

Freedom as Sensitive to Reasons, Habits, and Character

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Free Choice, the Good, and Teleology

My goal in this paper is to explore the ways in which a person's habits may shape what she is capable of freely choosing to do by (i) exploring how an agent's exercise of free choice is constrained by her reasons and (ii) giving an account of how habits can shape what an agent sees as reasons. At the heart of my view is what I shall call "the reasons-constraint on free choice": roughly, the claim that if an agent sees no reason at a particular time for doing a particular action, then the agent is unable to freely choose to perform that action at that time. I show how what an agent sees as reasons, and how she weighs those reasons, depends upon her moral character. An agent's moral character thus puts constraints on what actions she is capable of freely choosing to perform. By forming habits, the agent thus can close off (or open up) possibilities for acting in various ways.

I begin with the connection between an agent's exercise of free will and the good—or, to be more accurate, what the agent perceives as good. The degree of overlap between what the agent perceives as good and what is actually good will depend, to a large degree, on the moral character of the agent in question. The view that we only freely or intentionally do what we perceive as good in some way is sometimes referred to as "the Guise of the Good Thesis."¹ The vast majority of the medievals embraced the Guise of the Good Thesis and rejected the normative neutrality that characterizes much of contemporary philosophical writing on the issue.

Despite this connection's pedigree, the majority of contemporary philosophical work on free will avoids any explicit connection between free choice,

1 So far as I am aware, this specific name comes from Velleman (1992), but a medieval predecessor can be found in the common dictum: *quidquid appetitur, appetitur sub specie boni*. For a collection of worthwhile papers addressing the Guise of the Good Thesis, see Tenenbaum 2010.

the good, or even the perceived good, and thus don't directly draw upon the Guise of the Good Thesis. Instead, most philosophers working on free will prefer to use the language of reasons.² Shortly, I shall suggest that this language is not as far removed from the Guise of the Good Thesis as is sometimes suggested by the terminological shift. But I begin with a discussion of the teleological nature of free will.

Since at least Aristotle, it has been noted that action is teleological in nature and that the proper explanation for a morally responsible action will be a teleological explanation.³ The question, Why did A freely X? is a request for a reason, but as Richard Taylor noted it "is almost never a request for a recital of causes. It is rather a request for a statement of purpose or aim."⁴ G.F. Shueler unpacks the intentionality of actions as follows:

It seems clear enough that intentional actions are inherently purposive; indeed, intentional human actions are paradigm examples of purposive behavior. There is always some point, aim, or goal to any intentional action. It is equally clear that our everyday explanations of actions in terms of the agent's reasons ("reasons explanations" for short) must always refer to that fact, that is to the purpose of the action, if only implicitly, on pain of not explaining the action at all. If I tell you that my reason for sprinting toward the bus stop is that the last bus leaves in five minutes, you will take this as an explanation of my action only if you assume that my purpose is to catch the last bus (or anyway that there is something involving my being there at the same time the bus is—spray painting it with graffiti perhaps). Without some such addition, my reference to the time of the last bus simply won't "connect" in the right sort of way to what I am doing, i.e. sprinting toward the bus stop, and my action won't have been explained.⁵

2 For just two of many examples, see Fischer (2006) and Smith (2004, Chapter five). Boyle and Lavin (2010) suggest that the contemporary departure from "the Guise of the Good" is largely a result of rejection of teleological explanations of action; see Boyle and Lavin 2010, 162ff.

3 It is not my intention, in this chapter, to give arguments for the teleological nature of intentional action or the existence of free will in general. My reasons for preferring a teleological account over a causal account are largely shaped by Goetz (2009), Sehon (2005), and Schueler (2003), though the account of teleological explanation at work in this chapter differs in a number of ways from each of these views. For why I think there is free will, see Timpe 2013.

4 Taylor 1973, 141; See also Goetz 2009, 16.

5 Schueler 2003, 1.