to be able to choose freely and responsibly to do *A* for *R*.

Choices are essentially uncaused mental actions done for reasons. How, it might be asked, can reasons explain choices if they do not cause them? The answer to this question is that reasons are teleological explanations of choices. Choosing for a reason is choosing for a purpose. Teleological explanation is not a form of causal explanation but a distinct and irreducible form of explanation. In general, teleological explanation involves an agent (i) conceiving of the future as including a state of affairs which is an end to be produced, where this end is provided in the propositional content of a belief or a desire,<sup>27</sup> (ii) conceiving of the means to its realization, where the means begin with his performing an action (unless the action itself is the end, in which case there will be no means), and (iii) performing that action *in order to* bring about the end.

In trying to account for freedom, agent-causationists try to explain every event in terms of causation on the grounds that everyone believes in the principle of universal causality—everyone believes that every event must have a cause.<sup>28</sup> Otherwise, they argue, at least some events would occur randomly and inexplicably. Nevertheless, agent-causationists also claim that there are two kinds of explanation, teleological and causal, neither of which is reducible to the other.<sup>29</sup>

Agent-causationists are confused on the issue of explanation. It is plausible to maintain that every event has an explanation (earlier I termed this the 'principle of universal explanation') but implausible to think that every event has a cause. Moreover, there are two kinds of explanation, teleological and causal, neither of which is reducible to the other. Sometimes one event will have both kinds of explanation (e.g., an agent might cause an event to occur for a reason so that the effect event is explained both causally and teleologically). However, choices, because they are not effect events (they are uncaused), have only one kind of explanation, namely, a teleological explanation—an explanation in terms of a reason. Because a choice is an uncaused mental action it has only a teleological explanation.

A frequent criticism of teleological explanation says that teleological explanation must be a form of causal explanation because, if it were not, there would be no way to account for the distinction between having a reason to choose and choosing *with* it and having a reason to choose and

choosing *because* of it.<sup>30</sup> One may *justify* a choice by citing a reason one has even if in choosing one did not choose because of it, but one cannot *explain* a choice by citing a reason unless one chooses because of it.

To illustrate the objection, consider an executioner named Smith. Smith is ordered to put to death a certain individual, Charles. Charles was caught in the act of, confessed to, and was convicted for murdering a woman who happens to have been Smith's wife. Smith has two reasons for putting Charles to death. On the one hand, he believes that it is his job and moral duty to put to death persons guilty of the heinous crime of murder. On the other hand, Smith desires to get revenge against Charles by killing him. Smith has more than one reason to kill Charles. Both reasons justify the act. After putting Charles to death, Smith tells a reporter that he chose to put Charles to death in order to carry out what he believed was his job and moral duty, and he did not choose to kill him in order to get revenge. According to the critic, this can only mean that Smith's having the one reason caused him to make the choice and his having the other reason did not. But this is not the only way to explain Charles' choice. The distinction drawn to our attention by the critic can be accounted for on a teleological explanation of Smith's choice. On the teleological view of explanation, Smith chose to put Charles to death in order to fulfill his job and moral duty. Even though he had more than one reason which justified his choice, only one explained it, namely, the one which gives the purpose for which he chose.<sup>31</sup>

Given the plausible distinction in Smith's case between his putting Charles to death in order to carry out what he believed was his job and moral duty as opposed to putting Charles to death in order to get revenge, the noncausal agency theorist has a way to account for the distinction between having a reason and choosing with it and having a reason and choosing because of it. How is this teleological understanding of explanation any less effective as a way of accounting for this distinction than saying that one reason caused the choice and the other did not? Three arguments which a nonlibertarian critic might make are as follows:

First, a critic might argue that the causal theorist's account is superior because it is a more complete explanation. The causal theorist can say that causation involves laws and the reason which caused the choice did so because it and the choice are describable, at some level, in terms which make reference to laws. The noncausal theorist's account of the relationship between a reason and a choice is inferior because it cannot be further explicated in this way.

At this point, the causal theorist has just begged the question against the noncausal theorist. The point ultimately at issue between them is whether there are, at any level of description, lawlike explanations of choices. The noncausal agency theorist maintains that there are not and it is not an argument against his position to say that causal explanation is a more ultimate or genuine form of explanation because it involves nomic concepts. The truth is that with the distinction between causal and teleological explanation one has reached two irreducible ways of

explaining events. There is no sound argument which will prove that the latter form of explanation is less basic than and a form of the former.

Second, a critic might argue that it may be asked of Smith why he chose to put Charles to death in order to fulfill his moral duty and not in order to get revenge. Why did Smith choose to execute Charles for the one reason and not for the other? If there is no answer to this question, was not the choice fortuitous? If it was fortuitous, how can Smith be free and responsible?

Interpreted in one way, the critic's question plausibly suggests the existence of something like the previously acknowledged principle *P* which made Smith's choosing to put Charles to death for the reason that he did rational, as opposed to irrational. Interpreted in a second way, however, the critic's question wrongly implies that there must have been an explanation for why Smith made the rational choice as opposed to the irrational one. On this second reading, the critic's question assumes the reality of what does not exist (compare the question: 'Why did you beat your wife?' asked of a man who has not beaten his wife). Moreover, it is precisely because there is no explanation of the kind which is sought for in the critic's question that Smith's choice is the locus of his freedom and responsibility.<sup>32</sup>

Third, a critic might maintain that to say, in the situation as described, that Smith was free to choose and chose as he did for the one reason and not for the other is unsatisfying. One wants to know more about what makes the one reason and not the other the reason for which he chose to act, given that at the time of choosing he was aware of both reasons for acting. Must there not be, say, some kind of counterfactual among the truth conditions of his choice, a counterfactual such as 'If Smith had not believed that putting Charles to death was his job and moral duty, then he would not have chosen to put Charles to death.?'

In the case of Smith, there is no reason to think that the truth conditions of his choice include or entail a relevant counterfactual. Because Smith has more than one reason for putting Charles to death, he could have lacked the reason for putting Charles to death upon which he acted and still have chosen to put Charles to death. Thus, in a counterfactual situation where Smith is no longer an executioner but Charles has murdered his wife, Smith could still have chosen to kill Charles in order to get revenge.

That a reason is an adequate explanation of a choice need not imply that there exists a counterfactual dependence of the choice on that reason such that if that reason had not existed, the choice would not have been made.<sup>33</sup> It does not imply this in a case of freedom such as that involving Smith and Charles. However, it is false to conclude from this example that explanation of a choice in terms of a reason will never imply the assertion of a counterfactual dependence of the suggested kind. For example, in a case where an agent has a reason to perform an action *A*, a reason not to perform *A*, but no other reason to perform *A*, if it had been the case that the agent lacked that reason for doing *A* and acquired no other reason to *A*, then he would not have chosen to *A*. This is because an agent can only choose to *A* in a situation where he has a

reason to *A*. But in this counterfactual situation, he lacks such a reason. Because teleological explanation involves an agent conceiving of his action as a means to an end or as an end in itself, if he were no longer to conceive of his action in either of these ways, he would no longer have a reason to perform it.

In summary, genuine explanation of a choice in terms of a reason does not always imply a true counterfactual which states that had the agent not had that reason, then he would not have chosen as he did. Sometimes such a counterfactual will be implied and sometimes it will not. But even in cases where it is implied, there is no reason to think that the connection which links the reason and the choice is causal in nature. A teleological relation between the reason and the choice is most plausible and adequately accounts for the dependence of the choice on the reason. There is no reason to insist that this dependence must be understood causally which does not in one way or another assume the truth of determinism.

It is important to point out that some libertarians have mistakenly believed that teleological explanation alone cannot account for the distinction between having a reason and choosing with it and having a reason and choosing because of it. For example, Timothy O'Conner has recently maintained that a noncausal libertarian theory cannot account for the distinction between having a reason to choose and choosing with it and having a reason to choose and choosing because of it. There must be something to link the reason to choose and the choice made for that reason. O'Conner believes that this link must be causal in nature and develops what he regards as an agent-causationist account of freedom in which an agent has the causal capacity to cause the coming to be of an intention to act. The coming to be of an intention is an event-part of a decision (choice) which is made for a reason. Most important for present considerations is O'Conner's view that the causation by the agent of the coming to be of an intention has no cause and is "dependent upon the reason he has . . . for acting [deciding] in that way. . . . For the agent's free exercise of his causal capacity provides a necessary link between reason and action, without which the reason could not in any significant way explain the action."<sup>34</sup>

Does O'Conner's agent-causationist account of freedom avoid the problem which he claims undermines the noncausal libertarian's explanation of freedom? No. If there is a problem with explaining how a reason explains an uncaused choice, there is a problem with explaining how a reason can explain an agent's uncaused exercising of his power to cause the coming to be of an intention, where the exercising of this power depends upon the reason for the decision of which the coming to be of the intention is a part. Since there is no problem for the noncausal libertarian who asserts that a reason alone can explain an uncaused choice, agent-causation is superfluous to an adequate account of agency.

My position on teleological explanation is that the explanatory connection between a reason and the action performed for that reason is primitive and unanalyzable. Ginet is a libertarian who believes that this connection can be explicated in terms of an intention to act. On his

view, an action is explicable in terms of an intention had by the agent at the time of performing an action, where the intention refers directly to the action and its content specifies that the action is being done in order to fulfill the remembered reason for performing it. To illustrate his position, Ginet takes an agent *S* who urgently needs her glasses which she has left in *R*'s room where *R* is now sleeping.

*S* has some desire to wake *R*, because she would then have *R*'s company, but also some desire *not* to wake *R*, because she knows that *R* needs the sleep. *S* decides to enter *R*'s room in order to get her glasses, knowing as she does so that her action will satisfy her desire to wake *R*. Could it nevertheless be true that *S* did not intend of her action that it wake *R*? . . . It seems right to say that *S* did not intend to wake *R* if *S* was so disposed that, had it turned out that her entering the room did not wake *R*, *S* would not have felt that her plan had failed to be completely realized, and she must then either wake *R* in some other way or decide to abandon part of her plan. And *S*'s being thus *uncommitted* to waking *R* is quite compatible with *S*'s expecting and desiring to wake *R*.<sup>35</sup>

Ginet's view as applied to the case of Smith and Charles implies that Smith executed Charles in order to fulfill his duty because he intended of the execution that it fulfill his duty but he did not execute him in order to get revenge because he did not intend of the execution that it be done in order to get revenge.

Ginet has not succeeded in explicating the explanatory connection between a reason and the free action (choice) performed for that reason in terms of intention. This is because an intention (which is a commitment to act) is formed on the basis of a choice made for a reason. Free agents such as *S* and Smith only intend to perform actions for reasons because they first choose for those reasons to perform those actions.<sup>36</sup> Thus, while the concept of intention provides an explanatory connection between the choice and the chosen action, it provides no such connection between the reason and the choice itself.

At this point, Ginet might argue that it is false to maintain that free agents only intend to perform those actions which they first choose to do. Free agents such as *S* and Smith also intend their choices to act. They must intend those choices because their choices are teleologically explained by reasons *R* and an intention is required to forge a link between *R* and those choices.

To understand the inadequacy of this response, one needs to consider how free agents are able to intend their choices on this view. What *explains* such intentions to choose? The reasons *R* for which the choices are made? But if *R* can explain these intentions directly, without the need for something to forge an explanatory connection between the two of them, why cannot *R* explain the choices directly, without the need for intermediate intentions to link the choices with their reasons? If *R* do not explain the intentions, perhaps further reasons *R'* explain them. But if free

agents intend their choices for reasons  $R'$ , will they not need second-order intentions to link the first-order intentions with their reasons  $R'$ ? Here, a vicious regress seems unavoidable. The only way to avoid such a regress is to say that free agents intend their choices for reasons  $R'$ , and that is the end of the matter. But if there is no problem with saying this, there is no problem with saying that free agents such as  $S$  and Smith choose for reasons  $R$ , and that is the end of the matter. Thus, in the end, there is nothing problematic with the libertarian position which maintains that choices are teleologically explained for reasons and teleological explanation cannot be explicated in terms of any other concept such as intention.

In written correspondence, Ginet has responded to my criticism of his view by maintaining that he would prefer to talk in terms of the act of adopting the intention to  $A$ , instead of the act of choosing to  $A$ . In this way, the act of adopting the intention to  $A$  forges an explanatory connection between  $A$  and the reason  $R$  for which  $A$  is done. Even if we concede to Ginet his preference, it can still be shown that intention cannot plausibly be used to forge an explanatory connection between  $A$  and  $R$ . This is because adopting an intention is itself an act and, as such, is explained by a reason. What forges an explanatory connection between the adopting of an intention and the reason for which it is adopted? Is there some further intention which is adopted? If there is, then it will have to be adopted for a reason and an explanatory connection will have to be forged between it and that reason. A vicious regress like that described in the previous paragraph is avoidable only by saying that an intention can be adopted for a reason without any explanatory connection between it and that reason being forged by a further intention. But if this is the case, then the explanatory connection between a reason and the act of adopting an intention is ultimately primitive and unanalyzable and intention cannot be used in the way Ginet suggests to clarify the nature of teleological explanation.<sup>37</sup>

### III

I conclude that the teleological explanation of an essentially uncaused choice is a coherent concept which is supported by the epistemology of choosing. Indeed, I maintain that the concept has the status of a conceptual truth. Theists would do well to take a libertarianism which asserts this more seriously. As Plantinga notes, one essential component of theism is that God holds human agents responsible for what they do, and that libertarian freedom is necessary for such responsibility.<sup>38</sup> By seeking to explain freedom in terms of agent-causation, the theist always, if ever so slightly, undermines the thesis that we are really free and responsible. This is because the inclusion of causation in any form raises the spectre of causal determinism and the view that nothing is adequately explained without it, which is precisely what the libertarian denies is true. If we really are free in the libertarian sense, a free action is uncaused.<sup>39</sup>

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1. Alvin Plantinga, "Advice to Christian Philosophers," Inaugural Lecture as the John A. O'Brien Professor of Philosophy at the University of Notre Dame, November 4, 1983, p. 23.

2. Thomas Morris, *Anselmian Explorations* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press), 1987), p. 27.

3. Marilyn McCord Adams, "The Problem of Hell: A Problem of Evil for Christians," in *Reasoned Faith*, ed. by Eleonore Stump (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), p. 313. The emphasis is Adams'.

4. See my "A Noncausal Theory of Agency," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 49 (1988): 303-316.

5. Cf. Alan Donagan, *Choice: The Essential Element in Human Action* (New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1989) and Richard Taylor, *Action and Purpose* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1966).

6. Cf. Roderick Chisholm's "Freedom and Action," in *Freedom and Determinism*, ed. by Keith Lehrer (New York: Random House, 1966), pp. 11-14, and Richard Taylor's *Metaphysics*, 3rd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1983), Chapter 5.

7. See Timothy O'Connor's "Agent Causation," in *Agents, Causes, & Events*, ed. by Timothy O'Connor (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 173-200.

8. In this paper, what is meant by 'causation' is efficient causation which is the exercising of a causal power that produces its effect. Though popular, the concept of indeterministic or probabilistic causation in which a cause does not determine its effect is problematic. For an excellent criticism of it, see Ted Honderich, *A Theory of Determinism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), p. 61.

9. For example, the agency theorist, Taylor, says "The 'problem of action,' . . . is essentially that of supplying the difference between mere bodily motions and those that represent acts. There are other problems of action, surely, especially since some acts, interestingly enough called 'mental,' seem to involve no bodily motions at all." *Action and Purpose*, pp. 88-89.

10. Some will argue that the assertion that a power is an ultimate and irreducible property of a mind is obscure and unwarranted. This is hardly the case. It is no more obscure or implausible than saying that the nature of physical particles consists, at least in part, of causal powers or forces to attract and repel other particles with similar forces. Contrary to the objector, it is obscure and implausible to maintain that an adequate account of the world can be given without making reference to the concept of a power which constitutes at least part of the essence of its bearer.

An anonymous referee has noted that at least in the case of causal powers possessed by physical things, the idea of power can be cashed out in terms of some sets of dispositional properties expressed in 'if-then' statements. Because this cannot be done with a mental power such as the power to choose, the concept of such a power is obscure.

It seems to me that on this issue, the agent-causationist does have it correct: "[I]t is true that human beings are the only putative examples we yet have of possessors of powers that are exercised at will. But human action is of great importance and interest to human beings, and if it can be understood only by employing a concept that applies to nothing else in their experience, they have no option but to employ it." Donagan, *Choice: The Essential Element in Human Action*, p. 173.

11. Carl Ginet, *On Action* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 13f.

12. Wilfrid Sellars ("Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man," in

*Metaphysics*, ed. by Ronald C. Hoy & L. Nathan Oaklander [Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1991], p. 509) has pointed out "the mistake of supposing that in self-awareness conceptual thinking presents itself to us in a qualitative guise."

13. Theists who have recognized that we are patients with respect to what we believe include Plantinga ("Is Belief in God Properly Basic?," in *Contemporary Perspectives on Religious Epistemology*, ed. by R. Douglas Geivett and Brendan Sweetman [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992], p. 134: "[O]ne's beliefs, for the most part, are not directly under one's control.") and William Alston ("Religious Experience and Religious Belief," *Ibid.*, p. 296: "[B]elief is not, in general, under voluntary control . . .").

14. Another anonymous referee has inquired about events "internal" to the agent which are caused by the agent's choice (presumably, an instance of an internal event is a brain event which is caused by a choice). The agent controls these events in virtue of controlling his choice. Is the agent essentially passive with respect to such events? "At the very least it seems some distinction should be made between events that are the immediate products of the agent's free choices and events that are not the products of the agent's free choices."

The distinction in question can be made, as the referee suggests, in terms of causal ancestry. There are two kinds of passive internal events which can occur in an agent: those which are caused by the agent's choice, and those which are caused by other events with respect to which the agent is also passive. Considered in themselves, all caused events are ones with respect to which an agent is directly or immediately passive. With respect to some of these events, however, an agent may be indirectly active, given that his choice was the cause of them.

15. Harry Frankfurt, "The Problem of Action," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 15 (1978):157. Frankfurt makes this epistemological point with respect to bodily actions but it is equally, if not more, relevant for mental actions.

16. For examples of causal theorists who do this, see Myles Brand, *Intending and Acting* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press pp. 17-23, and Irving Thalberg, "Do Our Intentions Cause Our Intentional Actions?," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 21 (1984):249-260.

17. William Rowe, "Responsibility, Agent-Causation, and Freedom: An Eighteenth-Century View," *Ethics* 101 (1991):247.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 246.

19. In written correspondence, Rowe concedes that his experience of choosing is like mine in that he is not aware of exercising an active power to cause his choice.

20. In the correspondence referred to in endnote 19, Rowe answers my questions in the following way. He thinks that Reid would say that the need for distinguishing an act of will from an exercise of active power which causes it is needed because there is reason to believe that some acts of will are causally necessitated by the agent's desires and circumstances. Those which are not causally necessitated in this way are caused, instead, by the agent's exercising of his power to cause an act of will.

There is no good reason to think that an act of will can be caused by a desire or circumstance. If acts of will can be caused by a desire or circumstance, why cannot an exercising of the power to cause an act of will be caused by a desire or circumstance? Presumably, the answer is that "it is *conceptually impossible* to cause an *agent* to cause . . . his volition. For an agent has active power to cause only if he has power not to cause. This last is a conceptual truth for Reid." William Rowe, "Reid's Conception of



Human Freedom," *Monist* 70 (1987):441, e.n. 15. But why not invoke the conceptual truth with respect to the exercise of will and maintain that it is a conceptual truth that it is uncaused? This seems perfectly reasonable and does not unduly complicate matters.

One of the previously mentioned anonymous referees has suggested that my view that all choices are essentially uncaused is eccentric. Other libertarians (e.g., Chisholm and van Inwagen) accept the view that undertakings, volitions, choices, and intentions can be causally necessitated in some circumstances, and that an agent freely chooses only in those situations where his choice is not causally necessitated.

Because I don't know what undertakings and volitions are, if they are not choices, I can only comment on intentions. Intentions are not choices. Rather, an intention is a commitment to act and when a choice to act is made, it necessarily leads to an intention to perform that action. So while intentions are necessitated, choices are not. For an in-depth discussion of the relationship between choice and intention, see my "The Choice-Intention Principle," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 32 (1995):177-185.

21. What is the principle difference between my non-causal libertarian view and that of an agent-causationist, if, on either view, an agent exercises a power to act and is not caused to do so? Simply stated, agent-causationists insist that every event, even those which are mental actions, are caused. What makes mental actions different from non-actions is that the former are caused by an agent, while the latter are caused by events. On my view, mental actions are uncaused, period.

What is ultimately at stake between agent-causationists and myself is the adequacy of teleological explanation *alone* to explain choice. As I pointed out in the Introduction, agent-causationists have always insisted that non-causal libertarian views are deficient. In opposition to them, I am arguing that there is no need to include causation of any kind in explaining choice (freedom).

22. Galen Strawson, *Freedom and Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 45. On locating indeterminism at the point of choice or decision, Randolph Clarke says "I think that any libertarianism worth its salt will require that on at least some occasions indeterminism is so located." "Indeterminism and Control," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 32 (1995):129.

23. For instance, in the example of employee *P*, *P* will face different future choices, in light of different future reason-giving structures, depending upon which choice, *B* or *C*, she makes with respect to her colleague. If she chooses to do *B*, she might acquire a reason to find a part-time job, which is a means of supporting her husband financially, and she would not have had this reason for acting if she had chosen to do *C*.

24. Strawson, *Freedom and Belief*, p. 53.

25. I am indebted to William Wainwright and one of the anonymous referees for helping me clarify Strawson's second argument.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 54.

27. Cf. George Wilson's *The Intentionality of Human Action* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989), Chapter 7, for a fine treatment of this issue.

28. "That things cannot begin to exist, or undergo any change, without a cause that has power to produce that change . . . is so popular, that there is not a man of common prudence who does not act from this opinion, and rely upon it every day of his life." Thomas Reid, *Essays on the Active Powers of the Human Mind*, ed. by Baruch Brody (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1969), p. 29. Cf. Taylor, *Metaphysics*, p. 34 and Donagan, *Choice: The Essential Element in Human Action*, p. 28.

29. Cf. Taylor, *Action and Purpose*, p. 142.

30. Cf. Donald Davidson, *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), pp. 9, 11, 32 and 87.

31. The fact that choices are essentially uncaused events helps to answer an objection made by Al Mele to the teleological explanation of action in an example of Wilson's (*The Intentionality of Human Action*, pp. 287-288) which is structurally similar to my example involving Smith and Charles. With my own modifications, Wilson's example and Mele's modification and criticism of it (*Springs of Action* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp.248-250) are as follows: There is a man who has left his hat, tool kit, and a basket of bricks on a roof. The man wants to fetch each but knows that he cannot get them all at once. As he starts up the ladder, he is undecided about which item(s) to retrieve this time. At some point up the ladder, the man chooses to get the tool kit on the current trip, where his choice is supposedly explained by a reason *R*. However, imagine that just as he is about to make his choice for *R*, random *Q* signals from Mars cause his choice. While the man thinks that *R* explains his choosing to retrieve the tool kit, in fact the *Q* signals explain his choice. The choice *coincides* with the one he was going to make for *R* but it is not *explained* by *R*. The challenge to the teleologist is to articulate how *R* could explain the man's choice without causing it.

Given that choices are essentially uncaused events, the answer to this, in Mele's words, 'highly contrived case' is simply that such a case is impossible.

32. Thomas Nagel (*The View From Nowhere* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1986], p. 116) says "Intentional [teleological] explanation, if there is such a thing, can explain either choice in terms of the appropriate reasons, since either choice would be intelligible if it occurred. But for this very reason it cannot explain why the person [chose] for the reasons in favor instead of [not choosing] . . . for the reasons against. It cannot explain on grounds of intelligibility why one of two intelligible [choices], both of which were possible, occurred. . . . But this seems to mean that an autonomous intentional explanation cannot explain precisely what it is supposed to explain, namely *why I [chose] what I did rather than the alternative that was causally open to me.*" (The emphasis is Nagel's.)

The correct response to Nagel is to maintain that teleological explanation is not supposed to explain what Nagel says it is.

33. Cases where agents such as Smith have more than one reason for performing a certain action resemble cases of "fail-safe causation". In cases of the latter kind, there is an effect event *E* which is caused by an event *C* but the situation is such that had *C* not caused *E* another causal event *C'* would have produced *E*. Here, it is false to say that had *C* not occurred, then *E* would not have occurred. However, the falsity of this counterfactual does not entail that *C* was not the cause of *E*.

34. O'Conner, "Agent Causation," p. 191.

35. Ginet, *On Action*, pp. 145-146.

36. That agents intend to do what they choose to do is known as the 'choice-intention principle'. For a defense of this principle, see my "The Choice-Intention Principle".

37. In further written correspondence, Ginet has conceded that the description 'We have an intention formed for a reason, period' is perhaps correct. If it is, then given the reality of choice, there is no problem with saying that an agent chooses for a reason, period.

38. Plantinga, "Advice to Christian Philosophers," p. 21.

39. I want to thank Michael Bratman, Thomas Flint, Carl Ginet, Robert Kane, Tomas Kapitan, Al Mele, Timothy O'Conner, William Rowe, William Wainwright, and two anonymous referees for reading earlier drafts of this paper and making many helpful suggestions and criticisms.