Libertarianism, deliberation and rationality

(Sección: Ontología y teoría del conocimiento)

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Summary

In taking indeterminism to be a requirement of freedom, libertarianism faces the objection that undetermined decisions and actions are bound to be made in an arbitrary, chancy way and thereby to remain beyond the agent's rational control. In this paper, I intend to defend libertarianism against this objection on the basis of a reflection on practical deliberation. I will argue for the consistency between causally undetermined choices and rationality.

An issue about the nature of deliberation that seems especially relevant to a defense of libertarianism is whether deliberation is a matter of *weighing* reasons or of *weighting* them. I will take this controversy as the starting point of my task. I will try to defend the second option (weighting) against charges of irrationality. Let me present both alternatives.

Those who take deliberation to be a matter of weighing reasons conceive the reasons that an agent considers in deliberating as having a determinate weight or force for the agent, before she starts considering them. Instead, those who conceive of deliberation as a matter of weighting reasons do not take reasons to come before the agent with a determinate, precise weight or force. It is rather the agent who gives or assigns them a determinate weight. The weighing model of deliberation leads naturally to determinism about decision making. Instead, the weighting model is much more akin to libertarianism.

As I have anticipated, the traditional and most important objection that compatibilists raise against libertarians is that an undetermined decision is a random, arbitrary, and hence irrational act, so that it is neither a free act nor one for which the agent can be truly responsible. Now, this objection can also be, and has actually been, raised against the weighting model of deliberation (e.g. Levy 2007).

Against this, I contend that weighting reasons is an indispensable process in certain cases: first, cases of choice between alternatives supported by incommensurable (say, moral and prudential) reasons; second, cases where one of the reasons is not directly about actions, but about (lower-level) reasons (which in turn are about actions). Following Joseph Raz (1978), we may call reasons of this kind "second-order reasons". I claim that second-order reasons involve the possibility of weighting (first-order) reasons without irrationality.

Levy (2008) contends that the real problem with weighting is that it leaves us without a *contrastive explanation* of the agent's final choice, so that it remains ultimately arbitrary. A contrastive explanation aims at answering a question of the form, "Why is A the case

rather than B?" In the case of a choice, a contrastive explanation would provide a reason for the agent's choosing A *rather than* B or vice versa.

Defendants of weighting, however, can accept the contrastive explanation requirement and try to meet it by appealing to what we have called a second-order reason. We can also understand this way of solving the conflict in terms of the mental act that Patricia Greenspan has called "setting priorities" (cf. Greenspan 2012, p. 193). But the arbitrariness objection might be raised again with respect to the agent's endorsement of second-order reasons or to her setting priorities. Against this, I provide several arguments:

First, and most important, I show, by means of some examples, that a choice can have an element of arbitrariness without being thereby irrational. I reject the step from "arbitrary" to "irrational"; and the strong part of the objection against weighting (and against libertarianism in general) is irrationality, rather than arbitrariness as such.

Second, I also defend the rationality of weighting in terms of the distinction between satisficing and maximizing in rational decision theory. In many circumstances, it suffices for rationality that reasons for A are simply good ones; it is not also required that they are the best or at least better than those which favor B.

Finally, I argue that in many real-life circumstances, even if we face a difficult choice situation with a second-order reason, e.g., an evaluative principle, in place, it is still an open question what it means, in the particular circumstances, to act in accord with the reason or the principle; which of the first-order reasons should be assigned more weight in the light of the reason or principle at hand is an additional task which the agent must still undertake. And if she performs this task responsibly and carefully, any result will be rationally justified, so that both the indispensability and the rationality of weighting is thereby vindicated.

On the basis of the preceding considerations, I show that there can be, and actually are, choices that are both undetermined and rational, as an important step towards a general vindication of libertarianism

References

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