

# Feeling Reasons

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## **Introduction: The Social Significance of Agent Autonomy and Responsibility**

Much of human social life depends on the notion that agents have control over their actions and are responsible for their choices. We assume that it is sensible to punish and reward behavior so long as the person was in control and chose knowingly and intentionally. Without the assumptions of agent control and responsibility, human social commerce is hardly conceivable. As members of a social species, we recognize cooperation, loyalty, and reciprocation as prominent features of the social environment, and we react with hostility when group members disappoint socially salient expectations. Inflicting disutilities on the socially renegade and rewarding civic virtue helps restore the standards. In other social species, too, social unreliability, such as failures to reciprocate grooming or food-sharing, provokes a reaction likely to cost the renegade animal or his kin, sooner or later. For example, de Waal (1982) observed that chimpanzees who renege on a supportive coalition when loyalty is needed will later suffer retaliation. In social mammals at least, mechanisms for keeping the social order seem to be part of what evolution bequeathed to brain circuitry (Clutton-Brock and Parker 1995). The stability of the social-expectation baseline is sufficiently important to survival that individuals are prepared to incur some cost in enforcing those expectations. Just as an anubis baboon learns that tasty scorpions are to be found under rocks but cannot just be picked up, so it learns that failure to reciprocate grooming when it is duly expected may yield a smart slap. Much of behavior is guided by the expectation of certain consequences – not only what will happen in the physical world, but including also what will happen in the social world (Cheney and Seyfarth 1990; de Waal 1989).

What is it – for us or baboons or chimpanzees – to have control over one's behavior? Are we really responsible for our choices and decisions? Will neuroscientific understanding of the neuronal mechanisms for decision-making change how we think about these fundamental features of social commerce? These are some of the questions I wish to consider in this essay.

## Are We Responsible and In Control if Our Choices and Actions Are Caused?

A venerable tradition bases the conditions for free will and control on a contrast between being caused to do something and not being so caused. For example, if someone pushes me from behind and I bump into you, then my bumping you was caused by the push; I did not choose to bump you. Examples conforming to this prototype have given credence to the idea that in order for a choice to be free, it must be uncaused. That is, it is supposed that a free choice is made when, without prior cause and without prior constraints, a decision comes into being and an action results. This contracausal construal free choice is known as libertarianism (see Campbell 1957). Is it plausible?

As Hume pointed out in 1739,<sup>1</sup> the answer is surely no. Hume argued that our choices and decisions are in fact caused by other events in the mind: desires, beliefs, preferences, feelings, and so forth. Neither do the precipitating events, whether described as mental or as neuronal, need to be conscious. He also made the much deeper and more penetrating observation that agents are not considered responsible for the choices they made unless they are caused by our desires, intentions, and so forth. Randomness, pure chance, and utter unpredictability are not preconditions for control. Hume puts the issue with memorable compactness:

where [actions] proceed not from some cause in the characters and disposition of the person, who perform'd them, they infix not themselves upon him, and can neither redound to his honor if good, nor infamy, if evil. (p. 411)

Logic reveals, Hume argued, that responsibility is actually inconsistent with libertarianism (uncaused choice). Someone may choose to climb onto his roof because he does not want the rain to come in his house, he wants to fix the loose shingles, and he believes that he needs to get up on the roof to do that. His desires, intentions and beliefs are part of the causal antecedents resulting in his choice. If, without determining desire and belief, he simply went up onto the roof – as it were, for no reason – his sanity and hence his control is seriously in doubt. More generally, a choice undetermined by anything the agent believes, intends or desires is actually the kind of thing we consider out of the agent's control and not the sort of thing for which we hold someone responsible. Furthermore, desires or beliefs, were *they* uncaused rather than caused by other stable features of the person's character and temperament, are likewise inappropriate preconditions for responsible choice (see also Hobart 1934).

Neither Hume's argument that choices are internally caused nor his argument showing that libertarianism is absurd has even been convincingly refuted (for disagreements with Hume, see Kenny 1989). Notice, moreover, that his arguments hold whether or not one thinks of the mind as a separate Cartesian substance or as a pattern of activity of the physical brain; whether one thinks of the etiologically

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<sup>1</sup> In his anonymously published, *A Treatise on Human Nature*. Edited by LA Selby-Bigge (first printing 1888).