

Experience and Free Will*

[Deneyim ve Özgür İstenç]

Pakize Arıkan

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ABSTRACT

One of the most important arguments given for the existence of free will is based upon the notion of “direct experience of free will.” According to many philosophers, free will exists because we can directly experience it. This argument can first be challenged by arguing that the experience in question is illusory. It can further be argued that while performing voluntary actions “direct experience of free will” does not show up at all. In this study it will be claimed that experience of action by itself (devoid of any conceptual and theoretical commitment) is neutral about free will. It will further be proposed that free will ascription to voluntary actions is not due to mere phenomenology, but rather due to our theoretical architecture through which we interpret our actions as free.

Key Words: Free will, experience, consciousness.

ÖZET

Özgür istencin varlığına ilişkin öne sürülen en önemli argümanlardan biri “özgür istencin doğrudan deneyimi” kavramına dayanır. Birçok düşünürün göre, özgür istenç vardır çünkü doğrudan deneyimlenebilmektedir. Bu argümana karşı koymanın birinci yolu söz konusu deneyimin yanıltıcı olduğunu iddia etmektir. Diğer bir seçenek ise, istençli bir eylemde bulunurken özgür istenç deneyiminin ortaya çıkmadığını iddia etmektir. Bu çalışmada, tek başına bir eylem deneyiminin,

* This study is a revised and improved version of the paper “Free Will and Consciousness” presented in Towards a Science of Consciousness 2015, Helsinki.

özgür istencin varlığı konusunda tarafsız olduğu iddia edilecektir. Buna ek olarak, eylemlere özgür istenç atfetmemizin nedeninin, salt fenomenoloji değil, daha ziyade eylemlerin teorik altyapımız çerçevesinde özgür olarak yorumlanması olduğu iddia edilecektir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Özgür istenç, deneyim, bilinç.

In daily life, very few people would seriously question whether they are genuinely free or not. Similarly, most people would say without hesitation that they are free agents that can be held morally responsible. However, a philosophical reflection on free will drags us into interminable disputes about whether it really exists or not. Theoretical reasons that we can give in favor of determinism, no matter how strong they are, do not suffice to end these disputes because any deterministic account needs to cope with the most challenging evidence put forward by libertarians: *conscious experience of free will*. As can be seen from relevant literature, one of the most important reasons to posit free will is its phenomenology. Many philosophers argue that we are free agents because we have direct experience of free will. Others that deny the existence of free will, on the other hand, explain away this phenomenological evidence by claiming that it is illusory. Samuel Johnson's famous words "All theory is against the freedom of the will: all experience for it" (Boswell 1769) is a striking expression that highlights the tension between our theoretical reasons for denying the existence of free will and our phenomenological reasons for supporting its existence. The first half of the above expression will not be the subject matter of this paper. In other words, we are not aiming at giving a full fledged theoretical account of determinism nor an account that voluntary actions occur randomly. What is aimed is rather to question the second half of the expression, namely, to question whether experience really provides genuine evidence for the existence of free will or not. It will be proposed that experience does not favor free will because experience by itself (devoid of any conceptual and theoretical commitment) is neutral about free will. In short, we will attempt to show that experience is silent about free will.

Although it can be defined in more than one way, free will can be roughly characterized as our ability to do otherwise than we in fact do (Van Inwagen 1975). Throughout this study, it will be focused on an incompatibilist understanding of free will, hence this definition will further require the

metaphysical claim that human actions are not determined by previous events or states of the world and that it is in a sense completely up to the subject which action he chooses. Accordingly, we can characterize the experience of free will as experiencing the self as the ultimate or unconditional source of actions and as the feeling of being able to choose differently. It is widely held that while performing voluntary actions we directly experience free will. Actually, it seems undeniable that the phenomenology of voluntary actions that we tend to characterize as free differs in some respect from the phenomenology of involuntary actions that we classify as unfree. For instance, voluntary actions, unlike involuntary ones, besides involving the feeling of purely bodily motion and physical effort, are also accompanied by the phenomenology of conscious willing, deciding or deliberating. However, it is questionable whether this distinctive phenomenology gives us accurate information about free will, or whether it gives any information about free will at all. Therefore, after briefly presenting the main line of “the Argument from Introspection”, two possible objections to this argument will be presented. The first is the well known argument that questions the veridicality of the experience of free will. The second one, on the other hand, proposes a similar but new insight that direct experience of free will does not occur at all and that the attribution of free will to the subject is not due to mere phenomenology but further facts about the subject’s conceptual and theoretical architecture.

As Gregg Caruso emphasizes, Ledger Wood describes the libertarian arguments as follows: “most advocates of the free will doctrine believe that the mind is directly aware of its freedom in the very act of making a decision, and thus that freedom is an immediate datum of our introspective awareness” (Caruso 2012, p.141). According to the Argument from Introspection while performing a voluntary action, introspection reveals that our actions are not causally determined. We, therefore, feel that our actions are freely performed. The fact that we feel free, according to most libertarians, constitutes the major evidence that we are actually free. The following words of John Searle and Timothy O’Connor clearly exemplify the main line of the reasoning of libertarian philosophers:

Reflect carefully on the character of the experience you have as you engage in normal, everyday human actions. You will sense the possibility of alternative courses of action built into these experiences...that we could be doing something else right here and now, that is all other conditions remaining the same. This, I submit is the source of our own unshakeable conviction of our own free will (Searle 1984, p. 95).

It does not seem to me (at least ordinarily) that I am caused to act by the reasons which favor doing so; it seems to be the case, rather, that I produce my own decision in view of those reasons, and could have, in an unconditional sense, decided differently (O'Connor 1995, p. 196)¹

One of the most challenging counter-arguments given against the Argument from Introspection questions the veridicality of the experience that libertarians rely on. According to it, the Argument from Introspection can succeed only if we assume that the experience of free will is veridical. However, the way we feel does not always correctly represent how things actually are. Accordingly, the fact that we feel free does not necessarily entail that we are actually free. Therefore, if one can show that the experience of free will may be illusory, then introspection cannot be admitted as a firm evidence for the existence of free will.

As Caruso also highlights, the important underlying assumption of the Introspective Argument is the belief that we have access to all causally relevant factors that determine our actions and that if there were a determining process underlying our decision we would know it (Caruso 2008). However, there are many philosophers who question this assumption and believe that we feel as if we are free only because of the fact that we do not have a complete grasp of the casual chain that determines our actions. When the cause of or impediment on actions are apparent to the subject that is, when the action is overtly determined, the subject usually does not form the belief that he/she is free. For instance, if I know that my bodily movement is caused by an external force, I will not hesitate to say that I did not act freely. However, while performing a voluntary action we are not always aware of all causally relevant facts because some of these facts do not occur at the level of consciousness. For instance, there are also some decisive neural processes that are not phenomenologically salient to us and over which we have no control. Therefore, it phenomenologically appears that our actions are not determined at all. However, the fact that we are not aware of the deterministic story behind our actions does not mean that this story is not true. Centuries ago, Baron D'Holbach, who believes that the will is a brain state, asserts that free will is an illusion that arises out of ignorance as follows:

"But," you will say, "I feel free." This is an illusion, that may be compared to that of the fly in the fable, who, lighting upon the pole of a heavy carriage, applauded himself for directing its course. Man, who thinks

himself free, is a fly, who imagines he has power to move the universe,
while he is himself unknowingly carried along by it.

The inward persuasion that we are free to do, or not to do a thing, is but a mere illusion. If we trace the true principle of our actions, we shall find, that they are always necessary consequences of our volitions and desires, which are never in our power. You think yourself free, because you do what you will; but are you free to will, or not to will; to desire, or not to desire? Are not your volitions and desires necessarily excited by objects or qualities totally independent of you? (D'Holbach 1831, pp. 51, 52)

More contemporary attempts to show the illusory character of free will are based on empirical experiments. Several empirical studies are managed to show that all of our actions that seem to be originated from our conscious will is in fact determined by unconscious brain processes, and hence are not free (Donald 2010, p. 9). For instance, studies carried out by Benjamin Libet attempt to establish that the brain starts the action before the agent is aware of his decision to act.² That is, brain activity inaccessible to conscious awareness always precedes action of any kind, including voluntary action. This means that consciousness of will occurs too late to have a causal influence on the action; the brain “decides to initiate a movement before the observer even becomes aware of having made a decision to move.” (Donald 2010, p. 10) This phenomenon known as “readiness potential” or “expectancy wave” shows that the experience of free will or ourselves as the ultimate cause of our actions cannot be veridical (Donald 2010, p. 10). Because the experience of free will requires that a voluntary action should be the outcome of a conscious decision or deliberation, action has to start after we have consciously decided to act. Therefore, given that experience of free will is illusory, then experience and introspection cannot be considered as evidences that prove the existence of free will.

² In Libet's experiments subjects were asked to perform some motor actions within a specific period of time. They are further asked to identify the time at which they were first aware of their decision to act. On the other hand, Libet measured their neural activity. The measurements showed that there was a preparatory brain activity that occurred before the action. In addition, it appeared that, this brain activity preceded the action by approximately 550 ms, while subjects reported that they were aware that they have decided to act 200 ms before the action (Bayne, 2011).

Whether the argument based on Libet's experiments is conclusive against free will is debatable, but this discussion will not be the concern of this study.³ Therefore, the next argument that we propose against the Argument from Introspection will be independent from the illusory or veridical character of experience. Instead of explaining away the experience of free will as illusory, we propose that it can reasonably be claimed that the experience of free will does not exist at all. In other words, it can reasonably be held that the expression "I feel free" is literally wrong. This is why, whether we have a veridical experience or not while performing a voluntary action does not matter, since the experience *by itself* may neither include nor imply the experience of free will. In other words, we cannot infer the existence of free will from our direct experience of our actions. Pure experience is silent and neutral about the existence of free will.

The Argument from Introspection is based on a conception of free will that describes an inner experience that can be achieved through introspection. In other words, libertarian philosophers usually conceive free will as something that can be directly felt. However, is freedom of the will a kind of thing that can be experienced at all? As Richard Holton highlights, in his "A Philosophical Inquiry Concerning Human Liberty" Anthony Collins criticizes libertarian philosophers for appealing to "vulgar experience" in order to explain an intricate matter as free will (1890). Collins believes that if free will can be characterized in terms of mere experience, then it should not be considered as a complicated and obscure matter. Here are Collins' words concerning freedom:

But how can all this happen in a plain matter of fact, supposed to be experienced by everybody? What difficulty can there be in stating a plain matter of fact, and describing what everybody feels? What need of so much philosophy? and why so many contradictions on the subject?
(Collins 1890, p. 31)

As stated previously, according to libertarian philosophers, one of the requirement for free will is that actions must be self caused, whereas the agent must not merely cause the action but has to be the sole reason of that action (Campbell 2002, p. 36). Similarly, the Argument from Introspection is based on a conception of phenomenology of action as involving a sense or feeling of the self as the cause of the action in an unconditional way. So, the experience of free will, in a sense, should involve an

³ To see some arguments given against Libet's case see, Donald (2010), pp. 11,12.

immediate grasp of further metaphysical facts about the agent since it is claimed that we have direct experience of ourselves not merely as the cause of our actions and decisions, but as the *ultimate, uncaused, undetermined* author of them.

But, is it really possible to have such an experience; an experience that directly conveys us that we are undetermined? Can such a fact be achieved through introspection? As Collins also indicates, the notion of free will that libertarians try to establish on the basis of experience seems to overrun the information that mere experience can convey us. While holding a metaphysical notion of free will, libertarians claim that such a metaphysical fact is achievable through introspection. This seems to be inconsistent. For how can we directly experience the metaphysical fact that previous states of the universe do not determine our actions? As Richard Holton also expresses, these metaphysical claims do not describe an experience (2006, p. 1). Achieving the knowledge that we are not determined cannot be obtained through mere phenomenology.

The point can be made more apparent if we look at the problem from the reverse direction. Is it possible to have a direct experience of being determined while performing an involuntary action? It is reasonable to say that if someone believes that we can directly experience free will while performing a voluntary action, he should equally believe that we can directly experience determinism while performing an involuntary action. For instance, we should be able to directly be aware that breathing (or any other action such as digestion which is performed involuntarily) is determined by previous events. However, only appealing to the phenomenology of breathing does not tell us anything about the decisive factors behind it. The experience of breathing by itself, neither tells us that it is determined nor that it occurs randomly. Breathing's being determined and undetermined are both consistent with its phenomenology (for randomness does not seem to be a phenomenologically salient aspect of an action either). That is, the claim that phenomenology does not reveal free will does not mean that it reveals determinism. On the contrary what is claimed is rather that pure phenomenology can neither reveal free will nor determinism. Again, while we can have direct experience of pain, it does not seem intelligible that we can have direct experience that our pain is determined or undetermined by previous events. Therefore, the libertarian introspective argument "invests vulgar experience with philosophical properties that are not the kind of thing that are, or perhaps even could be, experienced" (Holton 2006, p. 3).

If libertarian “free will” cannot be found in mere phenomenology then what is the ground of free will ascription? Or what makes libertarian believe that introspection can reveal free will? The answer seems to be our conceptual and cognitive commitments through which we interpret our actions as free. The main problem with the Introspective Argument is that it confuses unbiased direct experience with our theory-laden interpretation of it and considers our theory laden reports as trustworthy evidences in favor of free will.

In their article “The Phenomenology of Free Will” Nahmias et. al. state that conflicting accounts of the phenomenology of free will indicate that “introspective reports about relevant experiences are likely influenced by the theoretical commitments of the philosopher doing the introspection.” The empirical studies on phenomenology of free will shows us that while some people report compatibilist description of free will, others report libertarian description of free will depending on their conceptual and cognitive background (2004, p. 163). The fact that there is no consensus among philosophers and even ordinary people about how voluntary actions feel like seems to support the claim that some aspects that we are inclined to attribute to the phenomenology of voluntary actions may be rooted not in the experiences themselves but in further background beliefs we possess. Otherwise, two subjects having similar experience of identical voluntary actions under exactly the same circumstances would report approximately the same thing. Nahmias et.al claim that philosophers look at the phenomenology of action “through the lens of their theoretical commitments”. Through this line of reasoning “free will” can be evaluated as an aspect that is superadded to the phenomenology of actions on the basis of our conceptual and cognitive architecture.⁴

It can be claimed that experience of action by itself, devoid of any conceptual and cognitive commitment, can convey us the feeling of purely bodily motion and the effort that we spent; the phenomenology of conscious willing or volition and the state of deciding or deliberating. However, none of these elements of experience of action necessarily imply a feeling of freedom. For instance, the fact that I undergo the experience of willing or deliberating does not inform me that I am willing or deliberating freely. Libertarians can plausibly criticize this line of reasoning by claiming the elements that are listed are not exhaustive; the experience of voluntary actions contains more distinctive phenomenological aspects. For instance it could be plausibly claimed that experience of voluntary actions also involves, say, the feeling that we could have chosen otherwise. They could go

⁴ Nahmias et. al. conclude that empirical research on phenomenology indicates that even theory laden introspective reports of agents support a compatibilist description of free will rather than a libertarian one, for more people report a compatibilist descriptions of their experiences.

on saying that phenomenology of choice among open possibilities necessarily implies the feeling of freedom. However, even though we admit that we have the feeling that we could have acted otherwise, as Adolf Grünbaum states this experience does not tell us anything about whether we could have acted otherwise “*under exactly the same external and internal motivational condition?*” (Grünbaum 1957, 336). That is, the phenomenology of choice by itself cannot reveal a feeling of *genuine* free will. Therefore, no aspect of the phenomenology of action seems to convey us the feeling of genuine freedom.

As mentioned previously, in most circumstances ascribing freedom to an action requires that the subject is contemplating upon the action. Searle’s words “reflect carefully on the character of the experience you have as you engage in normal, everyday human actions...” indicates that attaining the knowledge of free will requires more than mere experience; it requires “reflecting” upon the experience. In other words, it is only after we seriously consider and think about the phenomenology of actions that we arrive to the conclusion that they are free. But if mere experience is supposed to reveal free will, then it is expected to do so even if the subject is not reflecting or contemplating upon his/her action; the mere phenomenology of the action would be sufficient to convey the feeling of freedom. Every day we perform countless voluntary actions as well as countless involuntary ones. For instance, on the one hand we involuntarily sneeze, bat the eyes, breath or digest while on the other hand, we voluntarily sing our favorite song; drink a cup of coffee, comb our hair etc. However, most of the time, we do not have a definite feeling about whether our actions are free or not despite the fact that we are aware of them. Contrary to our experience of pain which we are directly aware of, the so called “experience of freedom” does not occur unless we are engaged in a cognitive process of reflecting, conceptualizing or interpreting our experience. Most of our actions are not judged to be free at the moment they are performed, but are usually judged to be so only after we consider and think about them seriously. Given that reflection is a conceptual activity, it seems reasonable to assert that experience in its most basic non-theoretical form cannot convey the feeling of freedom. The phrase “direct experience of free will”, then, does not refer to a genuine case of experience but rather to the way we conceptualize and interpret our experience. Therefore, introspective reports concerning the existence of free will are not theory neutral, but rather are based on and shaped through the subject’s underlying beliefs and assumptions about himself and about the external world. For instance, an infant who is capable of performing voluntary actions but who is not endowed with the relevant conceptual and theoretical background would not report his/her actions as free since the infant would not possess any definite feeling of freedom. Similarly, the scope of the actions that are

felt and characterized as free by an ordinary person and by a neuroscientist would probably differ to a high extent, because an ordinary person's libertarian intuitions are stronger than the libertarian intuitions of a neuroscientist.⁵

Even though the way we feel is usually seen as strong evidence that favors the existence of free will, we have seen that the evidential role of phenomenology concerning free will is far from obvious. First of all, even if we admit that experience of voluntary actions conveys the feeling of freedom it should further be shown that the experience in question is veridical. Secondly, it seems perfectly plausible to take a step further and question whether the experience of free will really shows up as a part of phenomenology of voluntary actions or not. We tried to show that ascribing free will to our actions may not be due to mere phenomenology, for there is no pure phenomenology of free will, but due to how we conceptualize and interpret our experiences through our mostly libertarian inclinations. Therefore, "directly experiencing free will" should not be conflated with "interpreting an action *as* free". Pure phenomenology by itself does not seem to have any evidential role concerning the existence of free will unless it is conceptualized. Given that the way we conceptualize things is shaped through our beliefs and theoretical commitments, interpreting actions as free cannot constitute unbiased and theory neutral evidence for the existence of free will. Therefore, arguing for libertarianism on the basis of evidences that are shaped by libertarian assumptions will beg the question instead of answering it.

⁵ Here one can argue that even if an infant is unable to report his/her actions as free, it is still possible that he/she experiences freedom. However, as said before ascribing freedom to an action and feeling an action as free requires reflecting upon the action. Therefore, if a person lacks the theoretical make up to perform this reflection, it would not be possible to claim that he/she have a sense of freedom.

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