

## ***Bio-powers and Free Will***

Anne Sophie Spann  
(Innsbruck/ Austria)

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The problem of free will as discussed in traditional action theory appears to be a problem exclusively concerning human agency. This is due to the fact that traditional action theory simply *is* a theory of the actions performed by human persons. Whether in the famous debate on the relationship between reasons and causes or in the disputes on responsibility and control, the concept of action at issue is derived from the behavior typical of healthy, adult humans and i.e., of persons. The same notion of action, then, is presumed when asking whether and how actions can be free.

Perhaps this is a mistake. Especially against the background of the challenge of naturalism it might be suspected that traditional action theory suffers from a theoretical restriction, which from the outset undermines the task of meeting that challenge in a persuasive way. The problem of free will does not remain unaffected by this. Quite the contrary, if it is true that, as John Bishop suggested, that problem itself is nothing but the problem of “accommodating actions within the natural universe”,<sup>1</sup> we are even more well-advised to substitute the commonly asked narrow question ‘How does *human* agency fit into a natural world?’<sup>2</sup> by the broader question ‘How does agency *in general* fit into a natural world?’.

Indeed, recently there have been made several attempts to transcend the boundaries of traditional action theory in that direction. These attempts, belonging to a neo-Aristotelian metaphysics,<sup>3</sup> to the system theoretical line of thought in the philosophy of biology<sup>4</sup> or to the so-called Enactive Approach of the cognitive sciences<sup>5</sup> if not inspired by all three of these,<sup>6</sup> tackle the general challenge of naturalism by developing a notion of agency as universal as possible, i.e., a notion of agency subsuming forms of non-human agency as well.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Bishop (1989), 1f.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Mayr (2011), 1ff.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Buchheim (2006).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Skewes/ Hooker (2009).

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Varela/ Thompson/ Rosch (1991) and, more recently, Thompson (2007).

<sup>6</sup> This seems to be the case with Helen Steward’s theory of animal agency, cf. Steward (2012).

They all converge in recognizing that human agency is the special case of an overall capacity to act, which is biological in essence: Human agency is the agency of organisms, whose capacity to act does not fall from the sky but is biologically preformed in other organismic life forms.

Construing agency as 'bio-agency' – as a global biological phenomenon performed by biological agents – has some interesting consequences with regard to the problem of free will. The main point is that it leads to a non-orthodox view of causation involving the assumption of biological or biologically founded powers – let's call them 'bio-powers' –, which enable bio-agents to perform free actions. Free agency cannot be captured by the standard event-causal accounts as delivered by versions of the Causal Action Theory. Another aspect is the somehow innovative and sophisticated stance on the determinism – indeterminism controversy derived from the commitment to such bio-powers. It seems as if a biological perspective could create the space for a tertium datur in the sense that it allows for either a new conception of determinism or a richer understanding of indeterminism concerning biological phenomena. Finally, bringing free will together with bio-powers sheds new light on free will itself. Free will appears to be demystified in so far as it is reconceptualized as a biological function of the survival and well-being of organisms.

In my paper, I will, with varying degrees of comprehensiveness, address three of those theories to be subsumed under the heading of 'bio-agency'. The first two – the systems biological theory of J. C. Skewes and C. A. Hooker, which models free actions as processes of anticipative self-regulations of organisms, and the neo-Aristotelian theory of T. Buchheim, according to which free actions are complex life-expressions ('Lebensäußerungen') of organisms, follow a compatibilist path of thinking; the third – the animal-agency theory of H. Steward – argues for an incompatibilist position. However, all three theories react, in different ways, to the same problem. I mean the dilemma of traditional action theory that you obviously cannot have both: a robust notion of free agency as distinguished from mere processes and happenings and a scientifically reasonable explanation of that robust free agency. Is it true that a biologically inspired stance on the problem of free will can overcome this dilemma?

In trying to give an answer to this question, I will roughly proceed as follows. First, I will give a short outline of the dilemma of the traditional action theory manifesting itself in the

antagonism of event-causal action theories versus agent-causal action theories both failing to give a convincing account of free agency for different reasons. Second, I will show how the systems biological bio-agency theory proposed by Skewes and Hooker interprets the dilemma and how it claims to solve it. Third, I will examine plausibility and explanatory power of this proposal by bringing it into a dialogue with Thomas Buchheim's neo-Aristotelian theory, which takes account of the biological origins of free agency in a very different manner. The main point of attention here is indicating where and why bio-powers come into play and what this metaphysically seems to imply. Finally, I will, with a view on Steward's animal-agency theory, discuss the general prospects of a biologically framed theory of free will, thereby briefly commenting on the relation of such a theory to the recent debate on powers within the traditional, human-action centered branch of action theory.<sup>7</sup>

The overall aim of my considerations is to support the claim that assuming there to be free agency in our natural world forces us to rely on an anti-Humean view of causation in a more radical sense than the friends of biology seem to be willing to accept. It commits us to some serious version of a powers metaphysics however to be spelled out in detail. Thus, although the traditional debate on agency and free will does well to broaden its horizon by taking into account the biological roots of free actions, it, nevertheless, would be an illusionary belief that the hard problems concerning the question how free agency fits into a natural world could be spirited away solely by means of biology.

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**annesophie.spann@uibk.ac.at**

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<sup>7</sup> Admittedly, in discussing powers (as, for instance, done by O'Connor (2009)), this branch of action theory is 'traditional' merely in the sense that it focuses on human agency exclusively.