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# Response to Anton Ford

Anton's central claim is that I can – and should – reject the thesis that he calls *corporealism*. In my original response, as Anton notes, I claimed that I did not take myself to subscribe to corporealism, nor to have subscribed to it in *A Metaphysics*. But Anton remains convinced that I do (or at any rate did) so subscribe and moreover, professes himself stunned at my disclaimer! In view of my very considerable stress on the power of self-movement in *A Metaphysics*, I am rather less stunned by – and grateful for – his persistence in attributing to me the thesis I purported to disclaim, because it gives me the opportunity to attempt a diagnosis here of what might otherwise seem to be a puzzling dispute between us.

If we are going to be clear about whether or not I am committed to corporealism, we are going to have to be clear also about what exactly that thesis says. In his published response, Anton says merely that it is the thesis that "agency is a power to move one's body" (p.?). In his original paper, though, the thesis I am attributed in virtue of which I am said to be a corporealist is the thesis that "agency is *the* power to move oneself" (my italics); and moreover, this answer is offered as my supposed reply to the question "What stands to this power (the power of agency) as seeing stands to sight? What is its definitive act?" It is *this* answer to *this* question that I meant to disavow – and this disavowal need not amount to a disavowal of the thesis that agency is a power to move one's body. Let me explain.

If one says of some power, P, that it is *the* power to ø, the definite article here imposes a certain natural construal on the "is" which is used in stating the thesis – what seems to be implied, it seems to me, is that the 'is' is the 'is' of definition. (If that were not already obvious, the analogy with seeing and sight, and talk of agency's 'definitive act', would I think, settle that this was Anton's intended interpretation). And it is on this interpretation of the 'is' that I meant to deny that I believed that agency is the power to move one's body. Rather, I stated, agency should be thought of (definitionally) as the power to a*ct*. It is *acting* that stands to agency as seeing stands to sight. I *do* subscribe, of course, to the weaker claim that agency in its animal manifestations always *in fact* involves, in animals, the exercise of the power to move (or effect changes in) one's body. But this is different from thinking that

self-movement is the ‘definitive act’ by means of which the power of agency is to be specified.

How is it different? For one thing, the weaker thesis leaves open the possibility that there might conceivably be manifestations of agency which do *not* involve self-movement. Consider the following suggestion: the world might conceivably have been such that whenever the wind is in the east, I find myself able casually to move tables about at will in the same way as I can now casually move my arm, or twiddle distractedly and directly with a knife and fork as I can now twiddle my thumbs. The stronger definitional thesis rules these out as cases of agency; the weaker thesis does not. Or compare the following claim about a different power: vision:

(V) Vision is the power to convert patterns of light into neuronal signals and thereby obtain information about the world.

Taken as a definitional claim, (V) would rule out the presence of vision in a creature without neurons – and thus might be thought implausibly chauvinistic. But we could take (V) differently, not as a definitional, but rather as a constitutional claim concerning the basis of the power in such creatures as we currently know to possess it. Thus construed, we might think (V) true, though we would not go so far as to suggest that vision’s ‘definitive act’ is the conversion of light into neuronal signals.

So much for the bewildering dispute. I want to concede that it is certainly due, as Anton’s range of quotations clearly reveals, to my own failure sufficiently to distinguish these two distinct theses when I wrote *A Metaphysics*. Let me turn now to Anton’s positive suggestion that it is *materialism*, rather than corporealism, which really offers the definitional truth about agency – agency, he suggests, is a power to transact with something or someone else. “The ‘immediate object of power’”, Anton claims, “is precisely *not* oneself: it is neither one’s body, nor one’s soul, but an extra-corporeal object or a second bearer of the power” (p.?).

Might materialism offer a good definitional account of agency? My worry is that the *extension* of the concept of agency, according to materialism, is implausibly narrow. Even if one felt sympathetic to Anton’s suggestion that the man drifting somewhere in outer space who can raise his arm or blink does not deserve to count as an agent in virtue merely of these

truncated powers (and I think myself that that claim is implausibly strong- on my view, he is an agent, although an exceedingly limited one), one must say something about so -called 'mental' actions. Among the long list of verbs and verb phrases in terms of which we characterise our active lives come such verbs as 'consider'; 'calculate'; 'visualise'; 'decide'. It is hard to see how such mental activities as these are to be properly accommodated on the materialist's view. Is calculating, for example, a transaction between two different parties? If so, what are the two parties? Me and some numbers? Me and some ideas? It does not seem to me as though the transactional model of action very comfortably accommodates these instances. Perhaps the materialist believes that mental activity of this kind should indeed be regarded as falling outside the domain of action proper and so would feel unmoved by the difficulty. But that would be a very radical thesis - and one would want to hear more about the reasons for deciding to redraw the boundaries of activity so as to exclude these kinds of cases altogether from the category of the active.

Whatever the prospects for a workable materialism, is Anton right in his general suggestion that the idea that agency involves movement *of the self* (or the body) by the self plays no important role in *A Metaphysics* and could readily be given up? I think the perspective which privileges the body and its being moved is one which is more crucial to the central argument of *A Metaphysics* than Anton allows. This perspective *does* have an important role to play in the defence of Agency Incompatibilism. Here's why. I believe and want to argue that there is an essential connection between agency and indeterminism. But what is the essential connection, exactly? It can't just be that whenever one acts in a certain way, it is undetermined that one will act in that way. For of course we often act in ways such that it might seem plausible to suppose that it is *determined* thant we will act in those general ways – or, if it is not, that is only because of the possibility of indeterministic influences from the Universe, as it were, that do not seem to have any relation to the question whether agency itself must be indeterministic. For example, it may be determined by my being the sort of person I am, by the principles I adhere to and the reasons I recognise, that once I am there standing in the polling booth and faced with a choice between, say, two parties, that I will vote a certain way in the general election – strange and irrational sub-personal interferences with my rationality and/or physical capacities apart, perhaps. It is this sort of point which

makes compatibilists feel that they must have right on their side. What I wanted to argue, though, is that even if it were true that generally predictable and stable relations held between such things as facts about motivations and personalities, on the one hand, and facts about how agents would act, on the other, there would remain something essentially indeterministic about the activities of those agents, but one might sometimes need to descend through the levels of description, as it were, in order to be able to capture it – one might need, for instance, to recognise that each *individual* exercise of agency has at least some of its specific features settled by the agent at the time of action, even if there are certain general descriptions which one can very safely predict will be instantiated, provided rationality and normal motivation prevail. But to get at this, one would have to be able to describe a voting, for example, as the moving of a body part – in order to say that *thus described*, its occurrence was undetermined by antecedent circumstances. Likewise, it may be determined that a hungry dog put in front of a piece of meat, and not prevented from doing so, will eat it. Nevertheless, the particularities are up to the dog, are settled by it.

The vision of the Universe as one which contains animal bodies controlled and moved by the animals themselves from moment to moment thus *is* crucial to Agency Incompatibilism. But I deny that it is a corporealist vision in the definitional sense. It is a corporealist vision, perhaps, in another and rather weaker sense, as I have tried to explain. But we have been given no reason for thinking that in the weaker sense, corporealism might not be true; and in some respects, as I have tried to argue, it may have advantages over its materialist rival.