

Christian List (2019): *Why free will is real*

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Christian List is a Professor of Philosophy and Decision-theory at Ludwig Maximilian Universität. His work includes in the field of philosophy and political science, with a primary focus on individual and collective decision-making, and nature of intentional agency. His book, published in 2019, *Why free will is real* presents a novel defence of free will and explains the key thesis to reconcile it with a scientific worldview. The book engages with metaphysical questions on free will, causation, intentional agency, and the level phenomena in the behavioural and social science. Further, he argues about the existence of free will as a real phenomenon and supports the same with the help of three requirements. He concedes that free will and its requirements: intentional agency, alternative possibilities, and causal control cannot be found among the fundamental physical features of the natural world. List's main aim is to prove that free will is a higher-level phenomenon which is found at the level of psychology. He carefully crafts his book by describing three scientific challenges for free will and eventually proves how it cannot be successful if we believe in the claims presented in those challenges. In the end, List represents a philosophical and psychological view of free will and undermines a detailed scientific understanding of the same.

In *Why free will is real*, Christian List's aim is to defend free will. He approaches this subject from an agent's perspective i.e., what would it be for an agent to have free will. His work is divided into five chapters beginning with an introduction. Each chapter formulates principles and

a desired goal. In chapter 1, List introduces free will in-depth and states three requirements for free will namely, intentional agency, alternative possibility, and causal control over one's actions. Chapter 2 describes three scientifically interesting challenges for free will – one for each requirement – which signifies that the requirement cannot be met if the world is as science depicts it. Chapter 3, 4, and 5 include List's defence of free will. Thereby, the book provides empirical evidence to support arguments for free will.

The introduction of List's book focuses on his aim i.e., to set out a strategy for answering the scientific challenges for free will. It also highlights the key points which he intends to solve in the coming chapters. The idea of free will that he wishes to present is dependent on certain empirical premises, which are presented in chapter 2, 3, and 4. Also, he argues for understanding free will as a higher-level phenomenon. According to him there are two levels of phenomena: higher and lower-level phenomena. In science, 'level' is interpreted in different ways. He confidently claims to defend free will as a higher-level phenomenon by using the concepts and categories of psychology and social sciences, i.e., sciences that understand humans as goal-directed agents whose actions are guided by their intentional mental states.

Chapter 1 focuses on the core idea of free will and it engages with the following questions: What is free will? Why does it matter? And what is the difference between free will and social freedom? In simpler terms, free will is an agent's ability to exhibit control over his/her

actions and mental states in such a way that the agent is held responsible for them. Following this, List introduces the three requirements: a) Intentional agency b) Alternative possibilities, and c) Causal control. His aim is to prove that these three requirements characterize free will in a conventional sense. He undermines different aspects such as free will versus social freedom, free will as a capacity versus its exercise, and free will as a matter of degree to achieve his objective. He explains the difference between freedom and free will; freedom is a quality or a state of being free, which is associated to liberty and law. On the other hand, free will is a genuine human capacity which arises independently of social conditions. Second, the section on *Free will as a capacity versus its exercise* shows why having free will is a core property of an agent. Further, List talks about the association of free will and moral responsibility. Take, for instance, drunk driving: a person may no longer act freely when heavily intoxicated but the decision to drink was under his/her control. Thus, an agent is morally responsible for the damage caused while drunk driving. Lastly, the aspect on *Free will as a matter of degree* repeats the three requirements which List explained before.

Chapter 2 explains three challenges for free will: the challenges from radical materialism, determinism, and epiphenomenalism. To begin with the first challenge, it targets the requirement of intentional agency. According to radical materialism, intentional agency is an old-fashioned folk notion, and that human organism is a biophysical machine. Even though intentional thoughts are useful in everyday life it will eventually be replaced by neuroscientific theories of human behaviour. List understands folk theories as “*informal, prescientific belief systems that humans habitually developed in relation to physical, and biological issues in their everyday lives*” (p. 37). Thereby, radical materialism discards intentional agency as a requirement of free will. The next challenge is determinism. The key element to this challenge is that there are no alternative possibilities. Therefore, a person or an agent is incapable of

making choices. In contrast to this, List argues that humans have alternative possibilities to act, i.e., when they choose to perform a particular action, the action is not a necessary decision for the agent, he/she can act otherwise as well. This challenge was presented famously by Peter Van Inwagen’s (1983) consequent argument. Lastly, there is the challenge by epiphenomenalism; it targets the causal control or mental causation requirement for free will. Several psychologists and neuroscientists have argued that our consciously accessible mental states, such as beliefs, intentions and decisions are not causally related to actions. All of these are instead connected to mental states known as epiphenomenal. They appear in conjunction with our actions but do not cause them.

In chapter 3 List defends intentional agency as a response to the radical materialist. He defends it by claiming that it is a real phenomenon, and not just an illusion. According to him, an intentional agent represents states of belief, desire, intention, and goals to execute a particular action. These states are classified as higher-level phenomena because they supervene on physical phenomena but are not reducible to them. List diagnoses two points overlooked by radical materialists, i.e., 1. The essentiality of the notion of intentional agency in behavioural and social sciences. 2. The higher-level nature of intentional agency. List indicates that theories from disciplines like psychology, sociology and economics provide valuable explanations about human behaviour which would be erased if we adopt radical materialism. He defends intentionality as a higher-level phenomenon by stating that “*a system is intentional if some of its states, such as belief-and-desires states, are directed towards something: they encode an attitude towards some meaningful content*” (p. 67). So, for instance an agent might have a particular intentional property, such as ‘believing’ that Washington DC is the capital of the United States, or ‘intending’ to go swimming. These have a feature of ‘aboutness’ which allows those intentional properties to play a certain role in rationalizing the agent’s actions.

In chapter 4, List defends alternative possibilities as a response to determinism. He explains determinism as follows: “*given the initial state of universe, only one course of events have been physically possible*” (p. 80). If an agent has alternative possibilities, when he or she chooses to perform a particular action, the actual action is not the only one open to the agent; he or she could also act otherwise. Primarily, his aim in this chapter is to argue that free will requires a form of indeterminism, namely agential indeterminism. He claims that physical determinism and agential indeterminism are distinct and logically independent. This claim is supported by the idea of different levels, i.e., the physical and the psychological level. The important implication of both these levels are that when asked what an agent is capable to do, the right level of description is not the physical but the psychological one. The reason being it cannot be reduced to explain human cognition and behaviour. Thereby, if we agree with determinism, we tend to lose the fundamental understanding of alternative possibilities.

In chapter 5, List defends causal control as a response to epiphenomenalism. According to epiphenomenalism, there is no mental causation i.e., causation by an agent’s intentional mental states. List explains mental causation with an example: A glass flask breaks when the water inside it starts boiling. There are two states that we can focus on here: the microphysical state and the higher-level state. Either the breaking was caused due to specific molecules or mere boiling. List argues that it would be wrong to associate causation with the lower level, because different arrangements of water molecules would have led the flask to break. Hence the cause should be identified at the higher level of boiling rather than the lower level of the microphysical state. Moreover, List explains the idea of a causal principle. Causal principles or causal reasoning are an attempt to understand how the world functions i.e., the notion of cause and effect, e.g., when we learn to light a fire to cook or that dark clouds lead to rain. Here, List claims that “*the idea of cause and effect are relevant both to our theoretical representations, such as*

science, and to our practical reasoning in decision making and agency” (p. 115). To address the challenge of epiphenomenalism List adopts Jaegwon Kim’s causal exclusion argument. The argument states, “*At any point a mental property M1 causes another mental property M2 to arise, it must be accompanied with the supervenience base from P1 to P2*” (Kallestrup 2016: 461). This means that mental property (M1) cannot have any causal power which are not present in P (physical state). It is essential for P to be present while M is taking place.

With the above-mentioned interpretation, we understand that causal closure and the causal exclusion principle are connected to each other. Thereby, each behaviour enacted by an individual is non-intentionally caused, hence, no being has causal control over their actions. Therefore, according to this thesis if all intentions are mere epiphenomena is true, then no one has free will.

To conclude, I believe List’s book contains valuable arguments and solutions. List’s discussions are thorough, and the book is accessible to those who are not aware of traditional free will debate. Further it explains the problem of free will in-depth and connects it with philosophical and psychological theories and relevant examples. It also gives an elementary introduction to neuroscience. There are a few instances in the book which could have been clearer with respect to definitions, examples presented to support the theories and developing connected points. In chapter 4, List states his aim of proving agential indeterminism and physical determinism as distinct and independent of each other. However, it would have been clearer if he would have stated his purpose to include agential indeterminism as a requirement for free will. The chapter has transparent examples and terms to grasp the meaning of ‘alternative possibilities’, however it was difficult to see the real purpose of incorporating the indeterminism. List claims that agential indeterminism has psychological properties which are a higher-level phenomenon. In relation to this there are two contradictory statements: “*A person’s beliefs, desires, intentions, memories, and other psycho-*

logical properties may be compatible with different subvenient physical details” (p. 91) and *“any talk of agents and their intentional states and action is not reducible to lower-level talk of physical processes in the brain and body”* (p. 90). I find these two statements conflicting with respect to psychological and physical properties. List accepts that psychological properties entail the ideas of belief, desire, intention etc. which he categorizes to be a higher-level phenomenon, however, at the same time he states that it can also be compatible with different physical properties or details. Here, it’s difficult to comprehend List’s understanding of two properties. It would have been helpful if he would have clarified on this aspect because he assumes that agential indeterminism is a real phenomenon even though the world is deterministic in the background.

In chapter 5, List’s interpretation of causal control and the causal exclusion principle could have been more comprehensible. For instance, he states two conditions, *“1. If C were to occur, then E would occur. 2. If C were not to occur, then E would not occur”* (p. 132). These conditions are explained by providing this example, *“Falling down the stairs causes me to get injured. This is true because in the nearest possible worlds in which I fall down the stairs, I get injured and in the nearest possible worlds in which I do not fall down the stairs I do not get injured”* (pp. 132–133). List does not explain what he means by the term ‘nearest possible worlds’, however I believe that one could interpret cause and effect scenarios in more than a singular way. For instance, someone may fall down the stairs and yet not get hurt. Here, List could have explained how a scenario has different interpretation of cause and effect phenomena. This would help us in understanding the complications and multiple perspectives that List wishes to display in his work.

Similarly, he cites another example from chapter 5, *“Suppose I hail a taxi somewhere in London, and I ask the driver to take me to St. Pancras station and on another day, I ask another taxi driver to take me to Paddington station and I will be driven to requested destina-*

tion” (p. 136). List claims that someone preoccupied with the idea of physical-level causation might look for causes in the microphysical state in driver’s brain and body or in the microphysical state of car. Further, he concluded stating that, *“a person’s intentional mental states are difference-making causes of the person’s actions, and not the physical states of the brain and body”* (p. 138). It is here that I am not convinced with List’s interpretation of his examples and level phenomena. It is difficult to understand whether he completely discards or adopts the mind-body problem. If so, why should it be the intentional mental states that lead to action? It would have been helpful if List would have explained the difference between ‘physical level causation’ and ‘microphysical state’ because only then readers would be able to understand the purpose of distinguishing these terms and how both concepts connect with causal relations.

On the other hand, chapter 3 contains interesting claims and various empirical examples of intentional agency. List gives the following example, *“A person’s desire to drink coffee has the content that the person drink some coffee, and the attitude is a motivational one: the content is something that person would like to make true”* (p. 53). Intentional states are about meaningful contents, they encode certain attitude, characteristics towards a particular action. Here, the supporting argument for intentional agency is convincing because List clearly indicates with an example what makes something an intentional action as opposed to a mere physical movement. Intentional actions are accounted for by intentional states and hence are rationalized by those states. The attitude is a component of intentionality, that which drives an agent to justify their rational action. Secondly, List’s idea of advocating intentional agency is not only proposed from a philosophical viewpoint or as a level phenomenon. He also introduces a biophysical or biological perspective. For instance: A dog runs around in the garden and goes into the kitchen to eat food. How can one explain the dog’s purpose of going to the kitchen rather a bedroom or the living room for food? Here,

the dog exhibits a goal seeking behaviour and is an intentional agent. List believes that a good scientific explanation should not only describe things that actually happen but also give an indication to what would happen in different circumstances. He incorporates the biophysical explanation in the following way: “*This is because the dog is capable of updating its beliefs its representation of the environment – in light of new sensory information, and it rationally adjusts its actions*” (p. 60). Here we can see the analogy with a goal seeking agent which is not only evident in humans but also animals.

A valuable idea mentioned several times is that of a higher-level phenomenon. This is the capability of an intentional agent to exercise his/her choice based upon their belief about the environment, their value system and goals. List’s explanation as to how this is differentiated from lower level-phenomena is convincing and clarifying. It further creates a strong argument against radical materialism that postulates that intentional agency will eventually disappear from science.

I highly recommend this book to anyone who is interested in learning more and engaging in the debate on free will, determinism

and the challenges posed by materialism. The book gives us an excellent perspective on the philosophical and scientific take on free will and agency. The arguments presented in the book are a good tool to understand the related terminology (libertarianism, consequentialism, and levels) in depth. List’s argument is clear, and he engages with the discussion on free will in behavioural science. These discussions also help us to grasp intentionality, decision-making and choice from a neuroscientific, psychological, and philosophical perspective and thus, present readers with a multifaceted view of these scientific concepts.

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