

A Phenomenological Argument for a Metaphysics of Powers

Abstract

In this paper I want to argue that our experience in situations of free decisions with conflicting reasons can only be veridical if we have agential powers. In a first step, I argue that our experience in such situations would turn out to be illusory if determinism were true. In a second step, I argue that if event-causal indeterminism were true, we would not have the control over our actions that we experience to have. In a third and final step I argue for the positive thesis that an account of agential powers would meet the veridicality conditions of our experience.

In situations of free decisions with conflicting situations several alternatives are given to us. I call these alternatives open-up-to-me alternatives. They are open because for each alternative I can (in the situation I am in at the moment of choice) act in a way so as to realize that alternative. They are up-to-me because we do not experience such situations as if the reasons determine which alternative I am going to realize, but such that we determine which alternative we realize by deciding which reasons to act upon. I distinguish open-up-to-me alternatives from abilities. In order to have an open-up-to-me alternative we need to have the corresponding ability and the situation must be such that I can exercise this ability. In order for a situation to be such that I can exercise the ability in question the exercising of the ability needs to be compatible with the actual state of the world including the actual laws of nature. If determinism were true then only one open-up-to-me alternative could turn out to be a veridical alternative. If we experience to have more than one open-up-to-me alternative, we would be in an illusory state.

I argue that we experience ourselves as choosing which of the open-up-to-me alternatives we realize. While it is surely correct that the state I am in at the moment of the decision determines the open-up-to-me alternatives which are given to me, it does not seem as if the state determines which of the open-up-to-me alternatives I am going to realize. Which of the open-up-to-me alternative I realize is up to me. We experience such decisions as if we control the outcome. If event-causal indeterminism were true, it would turn out that, contrary to my experience, the state I was in at the moment of the decision has indeterministically caused my decision. It seems that whatever the outcome of the decision is, it was merely a matter of luck and not in my power.

The positive picture I want to defend is that my state determines which open-up-to-me alternatives I have the power to bring about. I am in a state in which I have the power to bring about one out of more than one alternative. By deciding which alternative I realize I exercise my agential power to bring about a new state.

Obviously, my argumentation does not prevent the defense of illusion theories that explain why our experience fails to be veridical. I only try to resist recent arguments by, among others, Terry Horgan and Richard Holton who defend the view that our experience could turn out to be veridical even if determinism were true. I also oppose to event-causal libertarians, such as Robert Kane and Mark Balaguer, who defend the view that we do not need agential powers in order to have the free will we experience to have.