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Version: Accepted Version

Article:
Steward, H (2013) Responses. Inquiry: an interdisciplinary journal of philosophy, 56 (6). 681 - 706. ISSN: 0020-174X

https://doi.org/10.1080/0020174X.2013.841055

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Reply to Michael Garnett

Michael suggests in his very interesting response that it might be helpful to make a separation between two different facets of the Challenge from Chance: these he calls 'the agency problem' and 'the rational cost problem'. I don't unfortunately have the space to consider properly everything he says; I shall confine myself to the very interesting 'Crazy Singer' case, which Michael uses to suggest that my response to the rational cost problem cannot be satisfactory. The rational cost problem, as explicated by Michael, is this: " ... if a free agent's processes of practical reasoning necessarily contain elements of randomness or chance, then a free agent must always be at risk of acting irrationally ... Yet this means that the freedom on which the libertarian insists is simply the freedom to be irrational, which is a freedom that, surely, we would be better off without." (p.?) .

Let me first reiterate that the version of libertarianism which I intended to espouse in *A Metaphysics* is meant to *avoid* commitment to the view that a free agent's processes of practical reasoning necessarily contain elements of randomness or chance of a sort liable to involve the agent in irrationality. Joe's processes of practical reasoning, for instance, when they are applied to the question whether or not to move in with his girlfriend, rather than staying put in his miserable bedsit, will have simply failed him if they do not (at some point) arrive at the conclusion that he ought to move – and I wanted to concede that it is therefore *good* if there is a type of determination here. What seems desirable is that *what Joe decides* should be determined by his reasons, at least in a case like this, where his reasons make one course of action indisputably the best available. And where (practical) reason dictates one answer, we should of course hope for our concrete processes of reasoning to be such as to produce that same answer. But it does not follow that *the event which is Joe's deciding to move in* has to be deterministically caused by its antecedents if Joe is to avoid irrationality. That event is a specific occurrence which has a number of properties, quite apart from the property of *being a decision with a certain content* – for one thing, it is a decision which takes place at a particular time, and provided there is no particular reason for Joe to make his decision at the specific time at which he does (as there rarely is in ordinary cases) one

cannot move from 'the conclusion of the practical reasoning should be determined by Joe's reasons, in a clear case such as this' (which is true) to 'the particular occurrence which is the event of Joe's deciding to move in with his girlfriend should be causally determined by its antecedents, in a clear case such as this' (which, I maintain, is false). Causal determinism concerning the individual events which are our actions is not, I wanted to suggest, a necessarily desirable concomitant of the rational determination of the answer to a practical question by the reasons for and against the various answers on offer.

It is natural though, to ask at this point (as Michael does) what is to be said about cases in which there *are* reasons for performing an action at a particular time – e.g. *right now*. This is the point of Michael's 'Crazy Singer' case. In the Crazy Singer case, there *are* reasons for pressing the button at the particular time that Singer wants it pressed. And so, if I have those reasons prior to my pressing the button at the time that Singer specifies I must press it, it might seem as though, given the structure of my motivation, there is no metaphysical possibility at the time of action that I will do anything else – or at least, none whose existence could possibly be a condition of my freedom or agency. Perhaps there is some chance that I might, say, freeze with terror as the countdown reaches '9' and consign my beloved family to death at Singer's hands. But it might seem implausible that my freedom could depend upon such an irritating possibility as this.

In *A Metaphysics*, I thought I would be able to concede that in such artificially constrained situations, there might indeed be no possibility of a kind that is relevant to my freedom or agency of my not ø-ing at t – and I pointed out that there would remain, nevertheless, *other* things which my action would settle (e.g. which particular bodily movement would occur). Michael suggests that this response is inadequate, because he thinks that an action which is a ø-ing ought to be a settling of *whether one ø-s*. I agree that it ought be a settling of whether one øs, in the sense that whether one øs ought to be determined by ones reasons and motivations. But it does not seem to me to follow that it must be a settling of whether one ø-s in the sense that the fact that I will ø is *metaphysically* settled only as I act (and not before). To deny that agents can truly settle matters such as this is *not* to treat reasons themselves as constraints on the scope of one's agency; it is only to treat them as constraints with respect to the limited question *whether one will or will not ø*,

which, in such cases as the Crazy Singer case, they surely are. But each exercise of agency is still the metaphysical settling of a *range* of questions – so that a rational constraint on the answer to one, or even a few, of those questions does not amount to a constraint on the scope of one's agency itself. In pressing the button, even in the Crazy Singer case, one performs an action – albeit, an action which falls under some descriptions such that it was entirely predictable that one would act thus.

However, I am worried by reflecting on the Crazy Singer scenario for reasons other than those mentioned by Michael. For mightn't Michael's strategy be extended? Might it not be possible for Crazy Singer to constrain every feature of the action he wants me to perform, down to the tiniest level of detail? Suppose he specifies, for example, that I am to push the button with my right hand, at 10am on the dot, by means of a push with the following characteristics – etc., etc. Then I have a very strong motivation for at least attempting to do as he says – even if perhaps the specification might conceivably outrun my powers of compliance. It is probably not settled in advance that I will perform an entirely Singer-compliant action, because probably no agent is actually able to comply with the instruction to produce a totally specific bodily movement. I will thus doubtless still settle things, therefore, when my action occurs – inevitably, by virtue of my inability to comply with any totally specific instruction of this kind. But one might reasonably wonder whether this accident of powerlessness could possibly be the place where the essence of agency is located. Suppose I was better at controlling my movements than human beings generally are – suppose I *could* bring about a maximally specific bodily movement at will. Would the mere fact that I could be relied upon to produce it perfectly mean that my production of it would no longer be an action of mine?

I think this thought experiment is extremely instructive – and that perhaps it suggests the importance of a factor that I overlooked in *A Metaphysics*. What I think it raises is the question whether, given the enhanced powers of bodily control I have imagined, I still have to exert *effort* in the execution of the movement in question, in order to get it right. Perhaps even though the movement is well within my powers to bring about, I still have, for example, to concentrate, to avoid getting distracted, to exercise care and attention. Or perhaps I actively have to try *not* to concentrate – perhaps I know that such concentration might put

me off, and that the best strategy is to attempt to forget the importance attaching to the action in this particular case. Either way, though, there is something that is up to me to get right. In that case, my intuition is that we still have an action – it is in the deployment of the necessary care and attention that we see the agent's settling of what occurs. Consider: someone might offer me the chance to be hooked up to a machine which will simply *ensure* that the movement which is produced meets the Singer specifications – all I have to do is sit there with my finger attached to the device and it will ensure that my finger does exactly the right thing at the right moment. I might gladly hook myself up to avoid the stressfulness of actually having to execute such an important movement myself. Hooked up to the machine, the movement becomes a *mere* movement – my immediate bodily control over the action is suspended. But without it, I remain an agent – since even if it is the case that the production of the wanted specific movement is generally easy for me, there is still *execution* here – execution which could conceivably go wrong. I am an executer of an action, one might think, where the possibility of success or failure depends on what I called in *A Metaphysics*, *top-level control*.

What consideration of this extension of the Crazy Singer case suggests to me, then, is that perhaps contra my original position, there actually *is* a metaphysical possibility of not pressing the button at *t* which I should care about even in Michael's original, less constrained case. The possibility in question is the possibility of failure that is kept at bay by the deployment of the care and concentration I have to exercise in ensuring that I *do* press the button at the right time.