The Illusion of Agency: Hard Determinism and the Limits of Gallagher's Model

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Gallagher's critique of the Libet experiments

The modern debate on free will has been reshaped by neuroscientific inquiry. Libet's experiments on simple movements, such as wrist or finger flexes, showed that brain activity, the readiness potential, began before participants reported the conscious intention to act, challenging traditional notions of agency (Libet, 1985). These findings emboldened figures like Daniel Wegner, whose book *The illusion of conscious will* (2002) argues our sense of agency is a post-hoc rationalization of unconscious processes. In response to these "*illusioneers*", philosopher Shaun Gallagher has constructed a compatibilist model seeking to rescue free will from the grips of neuroscientific reductionism (Gallagher, 2004, p. 7)

This paper argues from a hard determinist view that Gallagher's project, though a useful attempt, ultimately fails. I contend that his emergent model merely provides a compelling description of a more complex and temporally extended form of determinism. Gallagher explains agency through the whole brain-body-environment system, but this still leaves our actions fully determined by prior causes.

This paper will first explain Gallagher's compatibilist framework. It will then proceed to a determinist rebuttal, systematically dismantling his arguments by reasserting the principles of unbroken causality. Finally, we will explore the implication of this rebuttal alongside proposing a framework consistent with a fully determined universe.

A summary of Gallagher's first objection

About the framework, Gallagher's (2004) first major criticism targets the myopic methodology of his opponents. Foundational experiments like Libet's mistakenly locate agency within fleeting neural moments, a timescale he deems inappropriate. As he writes, "*free will cannot be squeezed into timeframes of 150-350 msecs; free will is a longer-term phenomenon that depends on consciousness"* (p.9). To illustrate, he offers the example of a

snake encounter: the startle is automatic, but recognizing harmlessness, assessing the environment, and intending to capture it unfolds over seconds or minutes. Such extended deliberation, Gallagher (2004) argues, is missed when Libet isolated only the final motor command.

A summary of Gallagher's second objection

Gallagher's second argument is that neuroscientific reductionists are searching for free will in the wrong biological domain. Agency, Gallagher (2004) contends, must be understood at the "*highest pragmatic level possible*" (p. 11). The explanation for an action is intention, not neural firings. For Gallagher (2004), a decision is "*directly tied to*" intentional descriptions, not the subpersonal physiological mechanisms that execute them (p. 11). Agency is a feature of purposeful, contextually embedded actions, not isolated neural events.

Free will and subpersonal processes

Gallagher (2004) proposes an alternative model centered on a feedback loop between the brain, consciousness, and the environment. In this system, subpersonal neural processes are not the drivers of action but subordinate components that "*support intentional action and are structured and regulated by relevant intentional goals*" (p. 12). The automaticity of the nervous system enhances freedom by offloading the micro-management, allowing the conscious agent to focus on higher-level objectives.

The core of Gallagher's (2004) claim is that consciousness is "*a real force"* shaping future action (p. 12). He argues that conscious appraisal, judging a snake harmless, can interrupt automatic reactions and change behaviours. Proving that consciousness impacts what we do. In that moment several futures emerge i.e. walking away, observing, or catching the snake. Conscious deliberation, integrating experiences, goals, and environment, tips the balance in deciding which outcome occurs.

Gallagher's compatibilist view rests on three pillars. First, voluntary action unfolds over extended timeframes, allowing feedback and mid-course corrections. Second, intentional action via free will operated at the level of reason and goals, with consciousness distinguishing meaningful action from mere movement. Third, naturalistic emergence claims agency is "*neither magical nor absolute*" but arises from deterministic components (Gallagher, 2004, p. 14). This matters because Gallagher's defense of agency hinges on consciousness causing actions, a premise that, under determinist scrutiny, collapses

A hard determinist assessment of Gallagher's proposal

Objection one

Gallagher's (2004) foundational premise is that complex, interactive systems give rise to an emergent freedom that transcends its deterministic components. As my first objection, I argue this system simply describes "complex determinism". Both the determinist and Gallagher agree that analyzing agency at the millisecond level is to operate at the "*wrong leve*l", but we draw opposite conclusions from this premise (Gallagher, 2004, p. 7). Where Gallagher broadens the scope to find emergent agency, the determinist broadens it to reveal deterministic forces.

This is encapsulated in Pereboom's (2001) causal history principle, articulated in *Living without free will* , which holds that "*an action cannot be free if it is the product of deterministic factors beyond the agent's control"* (p.2). Every component of Gallagher's feedback loop, memory, perception, environmental affordances, and reflection itself, is shaped by external factors like genes, culture, and prior experiences. The deliberative "*loop*" is real, but it is causally saturated (Gallagher, 2004, p. 13).

In the snake scenario, the "*possibilities*" that conscious deliberation weighs are themselves determined (Gallagher, 2004, p. 14). Whether you see the snake as a threat or a

specimen is the deterministic output of your biology, your personal history, and your cultural conditioning. Your conscious thoughts may influence what your body does next, but those thoughts are themselves the inescapable consequences of prior events.

Objection two

My second objection is that Gallagher's claim that conscious agency can tip the balance, is empirically unsupported and philosophically flawed. Libet's original experiments showed that the readiness potential predicts an action before the subject reports a conscious decision. Subsequent research by Haynes et al. in *Current biology* extended this predictive window to several seconds, demonstrating that brain activity can reveal an impending choice long before the agent's conscious awareness (Haynes et al., 2007, p.323)

Furthermore, Wegner's *The illusion of conscious will* (2002) suggests that the experience of will is often an illusion of authorship. Our conscious thoughts happen to align with actions already being initiated by unconscious processes, leading us to infer that our thoughts caused the action. This frames conscious reasoning less as a driver of choice and more as a narrator to rationalizing behaviour after the fact. Deliberation is a real neurological process, but its content and outcome are determined by the preceding neural events and environmental inputs. It does not arise from a vacuum.

To preemptively rebut Gallagher, one might grant that deliberation shapes behavior, but these deliberations themselves are caused. This point is illustrated by Pereboom's (2001) manipulation argument. Imagine a neuroscientist secretly implanted the very deliberations that led a person to commit a crime. Even if that person experienced a robust sense of conscious reasoning and choice, we would not consider their action free because its ultimate source lay outside their control. Ordinary determinism is functionally no different; the deliberation still traces back to a chain of external causes that the agent did not choose. Every decision is the result of a "*chain of genes, biology, [and] experience that preceded it*"

(Sapolsky, 2023, p. 27). As Sapolsky explains in his book *Determined: A science of life without free will*, for genuine free will to exist, there must be a break in this causal chain that originates purely from the agent. Gallagher fails to provide this. He relocates causation to higher-order mental states, where the causal web is more complex, but he never negates the fundamental laws of cause and effect.

The challenges and implications of hard determinism

Having demonstrated the theoretical failings of Gallagher's model, we now turn to the practical and philosophical implications of embracing a fully determinist worldview.

A successful refutation of Gallagher's compatibility model necessitates a framework, consistent with deterministic principles, for understanding human action. This does not mean discarding concepts like choice or deliberation, but reframing them within an inescapable causal worldview. This section explores the practical and philosophical consequences of this shift.

From a hard determinist perspective, we can still speak of "choices," but not as miraculous injections of autonomy. A choice is simply the deterministic output of a biographical and biological algorithm, an event reflecting the complex confluence of an agent's internal processes and external influences. It is the inevitable result of a sophisticated biological computer processing data.

Similarly, conscious deliberation remains a valuable process. It is the mechanism by which our brains weigh variables, predict outcomes, and select a course of action that aligns with our determined goals. A more deliberative process can lead to more informed actions, but this does not make it a source of metaphysical freedom. It is a fully caused, albeit highly complex, part of the causal chain. A determinist can therefore agree with Gallagher that

reasons and intentions are real and useful explanatory tools. However, they are not uncaused initiators of action; they are fully caused links in the chain of events.

Perhaps the most profound implication of hard determinism concerns moral responsibility. If our actions are the inevitable result of prior causes that are ultimately. beyond our control, then the traditional basis for praise and blame dissolves. This perspective demands a radical shift in our societal systems, especially in jurisprudence. An act of criminal violence would no longer be seen as the product of a "bad soul" deserving of retribution. Instead, it would be understood as a causal outcome, a tragic confluence of genes, trauma, brain development, and circumstance.

This view does not reject accountability but reframes its purpose. The aim is no longer punishment based on moral desert, but interventions that address underlying causes.

Prevention comes first: reducing risk factors like poverty, abuse, and neurological disorders. Rehabilitation follows: using evidence-based methods to change behavior and reintegrate individuals into society. Finally, incapacitation remains necessary for those who pose ongoing danger, not as retribution, but as a pragmatic measure to protect public safety.

This is the logical and more humane consequence of a scientifically consistent worldview. Yet its implementation is difficult, given how deeply blame and moral desert are built into law and culture. Acknowledging this challenge does not weaken the conclusion, but it highlights the gap between scientific understanding and social institutions

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