

EVENT-CAUSAL LIBERTARIANISM, FUNCTIONAL REDUCTION, AND THE DISAPPEARING AGENT ARGUMENT

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Event-causal libertarians maintain that an agent's freely bringing about a choice is reducible to states and events involving him bringing about the choice. Agent-causal libertarians demur, arguing that free will requires that the agent be irreducibly causally involved. Derk Pereboom and Meghan Griffith have defended agent-causal libertarianism on this score, arguing that since on event-causal libertarianism an agent's contribution to his choice is exhausted by the causal role of states and events involving him, and since these states and events leave it open which decision he will make, he does not settle which decision occurs, and thus "disappears." My aim is to explain why this argument fails. In particular, I demonstrate that event-causal libertarians can dismantle the argument by enriching the reductive base in their analysis of free will to include a state that plays the functional role of the self-determining agent and with which the agent is identified.

1 The Disappearing Agent Argument

Event-causal and agent-causal libertarians are united in maintaining that an agent's possessing free will requires that some of his actions be undetermined. That is, according to these theorists, free will requires that for some of our actions, it must be possible that these actions have not occurred given the exact same past and laws of nature. What event-causal and agent-causal libertarians fundamentally disagree about concerns what it is for an agent to determine or bring about a free action.¹ According to event-causalists, self-determination is to be solely analyzed in terms of, and reduced to, states and events involving the agent—such as his desires and beliefs—determining the action (Wiggins 1973; Ekstrom 1993, 2000; Kane 1996, 1999).² Agent-causalists demur: while they

¹ I use 'action' here as an umbrella term: all agential activity falls under the rubric 'action.' Choices, thus, count as actions. In other contexts I will use 'action' more narrowly, referring only to agential activity subsequent to choice, such as overt behavior. The context should make clear how to disambiguate my use of 'action.'

² Some might balk at the idea that an agent can determine an undetermined act. This is understandable, but mistaken. Traditionally, free will has been thought to require the power of self-determination (Watson 1987; Shoemaker 2003). The main question is not whether free will requires this power, but what the power of self-determination amounts to. If

agree that self-determination requires that the agent cause his choice, they deny that the agent's determination of a choice can be solely analyzed in terms of, or reduced to, states and events involving the agent (Chisholm 1966; O'Connor 2000, 2009; Griffith 2010; Steward 2012). In this way they argue that self-determination requires the possibility of substances fundamentally or irreducibly causing events.

It is event-causal and agent-causal libertarians' united insistence on the existence of indeterminism for free will that gives rise to the notorious luck argument (Hume 1740; Hobart 1934; van Inwagen 1983, 2000; Mele 2006; Haji 2001; Levy 2011). This argument comes in many shapes and sizes, but the central worry is that libertarians mistakenly think that indeterminism is a necessary condition for the existence of freedom and moral responsibility, when in fact indeterminism is a sufficient condition for their absence (Franklin 2011). What is of present interest for us is the following feature of the debate: agent-causal libertarians often employ the luck argument against their event-causal libertarian cousins (Pereboom 2001, 2004, 2007, forthcoming; Griffith 2010). That is, agent-causal libertarians argue that event-causal libertarianism fails as an account of free will *because* it falls prey to the luck argument. Here is how the argument goes:

1. On event-causal libertarianism, there is nothing about the agent that settles which decision he makes.
 2. If nothing about the agent settles which decision he makes, then the decision he makes is a matter of luck.
 3. If the decision the agent makes is a matter of luck, then he is not free with respect to or morally responsible for the decision.
- Therefore,
4. An agent who merely satisfies event-causal libertarianism is neither free with respect to nor morally responsible for any of his decisions.

Following Derk Pereboom, let us refer to this as 'the disappearing agent argument' (Pereboom 2004, p. 276; 2007, p. 102; forthcoming). Meghan Griffith has recently endorsed this argument, claiming

self-determination is to be an undisputed condition of freedom, then the notion of 'determination by the self' cannot, by *definition*, exclude the possibility of self-determining an undetermined act. I here assume that there is a meaning of 'determination' (and its verb form 'to determine') that is conceptually distinct from determinism. I will consider these issues more thoroughly in section 3 below.

that the problem “is that the agent is not able to control *which* decision is made” (2010, p. 51; emphasis mine).³

To appreciate the intuitive force of the claim that the agent “disappears” at the moment of choice, let us consider the well-known case of a would-be thief who is deliberating about whether to rob a poor box in a local parish (van Inwagen 1983). The thief has reasons that favor robbing the poor box: he needs money, he is confident that he will not be caught, etc. He also has reasons that favor refraining from stealing: the parish needs the money to feed the poor, he promised his mother on her death bed that he would live a morally good life, etc. Suppose that the thief decides to refrain from stealing and that his action satisfies the event-causal libertarian conditions for free will. This means, among other things, that, given the past and laws, the thief might not have decided to refrain from stealing. For the sake of simplicity, let us suppose that it was possible given the past and laws that the thief decided to steal instead. According to event-causal libertarianism, the case of the thief comes to this: just prior to choice, there were two possible outcomes of the thief’s deliberation (the thief might decide to steal or he might decide to refrain) and the thief’s contribution to either decision is exhausted by his possessing the relevant set of desires and beliefs. Pereboom writes, “there is nothing else about [the thief] that can settle whether the decision [to refrain] occurs, since on this view [the thief’s] role in producing a decision is exhausted by antecedent states or events in which [he] is involved” (2007, p. 102). But since there is nothing about the thief that settles which decision he makes, it follows that “[he] lacks the control required for moral responsibility for it” (Pereboom 2007, p. 102; cf. 2004, p. 276). On event-causal libertarianism, an agent’s contribution to his choice is exhausted by his desires and beliefs, and since these states and events leave it open

³ O’Connor (2000) and Clarke (2003) also appear to endorse this, or a closely related, argument. “A prima facie problem for [event-causal libertarianism] is to explain how the agent directly controls the outcome in a given case. There are objective probabilities corresponding to each of the possibilities, but within those fixed parameters, which choice occurs on a given occasion seems, as far as the agent’s direct control goes, a matter of chance” (O’Connor 2000, p. xiii; cf. O’Connor 2005, p. 215); “[Event-causal libertarianism]... fails to secure for the agent the exercise of any further positive powers to causally influence *which* actions she will perform” (Clarke 2003, p. 96; emphasis mine).

which decision he will make, the agent does not settle which decision occurs; and in this sense, the agent disappears.

My aim in this paper is explain why this argument fails, and, in particular, why premise (1) is false. In order to facilitate this discussion, however, we need a more detailed account of event-causal libertarianism on the table.

2 Event-Causal Libertarianism, Functional Reduction, and Identification

In this section I will lay out a schema of event-causal libertarianism. I consider it merely a schema because aspects of it will remain in need of clarification and elaboration. However, the account will provide a useful framework for thinking about the disappearing agent argument, and, most importantly, it will provide all the resources necessary for explaining why this argument fails.

Event-causal libertarians appropriate the causal theory of action, according to which an event (a bit of behavior or a mental episode) is an action if and only if the event is caused, in the appropriate manner, by mental states and events involving the agent.⁴ Donald Davidson (1980) is the contemporary *locus classicus* of this view, although the heart of it traces back at least to Thomas Hobbes (1654).⁵ Proponents of the causal theory of action disagree over exactly which states and events involving an agent must be involved in the causation of action, though the usual suspects include desires, beliefs, and intentions. We might say, then, that the thief's decision to refrain from

⁴ The qualification 'appropriate manner' is required to rule out cases of causal deviance. One respect in which the account I offer is only a schema is that I leave the content of this all-important clause unspecified. See Bishop (1989) for one of the most careful and detailed attempts to explain what exactly "appropriate manner" amounts to.

⁵ In recent years there has been a bit of disagreement concerning what the causal theory of action is a theory of. Velleman (2000b, pp. 7-10; 2000c) criticizes the causal theory of action for failing to provide an adequate account of autonomous action. Mele (2004, p. 249) however objects, asserting that the theory is only intended as a theory of intentional action. I believe Mele is mistaken about the aims of all advocates of the causal theory of action. For example, Bishop (1989), who offers one of the best contemporary discussions and defenses of the causal theory of action, does indeed offer it as a theory of autonomous action. My discussion will assume, however, that the causal theory of action is only intended as an analysis of intentional action, though none of these complications affect my overall argument.

stealing is an action because it was jointly caused, in the appropriate manner, by his desiring to keep his promise to his mother and his belief that he could partly realize this end by so acting.

In general event-causal libertarians believe that this is a satisfactory analysis of *action*, but not *free* action. They are, after all, incompatibilists, and deterministic agents seemingly can satisfy the causal theory of action. Thus, event-causal libertarians believe more must be added in order to transform the causal theory of action into a theory of free action. Central among the required additions is indeterminism: free action requires the existence indeterminism.⁶ I believe that the best way to integrate the requirement of indeterminism with the causal theory of action is to require that the causal relation that obtains between the agent's non-actional states and events (e.g. desires and beliefs) and free choice be nondeterministic. Supposing that the thief's choice to refrain satisfies this requirement, then there is a possible world with the same past and laws of nature up until the moment of choice in which the thief does not choose to refrain from stealing. In this world the thief's desires and beliefs that are actually causally efficacious (causing his choice to refrain from stealing) are causally inert.⁷

Event-causal libertarianism requires, at minimum, that free choice be nondeterministically caused, in the appropriate manner, by agent-involving mental states and events. Randolph Clarke (2003, p. 31) refers to this view as “unadorned event-causal libertarianism”, in order to distinguish it from other versions of event-causal libertarianism, such as Laura Waddell Ekstrom's (1993, 2000) and Robert Kane's (1996, 1999) theories. Clarke maintains that the intricacies that Ekstrom and

⁶ Most libertarians allow for the possibility of free but determined actions so long as these actions are suitably connected to earlier free actions that are undetermined. In this way libertarians draw a distinction between directly free and indirectly free actions. For ease of exposition, I will focus on directly free actions.

⁷ To be clear, the event-causal libertarian account I am developing does not envision a single set of reasons having two possible outcomes (cf. Levy (2011, p. 45) who seems to saddle libertarians with this commitment). For example, it is not the case that the thief's reasons for stealing might cause his choice to steal or might cause his choice to refrain. Rather, on this account, given the presence of indeterminism, different desires and beliefs might be causally efficacious. If the thief decides to refrain from stealing, then his reasons that favor this choice will be causally efficacious. Alternatively, if the thief decides to steal, then other reasons—namely those favoring stealing—will be causally efficacious. I am grateful to Neal Tognazzini for helping me see the need to make this point explicit.

Kane add to the unadorned account (such as authorized preferences in the case of Ekstrom and efforts of will in the case of Kane) amount to little more than bells and whistles, affording these theorists no important theoretical advantages. While Clarke may be right in this charge, it is a mistake to think that event-causal libertarians need not add anything to the unadorned account.⁸

A free agent is an agent with the power of self-determination (Watson 1987; Shoemaker 2003). In seeking to offer a reductive analysis of free will, event-causal libertarians must offer a reductive analysis of the power of self-determination. It is clear that the causal theory of action falls short as an analysis of self-determination, for we can act without self-determining what we do. For example, we can act unwittingly, compulsively, or akratically. Our concept of a self-determining agent is (at minimum) the concept of the agent intervening between his motivations for action and his decision concerning which course of action to pursue (Velleman 2000c).⁹ The self-determining agent adjudicates among his rival motivations for action, considering and weighing them, and on the basis of this adjudication selects or chooses a particular course of action. These are the central functions of a self-determining agent. An agent who acts unwittingly does not consider his

⁸ I actually think Clarke's criticism of Ekstrom and Kane misses the mark. While Clarke is correct that aspects of Ekstrom and Kane's theories do not add anything of central importance, he is mistaken in thinking that everything they add amounts to mere bells and whistles. For example, Ekstrom is keenly aware of the problems I raise below for standard event-causal libertarianism. A central difference between Ekstrom's theory and the account I defend concerns the states that we posit as playing the functional role of the agent. She claims that the agent's role is played by authorized preferences (desires that have emerged through a distinctive evaluative process). I suggest, *a la* Velleman, that it is played by the desire to act in accordance with reasons.

Kane seems to have anticipated something like the disappearing agent argument rather early on (see Kane 1996, pp. 139-142). It seems plausible to interpret Kane's "self-network" as an attempt to avoid worries raised by the disappearing agent argument. Kane, however, mistakenly focused too narrowly on how such a network would be realized in the brain, neglecting the prior question of how this self-network can play the role of the self-determining agent. There are two questions here: first, which features of the agent constitute his exercising the power of self-determination. This question should be answered in folk-psychological terms, such as I try to do in the manner I attempt below. A second question concerns how this power, as characterized in folk-psychological terms, supervenes on, or perhaps even is reducible to, states and events involving the brain. Kane seems to be fundamentally concerned with the second rather than the first question. A second potential difference between my account and Kane's is that he may be trying not just to reduce the *role* of the agent in self-determination, but the agent himself (see O'Connor (2000, p. 40) for such an interpretation. However, see Kane (2011) for doubts about the accuracy of O'Connor's interpretation). My account, however, only aims to offer a reduction of the role of the agent in self-determining action.

⁹ Compare Bratman's description of self-determination: "The image of the agent directing and governing is, in the first instance, an image of the agent herself standing back from her attitudes, and doing the directing and governing" (2007b, pp. 195-196).

motivations for and against action and then make a choice, but acts without evaluation or consideration of the various possible courses of action. For this reason he fails to play these intermediary causal roles, and thus fails to perform a self-determined action. The moral is that there is *more* to self-determination than the mere causation of events by one's beliefs and desires. But what more must be added?

Event-causal libertarians cannot develop a satisfactory analysis of free will by simply layering the causal theory of action with the requirement of indeterminism. They must also layer it with a reductive analysis of self-determination, and the causal theory of action does not itself provide such an analysis. How then should such a reductive analysis go? Since the concept of a self-determining agent is a functional concept, a promising strategy is to offer a functional reduction of the role of the self-determining agent.¹⁰ On such an approach we seek to reduce the activity of a self-determining agent to a state or event (or set of states and events) that plays the self-determining agent's functional role. What was missing in the case of the unwitting agent was a mental state or event (or set of mental states and events) that played the functional role of the self-determining agent. Note that what is targeted for reduction here is not the agent, but the agent's *role* in self-determination. Therefore, event-causal libertarians must enrich their account of the causal etiology of free action to include a state or event (or set of states and events) that plays the self-determining agent's functional role.

But there is a second conceptual enrichment that must also take place. In seeking a functional reduction of the self-determining agent's role, we are seeking to locate a state or event that not only plays his functional role, but that in so doing *counts* as *his* playing his functional role. To appreciate this difference, consider Jaegwon Kim's well-known causal exclusion argument (Kim 2005). Given certain basic assumptions about the physical world, Kim argues that for every putative

¹⁰ I follow Velleman (2000c) on this point. See Kim (2005) for a helpful discussion of the logic of functional reduction.

mental cause of an effect, there is a physical cause of that effect.¹¹ This gives rise to the worry that the physical is in competition with the mental and, given that the mental is dependent (e.g. supervenes) on the physical, that physical causes exclude potential mental causes. David Robb and John Heil (2008) chart three general responses to this problem. Proponents of “autonomy solutions” (Yablo 1992; Van Gulick 1993; Crisp and Warfield 2001) contend that the mental actually plays a different causal role from the physical and so, despite initial appearances, there is no competition. Proponents of “identity solutions” (Block and Stalnaker 1999; Kim 2005) seek to solve the problem of competition by maintaining that the mental just is the physical, and since only distinct things can compete, the appearance of competition is illusory. Finally, proponents of “inheritance solutions” (Pereboom 2002; Shoemaker 2003) contend that “mental properties are so intimately related to their physical realizers that the former ‘inherit’ the causal powers of the latter” (Robb and Heil 2008). The core idea behind the inheritance solution is that since a mental property M stands in some intimate relation (though not *identity*) to physical property P, M inherits the causal powers of P, and so P’s causing something *counts* as M’s causing that thing.¹² Candidates for this intimate relation include constitution (Pereboom 2002) and realization (Shoemaker 2003). Taking the former account, it is argued that mental properties are causally efficacious because they are constituted by physical properties that are causally efficacious.

Observe that a shared assumption of these responses to the exclusion argument is that the physical *does* compete with the mental if (i) the physical plays the mental’s functional role, (ii) the mental and physical are not type or token identical, and (iii) the mental and physical are not

¹¹ The assumptions are:

“*Supervenience*. Mental properties strongly supervene on physical/biological properties. That is, if any system *s* instantiates a mental property M at *t*, there necessarily exists a physical property P such that *s* instantiates P at *t*, and necessarily anything instantiating P at any time instantiates M at that time.” (Kim 2005, p. 33)

“*Closure*. If a physical event has a cause that occurs at *t*, it has a physical cause that occurs at *t*.” (Kim 2005, p. 43)

¹² This is somewhat infelicitous. Property instantiations (i.e. events), and not properties, are causes. It is not P, but the instantiation of P that causes the effect.

intimately connected in the right way. This illustrates that simply because something plays the self-determining agent's functional role, it does not thereby count as the *agent's* playing his functional role. The mere fact that certain brain states play the functional role of a desire does not entail that the desire plays its functional role. Indeed, it appears to entail the opposite: namely that the desire is being usurped and causally excluded by brain states.

In searching for a state or event that can play the functional role of a self-determining agent, we must locate a state that does not compete with the self-determining agent's playing his role, but rather, in some way, amounts to his playing his role. Clearly an analogue of the autonomy solution is destined to fail. We cannot solve the appearance of competition between the agent and states that play his role by arguing that these states play a different role from the agent since our needed reduction goes through *only if* these states play the same role as the self-determining agent.

Analogues of the identity and inheritance solutions seem more promising. Event-causal libertarians, pursuing an analogue of the identity solution, might argue that the agent just is his (or some subset of his) mental states and events, and so the states that play his role count as his playing his role since, after all, he is identical to those states. Call these libertarians 'identity reductionists.' Alternatively, event-causal libertarians, pursuing an analogue of the inheritance solution, might argue that while agents are not identical to any (collection of) mental states and events, they are *identified* with some of these states and events. When an agent is identified with a state or event, that state or event has authority to speak for the agent, and because the state has authority for the agent, its playing the self-determining agent's functional role counts as his playing his functional role. Just as mental properties can play a causal role if they bear an intimate relation (such as constitution) to physical properties that play a causal role, so agents can play a causal role if they bear an intimate relation (such as identification) to mental events or states that play a causal role. Call these libertarians 'identification reductionists.' On this solution, our worry about competition is solved, not because

the self-determining agent is identical to the states and events playing his functional role, but rather because he is identified with them.

In addition to enriching their accounts by including a mental state that plays the self-determining agent's functional role, event-causal libertarians must also show that the agent is either identical to or identified with it.¹³ An advantage of the identification reductionist route is that it allows us to avoid questions about the nature of the self: we need not commit ourselves to the claim that the agent is a bundle of mental states or a substance. Instead, identification reductionists contend that the role of the self-determining agent (regardless of what the agent actually is) is played by states and events with which he is identified. For these reasons I will develop this route more carefully below.¹⁴

Identification reductionists are committed to the existence of a state or event that (i) plays the functional role of the self-determining agent and (ii) is such that the agent is identified with it. But what state is this and what does it mean to say an agent is identified with it? There turns out to be a variety of answers to these questions. The early Frankfurt (1988a) argued that we are identified with our higher-order desires, while the later Frankfurt (1999), joined by David Shoemaker (2003) and Agnieszka Jaworska (2007), argued that we are identified with (a special subset of) our cares. Michael Bratman (2007a) has argued that we are identified with our self-governing policies and Gary Watson (1975; cf. Stump 1988; Ekstrom 1993) that we are identified with our system of evaluative beliefs. While all of these proposals have merit, I will adopt, as a working hypothesis, J. David Velleman's (2000c, 2000d, 2009) account of identification. To clarify: my aim in employing Velleman's account is both to give more flesh to identification reductionism (specifically its treatment of the notion of identification) and to illustrate the dynamics of marrying identification

¹³ Perhaps the identity reductionist need only show that the mental state is a member of the set of states that the agent is identical to.

¹⁴ I do not mean to suggest that the identity reductionist route is without merit. But given present constraints, we only have space to consider one of these routes in detail.

reductionism with event-causal libertarianism. The fate of event-causal libertarianism, however, is not inextricably linked to Velleman's account. The shared assumption behind identification accounts of self-determination is that exercises of the power of self-determination are essentially tied to a certain kind or range of motivation, but agreements ends here as different theories put forth different kinds or ranges of motivation for this role. Which specific identification theory an event-causal libertarian weds his theory to will depend on his other philosophical views, specifically his view of the nature of motivation. Thus, those finding problems internal to Velleman's account of identification (e.g. those less inclined to a rationalist moral psychology) are welcome to substitute other accounts in its stead.¹⁵

The idea that we are intimately identified with Reason or our reasoning faculty has a long history and finds its greatest expression in the works of Plato, Aristotle, and Kant. Aristotle suggested, "[Reason] would, seem, too to be each man himself, since it is the authoritative and better part of him....therefore, the life according to intellect is best and pleasantest, since intellect more than anything else *is* man" (1178a1-9). Velleman's account is an attempt to develop "the inchoate intuition" underlying Aristotle's claim, namely that each person is "identified with his own rationality" (2000b, p. 7).¹⁶ In particular, Velleman argues that the role of the self-determining agent is played by the desire to act for what the agent takes to be his strongest reasons (Velleman 2000b, p. 14 n. 20):

We say that the agent turns his thoughts to the various motives that give him reason to act; but in fact,¹⁷ the agent's thoughts are turned in this direction by the desire to act in

¹⁵ I am grateful to an anonymous referee for pressing me to make this point more explicit.

¹⁶ See Watson (1975), Stump (1988), Ekstrom (1993), and Korsgaard (2009) who all develop this intuition in rather different directions. Cf. "Insofar as we identify ourselves more closely with our Reason than with our nonreasoned desires, we may regard rational actions as more wholly ours than nonreasoned action would be" (Wolf 1990, p. 52).

¹⁷ The locution 'but in fact' is misleading. This might reasonably be interpreted to indicate that the agent does not in fact do certain things, such as calculate the relative strength of his reasons, throw his weight behind certain motives, etc. No reductionist should say this. Even on reductionist accounts agents do all these things, but just not irreducibly. It would be better (or at least more precise) to replace 'but in fact' with 'and what this comes to is.' The agent does weigh the

accordance with reasons. We say that the agent calculates the relative strengths of the reasons before him; but in fact, these calculations are driven by his desire to act in accordance with reasons. We say that the agent throws his weight behind the motives that provide the strongest reason; but what is thrown behind those motives, in fact, is the additional motivating force of the desire to act in accordance with reasons. For when a desire appears to provide the strongest reason for acting, then the desire to act in accordance with reasons becomes a motive to act on that desire, and the desire's motivational influence is consequently reinforced. The agent is moved to his action, not only by his original motive for it, but also by his desire to act on the original motive, because of its superior rational force. This latter contribution to the agent's behavior is the contribution of an attitude that performs the functions definitive of agency; it is therefore, functionally speaking, the agent's contribution to the causal order. (Velleman 2000c, p. 141)

Therefore, the desire to act in accordance with what one takes to be one's strongest reasons appears to play the self-determining agent's functional role.¹⁸

relative strength of his reasons, and what this comes to is that these calculations are driven by his desire to act in accordance with reasons.

¹⁸ Much of Velleman's later work is concerned with specifying the precise content of this desire. See especially Velleman (2000d, 2009). According to Velleman, the desire to act for reasons does not motivate us to act for reasons so described, but rather motivates us to act for considerations that allow us to "make sense" of ourselves. Velleman, being a reductionist about reasons, contends that what makes a consideration a reason is that the consideration enables us to make sense of ourselves, and "the relevant notion of 'making sense' is not normative" but is "the notion of what can be understood in terms of the character's attributes and attitudes under the circumstances", where the "understanding that must be possible, if an action is to make sense coming from the character, is a folk-psychological understanding that traces the action to its causes in the motives, traits, and other dispositions of the character (2009, p. 13). I intend my account of event-causal libertarianism to remain as neutral as possible concerning both the precise content of the desire to act in accordance with reasons and the nature of reasons. So at present, I take no stand on whether reference to reasons in 'the desire to act in accordance with reasons' is to be given a *de dicto* or a *de re* reading. I also take no stand on the nature of reasons. My account is consistent with externalism (Korsgaard 1986; Scanlon 1998; Dancy 2000) and internalism (Williams 1980) about reasons, and it is consistent with reductionism (Velleman 2009) and non-reductionism (Scanlon 1998; Dancy 2000) about reasons. I remain neutral on these important topics since they need not be settled *prior* to libertarians' showing that the disappearing agent argument fails. Clearly a complete event-causal libertarianism of this stripe would require settling these issues. But our aim is to see how supplementing traditional event-causal libertarianism with a functional reduction of the power of self-determination enables them to dismantle the disappearing agent argument.

Furthermore, this desire's playing the self-determining agent's functional role appears to count as his playing his functional role because he seems to be essentially identified with it. The desire to act for what one takes to be¹⁹ the strongest reasons is not simply one desire among many, but rather is a desire constitutive of self-determining agency (Velleman 2000d, p. 180; 2009, pp. 127-128). While mere agents (e.g. animals or small children) need not have the desire to act for the best reasons, what distinguishes us as *self-determining* agents is precisely the fact that we are guided by reason—that is, that we are motivated to act for the strongest reasons. Recall that the concept of a self-determining agent is (at minimum) the concept of the agent adjudicating between his rival motivations and on the basis of this adjudication selecting a course of action to pursue. According to Velleman, this process consists of determining which motivations present the strongest reasons for acting and then deciding to act for those reasons. Thus, a self-determining agent cannot be alienated or dissociated from this desire *and* remain a self-determining agent. To dissociate oneself from this state requires that one cease to guide one's life by reason, but to cease to guide one's life by reason is to cease to be a self-determining agent. As Velleman observed, “the sense in which an agent cannot disown his desire to act in accordance with reasons is that he cannot disown it while remaining a [self-determining] agent” (Velleman 2000c, p. 142; cf. 2009, p. 137).²⁰ Therefore, not only does the desire to act in accordance with strongest reasons seem to play the self-determining agent's functional role, but it also seems to be a desire with which the agent is identified.²¹

Strictly speaking though, event-causal libertarians need not agree with Velleman that this desire is *essential* to self-determining agency. It is open to event-causal libertarians to argue that the

¹⁹ I will, for the most part, drop this qualification from now on.

²⁰ As mentioned in n. 18, I remain neutral both concerning the nature of reasons and whether the content of this desire is to be given a *de dicto* or *de re* reading. I should also note that my presentation of Velleman differs somewhat from his own. Where Velleman writes of ‘an agent’ I write of ‘a self-determining agent’. This is merely a verbal difference. By ‘an agent’ Velleman *means* ‘a self-determining agent.’ Throughout his article Velleman uses ‘action’ and ‘agency’ to mean ‘action *par excellence*’ and ‘full blooded [i.e. self-determining] agency’ (cf. Velleman 2000c, p. 124).

²¹ Those less attracted to this rationalist picture may reject the Aristotle/Velleman claim that we are identified with reason and look to conative elements, such as our cares (Frankfurt 1999; Shoemaker 2003; Jaworska 2007) or intentions (Bratman 2007a) to play the functional role of the self-determining agent.

functional role of the self-determining agent is *multiply realizable*. While an action's being motivated by our desire to act for what we take to be the strongest reasons is sufficient for performing a self-determined action, it need not be necessary. Perhaps our role as self-determiners can also be realized in our deepest loves (Frankfurt 1999) or cares (Shoemaker 2003), rendering actions motivated by these states also self-determined. For simplicity I will focus solely on the desire to act for the best reasons.

We are now in a position to enrich the event-causal libertarian's interpretation of our original story of the thief. Let us suppose that the thief's decision to refrain from robbing the poor box is a self-determined decision. As discussed above, the thief has reasons that favor both stealing and refraining from stealing, and whichever choice he makes will be caused, in the appropriate way, by the relevant set of desires and beliefs. Let us suppose that on the basis of his deliberation he comes to view his desire to refrain as providing the strongest reason for action. In this case, the motivational force of the thief's desires and beliefs that favor refraining will be supplemented with the thief's own motivational force in the form of his desire to act for what he takes to be the best reasons and, in this way, the desire introduces a new causal influence. The thief plays a causal role *over and above* the causal role played by his desires and beliefs for action, and this supplementation amounts to his "throwing his weight" behind the desires and beliefs that led to action. It is this additional participation of the agent in action that transforms mere action into self-determined action.

It is important to realize that although freedom requires the *power* of self-determination, it does not necessarily require its *exercise*. In the above case, we are imagining that the thief's decision to refrain was undetermined. For ease, let us suppose that the thief could have decided to steal instead. In such a case the thief would be acting weakly, since he would be acting contrary to his judgment about what he had most reason to do. In acting weakly, the thief would act freely, but not

self-determinedly. He would not act self-determinedly because there would be no attitude among the causes of his deciding to steal both that he is identified with and plays his functional role. And yet he would act freely because, among other things, he *could* have acted self-determinedly: he could have decided to refrain, and had he made this alternative decision there would have been a state among the causal antecedents of his decision that played his functional role and with which he was identified. So free choice requires not that the agent actually exercise his power of self-determination, but only that the agent could have exercised this power.

This account may seem to imply a rejection of Kane's well-know requirements of plural voluntary control (1996, 1999, 2011).²² According to Kane, one has plural voluntary control if "one had the power to make either choice be or not be at the time, *voluntarily, on purpose and for reasons*, and not merely by accident" (2011, p. 397). Our thief satisfies this description. Both his self-determined decision to refrain from stealing and his weak-willed decision to steal are voluntary, made on purpose and for reasons, and not merely by accident. Moreover, the agent is (arguably) morally responsible for whichever decision he makes and thus possesses the required kind of freedom over the making of each choice. What is asymmetrical is that the thief only exercises his power of self-determination in one case, but, as far as I can see, this need cause no problems for event-causal libertarians nor constitute a departure from traditional event-causal libertarian models.

Event-causal libertarians attempt to transform the causal theory of action into a theory of free will by augmenting it in a variety of ways. First, they contend that free choice requires the existence of indeterminism. On this condition all event-causal libertarians are united. However, we have seen that such theorists must offer additional conditions—specifically they must offer a reductive analysis of self-determination—and on this issue there appears to be little agreement. On the account I have sketched, in addition to augmenting the causal theory of action by requiring the

²² I am grateful to an anonymous referee for raising this worry.

presence of indeterminism, we must also augment it by positing the causal relevance of the agent's desire to act in accordance with his strongest reasons.²³ And it is this additional requirement that allows the agent to play a robust role in the making of free decisions.

We now have a schema of event-causal libertarianism. Aspects of this theory must be clarified and elaborated to render it a complete theory of free will. Nonetheless, the theory, even in its incomplete fashion, affords us sufficient resources to dismantle the disappearing agent argument.

3 Determination and Settling What to Do

The most controversial premise of the disappearing agent argument is:

1. On event-causal libertarianism, there is nothing about the agent that settles which decision he makes.

What is required for settling which decision one makes? Pereboom offers little by way of details, so let us canvass the possibilities in order to generate a plausible interpretation. Remember that the disappearing agent argument is an argument that agent-causal libertarians employ against event-causal libertarians. So whatever is meant by 'settling which decision one makes', it better be the case that it is possible for agent-causal libertarianism to secure it. Presumably an agent's settling which decision he makes consists in the agent's making a distinctive contribution to his making of the decision. Let us first consider the issue of timing: when must this distinctive contribution take place? There are two possibilities: it can occur before the agent makes the decision or it can occur simultaneous with his making the decision.²⁴ Consider the first possibility. There is plausibility to this interpretation. In order to settle on a course of *action*, we must make a prior decision or form an intention about what to do. Perhaps settling which *decision* one makes is like this: in order for an agent to settle which decision he makes he must make a prior decision about what to decide. Is this

²³ But again, event-causal libertarians are welcome to substitute their favored state for playing this role.

²⁴ I assume that it cannot occur after he makes the decision.

what Pereboom has in mind? Presumably not—for apart from the psychological oddity of the view, it renders free will impossible, even for agent-causal libertarianism. If choosing freely requires that one must settle which decision one makes in the sense of having made a temporally prior free decision, and if this earlier decision is free only if we have settled on it, which in turn requires a yet earlier free decision, and so on *ad infinitum*, then free will is impossible for finite agents. Therefore, not even human agents who satisfy agent-causal libertarianism can settle a decision *in this sense*.

One way to block the regress is to require that the cause of a free decision is not an earlier *free* decision, but an earlier non-free decision.²⁵ I find this view odd (to say the least): why should acting freely first *require* that one act non-freely?²⁶ But aside from its peculiarity, if this is what Pereboom has in mind by ‘settling what to do’, then event-causal libertarians can easily accommodate it. There is little question that agents who satisfy event-causal libertarianism are capable of performing decisions—what is disputed is whether such agents are capable of performing *free* decisions. But if all that is required for making a free decision is that the agent makes a distinctive contribution to the free decision’s production, and if all this distinctive contribution amounts to is the making of an earlier non-free decision that causes the later free decision, then an agent who merely satisfies event-causal libertarianism can settle which free decisions he makes.

I will assume, then, that the agent’s contribution in virtue of which he settles which decision is made occurs simultaneous with his making the decision. Our question now is: what must be true of the agent in order for him to make this distinctive contribution? Why not just think that the agent’s making the decision suffices for his settling which decision he makes? One reason is the following: everything about the agent immediately antecedent to his making the decision leaves it open which decision he will make. This fact follows from the requirement that free decisions be undetermined. But it is also clear that Pereboom does *not* endorse this reason. Again, the

²⁵ Thanks to Ben Mitchell-Yellin for raising this response.

²⁶ However, see Ekstrom (2000, p. 135 n. 48) who seems to endorse such a view.

disappearing agent argument is not supposed to be a problem for agent-causal libertarianism, and yet it will be true even on these accounts that nothing about the agent settles which decision he makes *in the sense* that all the immediately antecedent features of the agent leave it causally open which decision he will make. Agent-causal libertarianism has this implication since these accounts also require that free decisions be undetermined.²⁷

So Pereboom must have a different reason in mind for thinking that there is nothing about an agent who merely satisfies event-causal libertarianism that settles which decision is made. Perhaps it is this: “On an event-causal libertarian picture, the relevant causal conditions antecedent to a decision—agent-involving events, or, alternatively, states of the agent—would leave it open whether this decision will occur, and the agent has no further causal role in determining whether it does” (Pereboom 2007, p. 102). What makes it the case that the agent fails to settle which decision will occur is a combination of two factors: that the decision is undetermined and that the agent’s causal role is *exhausted* by the agent’s antecedent states and events. It is this second feature that differentiates event-causal from agent-causal accounts, and it is this second feature that renders event-causal libertarianism susceptible to the disappearing agent argument.

Pereboom’s worry as directed toward traditional formulations of event-causal libertarianism seems spot on. Often event-causal libertarians adopt the causal theory of action and merely add the requirement of indeterminism (Wiggins 1973; Clarke 2003). This picture of agency seems perilously close to eliminativism about the role of the self-determining agent. Recall that one of the core functional roles of a self-determining agent is to intervene between his desires and beliefs for action and the choice he makes on their basis. Our concept of a self-determining agent is one in which the agent plays a causal role over and above the causal role played by his specific desires and beliefs for action. The causal theory of action, however, eliminates this role of the agent—simply having the

²⁷ Pereboom himself is sensitive to this (2004, pp. 278-279), suggesting that he does not take the mere presence of indeterminism to be the challenge posed by the disappearing agent argument.

desires and beliefs for action directly causing the decision, with no further supplementation by the agent. This indeed makes it seem like the agent disappears.

But by enriching event-causal libertarianism with a reductive theory of self-determination, we acquire the needed resources to respond to Pereboom's objection. For, on the account I developed above, it is false that the agent's specific desires and beliefs for action exhaust his causal contribution. In addition, the agent himself intervenes, or could have intervened, in virtue of the causal power of his desire to act in accordance with what he takes to be the best reasons—a desire with which he is identified. Consider again the story of the thief and let us suppose that his decision to refrain from stealing was self-determined. On my account, his desire to act in accordance with the strongest reasons combined with, and supplemented the motivational force of, his desires and beliefs that favored this action to jointly cause his decision to refrain from stealing. In this way, the agent does play an additional causal role in settling on what to do. Now suppose that although the decision to refrain was free, it was not self-determined (suppose in this case the thief judged that it was best to steal). In that case the thief did not play an additional causal role (although he could have), but instead let his motivational factors sort themselves out, perhaps doing whatever he felt like at the moment of action. But even agent-causal libertarians should not require that every instance of free action be self-determined. It should be enough to require that every instance of free action is one in which the agent could have brought his power of self-determination to bear.

So the thief did play an additional causal role beyond that of his specific desires and beliefs for action: he also determined (or could have determined) which set of desires and beliefs he acted on. This determination does not require the agent, qua substance, to cause his action, but rather that a state that is functionally identical to him and with which he is identified plays the relevant causal role. And on the event-causal libertarian picture I have developed, this is exactly what we have. Pereboom was mistaken to assume "If the agent were reintroduced merely as involved in events,

[the disappearing agent argument] could be reiterated with undiminished effect” (2004, p. 278). The problem with traditional event-causal libertarians is not that they reduce the role of the self-determining agent to states and events; the problem is with the specific states and events they attempt to reduce his role to. Once we enrich the reductive base to include a state with which the agent is identified and that plays his functional role, such as the desire to act in accordance with the strongest reasons, we provide all the resources needed to furnish the agent with the power to settle which decision he makes. Therefore, premise (1) is false.

We might imagine a defender of the disappearing agent argument responding in the following fashion: although the thief’s causal contribution to his decision was not exhausted by the states and events that constituted his specific desires and beliefs for action, his causal contribution was, nevertheless, exhausted by the antecedent states and events of the thief—leaving it open which decision he would make. The desire to act in accordance with the strongest reasons, although not a desire for a specific action, is a state of the agent and, given that the thief’s decision was undetermined, *all* the states of, and events involving, the thief left it open what he would decide and the thief played no further causal role beyond these antecedent states and events. Therefore, the agent disappears at the crucial moment in the action-sequence.

As we saw above, the force of this objection lay in the second conjunct, in the contention that the agent plays no further role in determining his choice. My initial response was to concede that if the agent’s decision was solely caused by the agent’s desires and beliefs for one of the two decisions, then there was indeed an important role that the agent failed to play: he failed to intervene between his reasons and the making of his decision. I then explained that this is not the story I offer. On my account, in addition to the desires and beliefs for action playing a causal role, the desire to act in accordance with the strongest reasons—a desire that is functionally identical to the agent and with which he is identified—also plays, or could have played, a causal role. It is in light of

this additional causal role that the agent determines, or could have determined, and thus settled, what he would do. We are now considering an objection on which the agent must play an additional causal role than even this. But what could this role be? It cannot be that the agent himself must be involved, for the desire to act in accordance with the strongest reasons, which is functionally identical to the agent, was involved. It is hard to read this objection as anything else but a bald assertion that the agent qua substance must fundamentally cause his decision, and if he does not, then he does not play the role that is required of him in free action. But this just begs the question at issue. So while Pereboom's initial objection had force against standard formulations of event-causal libertarianism, this revised objection has little to recommend it.

A final objection worth considering comes from a different source. In an important recent paper, Griffith (2010) has also defended the disappearing agent argument, but unlike Pereboom she explicitly considers an account of event-causal libertarianism that is similar to mine. Her objection begins with a question: "How could the agent—i.e. certain functional states—determine the decision without predetermining it?" (2010, p. 50). Determination, according to Griffith, requires predetermination. By 'predetermination' Griffith appears to mean 'deterministically brought about'. So, on her view an undetermined action cannot be determined. She goes on:

If [the] desire [to act in accordance with reasons] determines the choice by deciding which option is supported by the best reasons, then it is difficult, if not impossible, to see how the choice would not also be predetermined (as soon as the choice presents itself as a choice).

And now the problem is pushed back a step because for whatever mental states or events we take to be functionally identical to the agent, one needs to ask what caused them. (2010 p. 50)

Griffith seems to assume that the event-causal libertarian story, when wedded to Velleman's reductive account of the functional role of the self-determining agent, is something like this: the

agent, played by the desire to act in accordance with the strongest reasons, decides which option is supported by the best reasons, this decision then causes the agent to choose the option supported by the best reasons, and this choice causes the relevant behavioral movements required to execute the choice. And her claim is that this simply avoids her original query since now we will want to know whether the agent disappears, not at the moment of choice, but rather decision.²⁸ The libertarian cannot avoid this problem by simply endlessly positing earlier actions.

Griffith's objection to this view seems right, but the view is not the one I have offered. The desire to act in accordance with the strongest reasons does not introduce a new decision in the action-sequence, but introduces a new causal antecedent to decision. On the account I am espousing, the agent's desire to act for reasons combines with one set of desires and beliefs for action to jointly cause the decision. The decision is undetermined and so it was possible that the agent's other set of desires and beliefs for action, without the additional force of his desire to act in accordance with the strongest reasons, caused him to make a different decision. My introducing this desire does not introduce a new and earlier decision in the action-sequence and so I am not guilty of endlessly positing earlier decisions to forestall the original query.

What seems to have led Griffith to imagine that the event-causal libertarian is offering this convoluted account is her assumption that determination requires predetermination. On this assumption, so long as libertarians claim that their accounts secure self-determination, it seems that they are committed to positing an earlier action that causally determines the self-determined act. But why think that self-determination requires *predetermination*, rather than simply that the agent plays a distinctive causal role in the production of the choice? Griffith has offered no argument for this claim and, moreover, it is not an objection that agent-causal libertarians can (consistently) inveigh

²⁸ It is unclear to me whether Griffith envisages the view under discussion as drawing a distinction between decisions and choices, or whether she simply uses these different terms to make clear that she thinks this view posits an earlier moment of action to the decision about what to do, namely the decision about what the best reasons are. Nothing I say depends on how we settle this interpretive issue.

against their event-causal cousins: for not even agent-causal libertarianism secures predetermination. To see this consider the following dilemma: a choice that is predetermined is either nondeterministically caused or deterministically caused.²⁹ If the choice is deterministically caused, then it cannot be a (directly) free choice by the agent-causal libertarians own criteria (they are, after all, incompatibilists about free will and determinism). Suppose the choice is nondeterministically caused. In this case, according to Griffith, it cannot be predetermined since undetermined choices cannot be predetermined. Therefore, agent-causal libertarians cannot make room for (directly) free choices that are predetermined.

I believe the solution to this problem lays in rejecting Griffith's claim that determination requires predetermination. This solution might seem doomed in light of the following thought: an action that is self-determined is an action that is determined; an action that is determined cannot be undetermined; therefore, undetermined action cannot be self-determined. But there is an equivocation between the first and second instances of 'determined'. The notion of 'determination' in 'self-determination' is the notion of 'settling or resolving some issue', such as what to do (Anscombe 1971). The notion of 'determination' is closely connected to the notion of 'causing'. When deliberating about what to do I determine my action by causing my choice to pursue a course of action—I settle what to do by causing my choice. This is the sense of self-determination that seems required for free will. The second instance trades on the meaning of 'determination': here 'determination' means something like 'deterministically caused'. It is only this second sense of 'determined' that is contrary to 'undetermined' (which I assume is being used univocally to mean 'not deterministically caused'). But we need a reason to think that self-determination requires not

²⁹ I put aside the possibility of uncaused choices. One might think this is a false dilemma, for in addition to nondeterministic and deterministic causation, there is agent-causation. But this is a mistake. The contrast I am drawing between nondeterministic and deterministic causation simply concerns whether the effect *must* have occurred given the presence of the cause and laws of nature. If the effect must have occurred given the presence of the cause and laws of nature, then the cause *deterministically* caused the effect. If not, then the cause nondeterministically caused the effect. Agent-causation is not a distinct, third option here.

just determination in the sense of settling what to do or causing one's choice, but that this activity must be deterministically caused. And neither Pereboom nor Griffith offers any such argument.

I conclude, therefore, that while the disappearing agent argument raises deep troubles for traditional event-causal libertarianism, my modified theory has the resources to answer this argument, and, in particular, to show that premise (1) is false. On my account, the agent is robustly present during the moment of self-determined action and makes his distinctive contribution by having his desire to act in accordance with the strongest reasons add weight to the desires and beliefs that favor the decision he makes.

4 Conclusion

Event-causal libertarians often rest content with simply enriching the causal theory of action with the requirement that free actions be nondeterministically caused in the appropriate manner by agent-involving mental states and events. Pereboom (and others) have forcibly argued that on these accounts the agent disappears at the crucial moment of decision. In response I have argued that the moral of this story is not that we need substances to fundamentally cause actions, but that we need to enrich our event-causal libertarian theories with a reductive analysis of self-determination. By reducing the role of the agent in action to a state with which the agent is identified and that plays his functional role, we preserve the presence of the agent at the moment of decision. In addition to all the motivational states that do not play the role of the self-determining agent in action, such as beliefs and desires for particular actions, the agent himself contributes to his decision in virtue of the desire to act for best reasons causally contributing to his decision.³⁰

³⁰ An earlier draft of this paper was presented at the 2012 American Philosophical Association, Central Division Meeting. I am grateful to the audience for their helpful feedback, especially Justin Capes and Molly Gardner. I am also grateful to Mark Balaguer, John Fischer, Bob Kane, Ben Mitchell-Yellin, Derk Pereboom, Neal Tognazzini and an anonymous referee of this journal for their instructive conversations and comments.

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