

# 12 Determining the Future

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Each moment is a leap forwards from the brink of an invisible cliff, where time's keen edges are constantly renewed. We lift our foot from the solid ground of all our life lived thus far, and take that perilous step out into the empty air. Not because we can claim any particular courage, but because there is no other way.

Han Kang, *The White Book*: 7

Freedom [. . .] is practically necessary – man must therefore act according to an Idea of freedom, and cannot act otherwise.

Kant, *Lectures on Metaphysics*, §29: 898

## 1

No matter what we sense, think about, or do, all our experiences, thoughts, and actions are recessively framed by a temporal point of view that is centred on the present from which we are oriented to our past and our future. That temporal point of view is associated with significant asymmetries in our psychological attitudes to our past and our future – psychological asymmetries that are reflected in the fact that we recollect the past but not the future, we anticipate the future but not the past, we regard the future as open in a way that the past is not. This asymmetrical way of being psychologically oriented to our past and future provides each of us with a tensed perspective on reality; so given that the relevant asymmetries in our psychological orientation are not optional, it might be said that as self-conscious agents we cannot help but occupy a perspective on reality that is tensed, whether or not reality is itself tensed. Some have also suggested that as self-conscious agents capable of practical deliberation, we cannot help but act under the idea of freedom.<sup>1</sup> One of my central aims in this paper is to explore potential connections between these two suggestions – in particular, connections between the notion that we occupy a tensed temporal perspective from which we regard the future as open, and the notion that we occupy a deliberative standpoint from which we act under the idea of freedom.

A further aim is to suggest that tracing out interdependencies between the psychology of our self-conscious agency and those psychological asymmetries that constitute our tensed temporal perspective can play a role in helping to illuminate how we exercise agency and self-determination in deciding to act. Just as we take ourselves to be responsible for the actions we decide to perform, we also take ourselves to be responsible for our decisions to act. However, it is not straightforward to explain how agency and responsibility manage to attach to the mental act of deciding, as well as the actions decided upon. Although it's generally accepted that we exercise our agency when we act on decisions we have made, it is more controversial to claim that we also exercise our agency in making those decisions.<sup>2</sup> This is because decisions don't seem to fit the standard accounts of what it is that makes an event an agent's action. Our decisions are not preceded by decisions or intentions to so decide. Moreover, if anything moves one to decide to  $\Phi$  on a given occasion, it seems that it is some reason for acting as decided – i.e. some reason for  $\Phi$ -ing – rather than some reason or desire that concerns the event of deciding itself.<sup>3</sup> This might lead one to doubt whether our decisions are mental actions that we are motivated to perform. But if our decisions are not themselves mental actions, in what sense can we be said to be exercising agency in deciding to act, and what makes us responsible for those decisions, given that our decisions are not themselves decided upon?

In what follows I suggest that connections between the psychology of self-determination and our temporal psychology should be central to an account of the sort of mental agency we exercise in deciding to act, and hence central to an account of what makes us responsible for our decisions. For I shall be arguing that the key to explaining how the mental act of deciding can amount to an agential mental act that is both self-determining and self-determined lies in providing the correct account of what is involved in occupying, over time, the sort of tensed temporal perspective that the self-determining agent adopts towards her past, present, and future when she decides to act. What this approach reveals, I argue, is that when it comes to providing an account of the respect in which the psychological act of deciding is a self-determined act for which we are responsible, it is a mistake to look simply to the psychological causes of the act of deciding.<sup>4</sup> For in order to account for the respect in which one's decisions are self-determined acts that one is responsible for, we need to look to the sort of behaviour (including mental behaviour) that one engages in, and the sort of temporal perspective one thereby occupies, *after* the act of deciding.<sup>5</sup>

After having considered ways in which aspects of the psychology of our temporal perspective may contribute to explaining our capacity to exercise agency in deciding to act, at the end of the paper I consider how our capacity to make decisions can contribute to explaining some of the distinctive features of the temporal perspective on the future that

we occupy. There I discuss, and respond to, the suggestion that when it comes to our perspective on our future, there is a potential tension between the standpoint of theoretical reason and the standpoint of practical reason.

## 2

The fact that one occupies a temporal point of view that is centred on the present can give one the sense that one is perpetually confined to the temporal present. One can of course be preoccupied with one's future or one's past. But if one is preoccupied with the future, the conscious activity of being so preoccupied falls within the experienced present, and when one dwells on the past, that conscious activity likewise falls within the experienced present. Even contemplation of the atemporal involves conscious activity shackled by the experienced present. So there is a sense in which one can no more escape the experienced present that one occupies whenever one thinks and acts than one can escape the egocentric spatial frame of reference that one occupies when one moves.

However, while our temporal point of view may be centred on the present, we also cannot help but be psychologically oriented to what lies beyond any fleeting, present moment. Even when the focus of one's conscious attention is latched securely onto what is now happening, and one is not consciously thinking about the past or the future, the stream of consciousness, which falls within the experienced present, flows upon a bed of psychological states that are recessively oriented to what falls on either side of the bounds of the experienced present. Arguably, only so can we experience the present as we do – as containing occurrences with temporal parts that have happened, and temporal parts that are yet to unfold. These psychological states give breadth to our temporal perspective on reality – a temporal perspective that cannot be adequately captured by the content of any single conscious thought or experience.<sup>6</sup>

The asymmetrical way in which these psychological states orient one to what falls on either side of the experienced present can be said to amount to a tensed temporal perspective on reality – a perspective that colours one's experience of what falls within the experienced present. For what falls within the experienced present is experienced by one as occupying a brief interval of time that intervenes between one's past and one's future – a past and future marked out by those asymmetries in one's psychological attitudes. Aspects of the psychology of our agency are relevant to an account of these psychological asymmetries, and so thereby relevant to an account of the temporal perspective that we occupy. Think, for instance, of the way in which one's *agential* perspective on one's current goal-directed intentional activities involves a distinctive kind of psychological posture to one's immediate future – the direction of action, as it might be put. That is an aspect of the psychology of our agency that

will need to feature in an account of the asymmetries in our psychological attitudes that give content to our temporal perspective on reality – a content far richer than that captured merely by the notion of times earlier and later than a temporal location referred to by means of some temporal-indexical expression. However, my particular concern in this paper is with connections between the psychology of our temporal perspective and aspects of our psychology that are peculiar to us as *self-conscious* agents – agents capable of occupying the standpoint of practical reason.

As self-conscious agents, we are capable of adopting a practical perspective on our lives that is not limited to the thoroughly immersed here-and-now exercise of bodily agency. We are capable of reflecting on our past, and we are also capable of thinking ahead and engaging in practical deliberation and planning in our decision-making. One question to consider is how our capacity to adopt this sort of deliberative standpoint might contribute to explaining some of the distinctive features of the kind of tensed temporal perspective that we occupy – for example, those features relevant to the fact that our temporal perspective is one from which the future is open in a way the past is not. However, we might also look for explanations in the other direction. For example, we might consider how an account of the psychology of our temporal perspective may contribute to explaining our capacity to engage in practical deliberation, planning and decision-making.

In order to identify explanations in either direction, we would need to uncover connections between the psychology of our temporal perspective and the psychology of self-determination; and uncovering such connections might in turn help to illuminate our understanding of what self-determination consists in. The notion that the psychology of self-determination should be central to an account of what self-determination consists in is related to a Kantian line of thought. Kant proposed that we cannot help but act under the idea of freedom, and he also proposed that this is what it is to be really free in the practical sense.<sup>7</sup> On one understanding of that proposal, the idea of a free agent is the idea of a self-determining agent, and so acting under that idea amounts to acting and behaving *as though* one were a self-determining agent. If the psychology of self-determination can provide an account of what is involved in regarding and treating oneself in that way, then if we assume and apply the Kantian line of thought, this should amount to an account of what it is *to be* a self-determining agent. So if the psychology of our temporal perspective is relevant to understanding the psychology of self-determination, then the psychology of our temporal perspective should in turn be relevant to understanding what self-determination consists in.

That is a line of thought I want to pursue here. In particular, I shall be exploring the following suggestion. Regarding and treating oneself as a self-determining agent involves adopting a certain kind of perspective on oneself. In adopting the relevant perspective, one thereby adopts a

distinctive kind of perspective on one's past and future, and hence on the past and future more generally (Sections 3–4). By occupying that temporal perspective on oneself over time, one thereby makes true various things about oneself. Since it takes time to occupy the relevant perspective, it can take time to make true certain of those things about oneself, including certain things about one's past. One of the things that one can make true about one's immediate past by occupying the relevant temporal perspective is the following: that one exercised agency and self-determination in deciding to act (Section 5). That is why when it comes to understanding how we exercise agency and self-determination in deciding to act, we need to look to what changes in how we regard our past and future once we have decided to act, rather than simply looking to the causal antecedents of the act of deciding.

So now my preliminary question is this: What changes in the way one regards one's past, present and future when one decides to do something?

### 3

Suppose a self-conscious subject decides that tomorrow she will  $\phi$ . It might be said that in the typical case something thereby changes in the way that subject regards her past and her present: she now believes she has decided to  $\phi$  (past), and she now believes that she intends to  $\phi$  (present). But what changes in the way she regards her future?

When a subject decides that she will  $\phi$  tomorrow, she settles a question in her own mind by committing herself to a certain course of action, and that commitment is reflected in her subsequent behaviour, including the further practical deliberation and planning she subsequently engages in.<sup>8</sup> For in committing herself to that course of action by making that decision, the subject will subsequently plan on the background assumption that she *will*  $\phi$  tomorrow. So, when a subject decides to  $\phi$ , at least the following changes in the way she regards her future: she adopts an attitude towards her future that serves as a constraint on her further practical reasoning, insofar as she is disposed to assume that she will  $\phi$  when she engages in further planning and practical deliberation.

If a subject *predicts* that an event will occur, then she will likewise be disposed to assume that some future event will occur, and that assumption will likewise constrain her practical deliberation and planning. However, when a subject decides that she will  $\phi$  tomorrow, the assumption that the subject makes about her future  $\phi$ -ing differs from a straightforward prediction in various respects.<sup>9</sup> From the subject's own point of view, the assumption that she will  $\phi$  tomorrow is not one that she takes herself to be epistemically obliged to make prior to deciding to  $\phi$ , neither is it an assumption that she takes herself to be epistemically obliged to make after deciding to  $\phi$ , and indeed the subject doesn't treat her assumption that she will  $\phi$  as an assumption grounded in her evidence. This point

can be brought out by considering the way in which the subject regards and treats the constraint on her practical reasoning that is imposed by her assumption that she will  $\Phi$  tomorrow.

Once a subject has decided that she will  $\Phi$  tomorrow, even as she continues to assume that she will  $\Phi$  tomorrow, she does not consider it to be *epistemically* impermissible for her to give up that assumption, for she does not consider it to be epistemically permissible to change her plans and thereby make an alternative assumption about what she will do – one *inconsistent* with her current assumption that she will  $\Phi$  tomorrow.<sup>10</sup> Of course, if a subject does change her plans, then there will be a change in her evidential situation, given that what she knows about her plans will have changed. However, the important point is this. Prior to any such change in her plans, from the subject's own point of view, no change in her evidential situation is required in order for it to be epistemically permissible for her to change her plans, and in consequence no change in her evidential situation is required in order for it to be epistemically permissible for her to make an alternative assumption about what she will do.<sup>11</sup> Contrast this with the way in which a subject regards the constraint on her practical reasoning that is imposed by an ordinary, evidentially grounded belief that she has about the future – for example her belief about when the tide will come in. She *does* take it to be epistemically impermissible for her to relinquish *that* constraint on her reasoning, unless her evidence changes. That is why, unless her evidence changes, she will continue to regard any change in her plans as subject to that constraint.

Note that the contrasting way in which the subject regards the latter constraint on her practical deliberation is relevant to the following, additional point: when a subject decides to  $\Phi$  tomorrow, although she doesn't treat her subsequent assumption that she will  $\Phi$  tomorrow as an assumption that is grounded in her evidence, she does nonetheless take her decision-making to be subject to evidential constraints. For the range of assumptions that a subject is in a position to make about her future by deciding what to do is rationally constrained by her evidence concerning what she is capable of doing and what the future circumstances will allow (including, for example, her evidence about when the tide will come in).

The fact that there are such evidential constraints on decision-making can help us to pin down further what is distinctive in an agent's psychological posture towards her future when she decides to do something. So far, I have said that when a subject decides to  $\Phi$ , (a) she is subsequently disposed to assume that she will  $\Phi$  when she engages in further planning and practical deliberation, and (b) she doesn't treat her assumption that she will  $\Phi$  as an assumption grounded in her evidence, but nonetheless (c) she takes her assumption that she will  $\Phi$  to be rationally constrained by her evidence – evidence concerning what she is capable of doing and what the future circumstances will allow. Items (a) – (c) can be explained by

the following proposal: When a subject decides to  $\Phi$ , she is subsequently disposed to assume that she will  $\Phi$ , and she regards her assumption as one that is to be discharged by an action that makes it true.

This explains (c), because if the subject takes herself to be incapable of performing the relevant action (given what she knows about the future), then she should take herself to be incapable of making an assumption that is to be discharged in that way.<sup>12</sup> The fact that the subject treats her assumption as one that is *to be* discharged by an action that makes it true also accommodates (b). For the sort of psychological posture that goes with the subject regarding her assumption in that way is not equivalent to her *predicting that* she will do something that makes true what she assumes. For reasons I shall explain, it is not even equivalent to her predicting that she will do something that makes true what she assumes *because she so predicts*.<sup>13</sup>

When one predicts that something will happen, the psychological posture towards the future that one adopts is consistent with that of waiting for the predicted events to occur. By contrast, when one regards one's assumption about a future action as one that is to be discharged by an action that makes it true, one's psychological posture towards the future does not share the sort of passivity that is associated with merely waiting.<sup>14</sup> For in so regarding one's assumption, one recognises that what is required is activity on one's own part. One way of putting this is as follows. In deciding to  $\Phi$  tomorrow, one commits oneself to that course of action, and one thereby regards one's assumption about that future action as an assumption that is to be discharged by an action that makes it true, insofar as one regards the commitment one made in deciding to act as a commitment that is *to be fulfilled*.

That commitment imposes various constraints on one's conduct. But one recognises that the constraints that come with that commitment are constraints one has imposed on oneself, rather than constraints imposed by the evidence one possesses about how the future will turn out. So one recognises that one is subject to those constraints only as long as one continues to impose those constraints on oneself, and so only as long as one continues to act in recognition of those constraints. That is why one does not consider it to be epistemically impermissible for one to relinquish those constraints at any point – i.e. to change one's plans and make an alternative assumption about what one will do.

This is relevant to understanding the following important point. Although the decisions one makes can determine one's future conduct, from one's own point of view there nonetheless remains a respect in which those decisions leave open one's future until one has completed the actions that one has decided upon.<sup>15</sup> That point is relevant to understanding what is distinctive about the sort of temporal perspective on oneself that one adopts once one has decided to act; and that in turn is relevant to understanding how occupying that temporal perspective can make it

the case that one exercised self-determination in deciding to act. I now want to unpack each of those ideas in turn.

#### 4

When you decide what to do, there is a respect in which you thereby determine something about your future that had previously been left undetermined. Here are two possible ways of understanding that idea.

- (A) *Epistemic understanding*: Your decision about what to do makes known to you something about your future that you previously didn't know.
- (B) *Causal understanding*: Your decision about what to do is the cause of an event that is yet to occur – i.e. the action you decide to perform.

While there is something to be said in favour of each understanding, neither is entirely satisfactory without further supplementation, nor is the conjunction of the two.<sup>16</sup>

Regarding (A): There is an epistemic understanding of “determining the future” that fails to capture the sort of perspective that a subject has on her future when she decides what to do. One attempts to “determine the future” in the relevant *epistemic* sense when one attempts to determine, via theoretical reasoning, what will come to pass; and as previously noted, when one figures out what is likely to happen, and hence what will likely come to pass, the psychological posture towards the future that one adopts is consistent with that of waiting for the predicted events to occur, even if those predicted events are one's future actions. For reasons I have already given, that is not the sort of psychological posture towards one's future action that one adopts when that action is an action one has decided to perform.

Regarding (B): Your decision to act determines your future insofar as it determines what is to be done, but the causal understanding allows for a reading of “what is to be done” which is simply equivalent to “what is yet to happen.” So the causal understanding of “determining the future” is also not entirely satisfactory without further supplementation, for reasons similar to those which make understanding (A) unsatisfactory. This is because knowing that you have decided to  $\Phi$  is not equivalent to knowing that some past event (one's decision to  $\Phi$ ) will eventuate in some occurrence that is yet to happen (one's  $\Phi$ -ing). For that is again suggestive of the idea of a psychological posture towards the future that is too close to prediction.

As a self-determining agent one regards one's future as a region containing “things to be done,” and one's decisions fix *what* is to be done. But we fail to capture what is distinctive about the perspective on one's future this provides one with, if we equate “regarding one's future as a



region containing things to be done” with “regarding one’s future as a region containing things that one will do.” One might be tempted to try to avoid that false equivalence by deploying something like the following *normative* understanding of “to be done” and hence a normative understanding of the respect in which you determine something about your future by deciding what to do:

- (C) *Normative understanding*: Your decision about what to do determines your future insofar as it determines what is to be done, and it determines what is to be done insofar as it determines what you *ought* to do.

A problem with understanding (C), as it stands, is that it fails to capture the distinction between, on the one hand, a decision to do something, and, on the other hand, a judgement that one ought to do something. The latter is not equivalent to the former.<sup>17</sup> One’s decision to do something imposes constraints on one’s subsequent conduct in a way that a mere judgement about what one ought to do does not. That is why when one decides to do something one thereby regards that future action as something that one *will do*, and not simply something that one ought to do. Having decided to  $\Phi$ , one plans on the assumption that one *will* act as decided. If one doesn’t plan on that assumption, then the constraints on one’s future conduct that come with the commitment one makes in deciding to act won’t yet have been imposed. And it is the latter notion of *commitment* – committing oneself to a course of action – and the self-imposed constraints that are incurred in so committing, which provides for the appropriate sense in which one determines something about one’s future that had previously been left undetermined when one decides what to do.

When one decides to  $\Phi$ , one commits oneself to a particular course of action by imposing certain constraints on oneself – e.g., by assuming that one will  $\Phi$  when one subsequently engages in further planning and practical deliberation. When one imposes those constraints on oneself, one thereby commits oneself to a *future* that contains that action. But that sort of commitment can be made only if one imposes on oneself constraints which one regards and treats *as self-imposed*. That is to say, in order to commit oneself (in the relevant sense) to a future that contains that action, one must recognise that the constraints one is subject to, in so committing oneself, are constraints that one has imposed on oneself, rather than, say, constraints that are imposed by the evidence one possesses about how the future will turn out. So, since one must regard and treat such constraints as self-imposed in order to so commit oneself, one cannot take it to be an *epistemic* requirement to so commit oneself, for epistemic requirements are not self-imposed.<sup>18</sup>

This means that when one decides to  $\Phi$ , and one thereby commits oneself to a future that contains that action, one cannot take there to be any

*epistemic* requirement to commit oneself to that future. And this remains true even *after* one has decided to  $\Phi$ .<sup>19</sup> That is to say, having decided to  $\Phi$ , one does not take oneself to be epistemically required to retain the commitment one made in deciding to  $\Phi$ , and so one does not take oneself to be epistemically required to retain one's commitment to a future that contains that action. That in turn means that although one's decision can determine one's future conduct by imposing constraints on how one goes on to behave, one is subject to those constraints only for as long as one continues to impose them on oneself, and one continues to impose those constraints on oneself only for as long as one acts in recognition of them. So, from one's own point of view, there remains a respect in which one's decision leaves open one's future until one has completed the action that one has decided upon – until one has fulfilled the commitment one made in deciding to act. From one's own point of view, what is left open to one is the perpetual possibility of changing one's mind, and so the perpetual possibility of committing oneself to an alternative future. So, after you have decided to  $\Phi$ , and so after you have committed yourself to a future that contains that action, there is a respect in which your future remains open, for the future that contains that action remains *yours to determine*. It remains yours to determine until you have completed the action and so fulfilled the commitment you made in deciding to act.

That temporal perspective on one's future brings with it a distinctive attitude towards, and hence perspective on, one's past. This is because from that temporal perspective, by engaging in behaviour that manifests one's recognition of the commitment one made in deciding to act, one is thereby attempting to fulfil that commitment, and such behaviour can be regarded as an instance of *remembering to do* something – i.e. remembering to fulfil the commitment one made in deciding what to do. That variety of remembering (i.e. remembering to do) is not reducible to remembering *that* something is the case – e.g., it is not reducible to remembering that one decided to  $\Phi$ . Behaviour that manifests remembering *that* one decided to  $\Phi$  is not sufficient for manifesting the sort of recognition that is of concern here – i.e. the sort of recognition that amounts to attempting to fulfil the commitment one made in deciding what to do. For one can remember that one decided to  $\Phi$  long after one has completed the action, or after one has changed one's plans when one no longer intends to  $\Phi$ , and so when one is no longer attempting to fulfil the commitment one made in deciding to  $\Phi$ .<sup>20</sup>

This further brings out the difference between, on the one hand, the psychological attitude towards the future that one adopts when one makes a prediction, and, on the other hand, the kind of perspective that one adopts towards one's future when one decides what to do. Behaviour that manifests the dispositional state that you acquire when you decide to do something counts as a case of remembering *to do*, whereas behaviour that manifests ordinary belief and prediction does not.<sup>21</sup> That is why

when one has made a prediction, the psychological posture towards the future that one adopts is consistent with that of *waiting* for the predicted events to occur. In adopting that psychological posture towards the future, one doesn't need to remember to do anything.

We are now in a position to summarise some of the distinctive features of the sort of temporal perspective on yourself that you adopt once you have decided to do something. In making a decision, you determine something about your future that had previously been left undetermined by committing yourself to a certain course of action. However, after you have decided on that course of action, and so after you have committed yourself to a future that contains that action, from your point of view there is a respect in which your future remains open. For the future that contains that action remains yours to determine. And it remains yours to determine until you have completed the action and thereby fulfilled the commitment you made in deciding to act. For until you have completed the action, what is left open to you is the perpetual possibility of committing yourself to an alternative future – one that doesn't contain that action. From that temporal perspective, by engaging in behaviour that manifests your recognition of the commitment you made in deciding to act (behaviour that includes planning on the assumption that you will act as decided), you are thereby attempting to fulfil that commitment, and such behaviour can be regarded as an instance of remembering to do something.

Let us now consider what one makes true about oneself by occupying that perspective over time.

## 5

In deciding what to do, you commit yourself to a certain course of action, and in committing yourself to that course of action, you adopt an attitude towards the future that constrains the way you subsequently behave – for example, you plan on the assumption that you will act as decided. You recognise that the constraints that come with that commitment are constraints that you have imposed on yourself in deciding what to do, rather than constraints that are imposed by the evidence you possess about how the future will turn out, and that is why you do not consider it to be epistemically impermissible for you to relinquish those constraints by changing your plans. However, if you do not change your plans, and you act in recognition of the constraints that you imposed on yourself in deciding what to do, then you thereby engage in behaviour that amounts to remembering to do something – for you are remembering to fulfil the commitment you made in deciding what to do. When you remember to do something, you thereby make true something about your past. For you thereby make it the case that when you decided what to do, you were successful in imposing constraints on your future conduct.<sup>22</sup> Note that

this isn't something you can make true about your past by simply remembering *that* something is the case – e.g. remembering that you decided to  $\Phi$ , or remembering that you will  $\Phi$  (the latter is consistent with merely predicting that you will  $\Phi$ ).

Note also that when you do act in recognition of the constraints that you imposed on yourself in deciding what to do, you don't regard those constraints as ones that it is epistemically impermissible for you to relinquish.<sup>23</sup> This is because, from your own point of view, until you have fulfilled the commitment you made in deciding what to do, there remains the perpetual possibility of changing your mind and committing to an alternative future. So, even as you act in recognition of the constraints you imposed on yourself in deciding what to do, you continue to regard aspects of your future as open, insofar as you regard aspects of your future as *yours to determine*; for you don't take it to be epistemically impermissible for you to relinquish those constraints. In consequence, by acting in recognition of the constraints that you imposed on yourself in deciding what to do, you thereby regard and treat that past decision as an act of *your* determining your current behaviour – rather than a past event that occurred within you and that is now having its effect on the way you behave.

From your point of view, given the respect in which your future is open and yours to determine, your past decision constrains your present conduct only if you continue to grant it the authority to do so – i.e. by now acting in recognition of the commitment you made in deciding to act. And when you do act in recognition of the commitment you made in deciding to act (e.g. by planning on the assumption that you will act as decided), you thereby make it the case that you *were* successful in determining your present conduct by making that decision. Your past decision about what to do thereby determines how you subsequently behave. In that respect it can be described as a self-determining act. But it only determines how you behave if you subsequently engage in self-determined behaviour which grants it that authority. So by engaging in such behaviour, you make it the case that your past decision is a mental act that is both self-determining *and* self-determined. It is a self-determining act insofar as it determines how you go on to behave. It is a self-determined act insofar as its power to determine your behaviour depends on your subsequent self-determined behaviour that grants it that authority.

There is a complexity to the temporal perspective you occupy when you act in recognition of the constraints you imposed on yourself in deciding what to do. By occupying that perspective, you are now doing (progressive, present tense) something that is directed towards fulfilling (not yet fulfilled, and so directed towards your future) a commitment you made (past). And by occupying that temporal perspective, you thereby regard and treat yourself, and hence your past, present and future selves, as self-determining.<sup>24</sup> Once you have decided to act, your present self regards the future as open insofar as your present self recognises the

perpetual possibility of a change in mind, and hence the perpetual possibility of committing to an alternative future. So your present self thereby regards and treats your future self as self-determining. From the point of view of your present self, the completion of the action you have decided upon is dependent on the co-operation of your future self.<sup>25</sup> For the same reason, there is a respect in which your past self determines your present conduct, in deciding what to do, only with the co-operation of your self-determining present self. But if your present self does act in recognition of the constraints you imposed on yourself in deciding to act, your present self thereby regards and treats the decision made by your past self as a self-determining act of your determining your present behaviour. And by acting in that way, your present self thereby engages in self-determined behaviour that makes true something about your past self – namely that the decision made by your past self was a self-determined act.

What this shows, I suggest, is that we fail to capture the distinctive way in which we exercise agency in deciding to act, if our approach to an account of the issue is the one typically adopted by action theorists who attempt to specify what it is that makes an event an action of an agent. According to that familiar approach, if we do exercise agency in deciding to act this will be in virtue of the fact that the mental event of deciding is preceded by (or accompanied by), and appropriately caused by, suitable psychological states and/or events. Whereas I am suggesting that when it comes to accommodating and explaining the respect in which we exercise agency and self-determination in making a decision, we need to look the result of this mental act, rather than its causes. It is what happens after one's decision to act that makes it the case that one has exercised agency and self-determination in making that decision.

There are interdependencies between the psychology of our self-conscious agency and the psychology of our temporal perspective. Such interdependencies make it possible for us to uncover connections between the psychology of self-determination and those psychological asymmetries that constitute our tensed temporal perspective. In this section, I have been suggesting ways in which aspects of the psychology of our temporal perspective may contribute to explaining our capacity to exercise agency in deciding to act. In the final section of the paper, I shall make some concluding remarks on forms of explanation in the other direction, and in particular, on how our capacity to make decisions can contribute to explaining some of the distinctive features of the temporal perspective on the future that we occupy.

## 6

From the deliberative standpoint, my future depends, in part, on the decisions I make and will make. So, my future, and hence the future in general, is no more fixed than those decisions. From that deliberative

standpoint, I regard and treat myself as self-determining, and I thereby regard my future as open, insofar as I recognise the perpetual possibility of a change in mind, and hence the perpetual possibility of committing to an alternative future. In so regarding my future, I thereby regard the future as a region that allows for that degree of openness.

Although I have primarily been discussing examples of decisions that concern relatively long-range future actions (e.g. decisions about what one will do tomorrow), many of the points I have been making about the temporal perspective that the self-determining agent adopts towards her future generalise; for one's possession of this capacity for decision-making introduces an asymmetry in one's psychological orientation that affects one's perspective on any temporal region lying beyond the future-oriented edge of the experienced present – including one's immediate future. From that perspective, the future (including the immediate future) is open, insofar as there remains open to one the perpetual possibility of committing to any one of a range of alternative possible futures, and so there remains open to one the perpetual possibility of thereby determining which of those futures unfolds. From that point of view, in fulfilling the commitment one makes in deciding what to do, one closes off alternative options, and so one closes off those alternative futures.

Earlier, I distinguished the sense in which one determines one's future by deciding what to do, from an *epistemic* understanding of “determining the future.” According to that epistemic understanding, one attempts to “determine the future” when one attempts to determine, via theoretical reasoning, what will come to pass. That epistemic understanding of determining the future provides for a different sense in which it is possible to “close off” future options. As I previously noted, there are evidential constraints on one's decision-making. The range of assumptions one is in a position to make about one's future by deciding what to do is rationally constrained by one's evidence concerning what one is capable of doing, and what the future circumstances will allow. We need to make place for the recognition of such evidential constraints on practical deliberation if deliberation is to be successful, or even possible. For one cannot govern one's own conduct without being guided by the facts, or what one thinks are likely to be the facts, including facts about what will be the case. Practical reasoning, then, depends on the deliverances of theoretical reasoning. One deliberates about what to do in a way that recognises that the deliverances of theoretical reason rationally constrain one's decisions, and so in a way that recognises that the options that are available to one are constrained by theoretical reason. Hence one deliberates in way that recognises that what one determines about the future in the epistemic sense can close off future options.

Recognising such constraints on planning amounts to acknowledging that there are aspects of the future which one cannot oneself determine (in the practical sense), but regarding which one might try to determine more

(in the theoretical sense). So implicit in this stance towards the future is the notion that the future is a region that contains things about which one can gather evidence and make justified predictions. It is a region about which one has some evidence and can try to gather more evidence. So one might think that the more evidence one gathers, the more future options are closed off, which in turn reduces the available options for one to close off in the other, practical, sense – i.e. by deciding what to do. Given that theoretical reason closes off, in the epistemic sense, the range of options that are available to be closed off in the practical sense, is there then a potential tension between what we might call the standpoint of theoretical reason and the standpoint of practical reason?<sup>26</sup>

We occupy a temporal perspective from which deliverances of theoretical reason and practical reason are integrated but distinct, for while the deliverances of theoretical reason rationally constrain one's decision-making, the deliverances of theoretical reason do not, and cannot, determine one's decision-making. It might be said that the integration of theoretical reason and practical reason provides for a temporal point of view on one's future that amounts to something like a template – a template that divides the future into what Huw Price (2005) has called “options” and “fixtures.” According to Price, the “options” are “the alternatives among which [. . .] [the deliberator] takes herself to be deliberating” (2005: 275). Whereas “fixtures” “denote everything else – all matters of fact that are not held to be a matter of choice in the deliberation in question” (2005: 275). Price writes,

FIXTURES will contain a subset, KNOWNs, comprising those facts the deliberator takes herself to know at the time of deliberation, and also a larger subset, KNOWABLEs, comprising matters she regards as either known or knowable, at least in principle, before she makes her choice.

Price 2005: 275

That picture may suggest that our temporal point of view, in principle at least, allows for the area of the template that contains “fixtures” to expand indefinitely, which would in turn result in a shrinking of the area of the template that contains “options.” The idea of a potential tension between the standpoint of theoretical reason and the standpoint of practical reason might then be expressed as follows. Implicit in the sort of temporal point of view towards the future that we occupy is the idea that theoretical reason could, in principle at least, keep shrinking the area of the template that contains “options” until it eliminates that area entirely.

However, although the generation of this sort of puzzle arises from the temporal perspective we occupy, it is not clear that the sort of potential tension it cites can be actualised from the temporal perspective that we occupy. One's possession of a capacity for decision-making introduces



an asymmetry in one's psychological orientation towards time that is inescapable for as long as one possesses that capacity. That asymmetry affects the temporal perspective on the future one actually occupies, and from that perspective there remains open to one the perpetual possibility of changing one's mind and committing to an alternative future. So there remains open to one the perpetual possibility of committing to any one of a range of alternative possible futures, thereby determining which of those futures unfolds. Since this temporal perspective is inescapable for those of us who are capable of making decisions, the exercise of our theoretical reason is also subject to it. That is to say, when one engages in theoretical reason, one makes decisions about what to discover or attempt to discover, and find out; and one also makes decisions about which questions to re-open and which matters to suspend judgement about. One governs one's epistemic conduct.<sup>27</sup> In doing so, one thereby commits oneself to a future that contains that epistemic conduct. From that perspective, the future (including the immediate future) is open, insofar as there remains open to one the perpetual possibility of committing to any one of a range of alternative possible futures, and so there remains open to one the perpetual possibility of thereby determining which of those futures unfolds. In exercising theoretical reasoning, one thereby adopts the practical perspective on one's future. One cannot determine one's future in the epistemic sense without thereby determining one's future in the practical sense.

Suppose one takes oneself to establish, via theoretical reason, that there are no alternative futures, there is only one future, but one just happens to be condemned to be ignorant of what it is. From that perspective, the future still remains yours to determine, in the practical sense. For this is not a scenario in which all future options have been epistemically closed off, so there remain options to be closed off in the practical sense; and as long as there are options that have not been epistemically closed off to one, there remain options to be closed off in the practical sense.<sup>28</sup>

By analogy, consider the fantasy of the time-traveller. As she sets off to travel into the past, aspects of her psychological future are in temporal regions earlier than her current temporal location, and she knows this.<sup>29</sup> For temporal regions earlier than her current temporal location contain actions about which she must now deliberate, and she knows this. Although she may think there is only one past, as long as she is not omnipotent about that past, from her point of view, there remain options to be closed off in the practical sense. She may try to find out more and more about the past with the view that this will improve her decision-making, by revealing more and more to her about which options are genuinely available to her; and the more she finds out, the more options will be epistemically closed off to her. However, although this historical fact-finding mission may constrain her decision-making, it cannot determine her decision-making. Her decisions, and hence her future (which in



this case falls in temporal regions earlier than her current temporal location), remain hers to determine. For while the deliverance of theoretical reason can close off options, in the epistemic sense, it cannot determine which particular options to close off in the practical sense. Although the deliverance of theoretical reason can constrain one's decision-making, it cannot determine one's decision-making. For in committing oneself to a (psychological) future, in the practical sense, one must recognise that the constraints one is subject to, in so committing oneself, are constraints that one has imposed on oneself, rather than constraints that are imposed by the evidence one possesses about how the (psychological) future will turn out. Since one must regard and treat such constraints as self-imposed in order to so commit oneself, one cannot take one's commitment to be epistemically determined. For epistemic requirements are not self-imposed.

I said earlier that since the temporal perspective from which the future is open is inescapable for those of us who are capable of making decisions, the exercise of our theoretical reason is also subject to it. However, it might be thought that despite that fact, we can nonetheless deploy theoretical reason to attempt to attain a perspective-independent (or less perspective-dependent) view of things – one that transcends the tensed temporal perspective from which the future is open. For while the actual *exercise* of theoretical reason may be subject to the tensed temporal perspective we in fact occupy, the content of the view we attain via theoretical reason need not be.

However, if we do manage to attain that less perspective-dependent conception of what there is, it is not clear that we would remain in view from it (which of course isn't to deny that we would remain in view to ourselves through exercising our agency when engaging in the theoretical reasoning that attains that conception). That point is the flipside of the notion that regarding and treating oneself as a self-determining agent is sufficient for being one. Self-determining agents are perspective-dependent entities. They are entities that adopt a certain kind of perspective on themselves. In adopting the relevant perspective, they adopt a distinctive kind of perspective on their past, present, and future, and hence on the past, present, and future more generally; and it is not clear that a conception that abstracts away from that temporal perspective would be one that keeps in view these perspective-dependent beings. So it is not clear that a conception that abstracts away from the kind of tensed temporal perspective that we occupy could take us any closer to understanding ourselves and our lives.

A theoretical conception of ourselves that can add to our understanding of ourselves should be one that keeps us in view. If the freedom we exercise as self-determining agents is perspective-dependent, and if that perspective is intimately bound up with the distinctive kind of tensed temporal perspective that we occupy, then at least one route to attaining

that theoretical understanding of ourselves will be to trace out interdependencies between the psychology of our self-conscious agency, and the psychology of our temporal perspective – interdependencies between the psychology of freedom and the psychology of time.<sup>30</sup>

## Notes

1. The phrase is taken from Kant. In addition to the quote from Kant's *Lectures on Metaphysics*, see also his *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (Kant 1785, §4: 448).
2. For arguments against the claim that our decisions are mental actions see Strawson (2003). Pink (1996, 2009) presents an important defence of the claim our decisions are mental actions. Peacocke (2007, 2009) also holds that decisions can be mental actions, but for rather different reasons. Gibbons (2009) and Hieronymi (2009) have also offered accounts that accommodate, in different ways, a role for agency in decision and intention.
3. Some take this to be a moral of Kavka's "toxin puzzle" (1983).
4. For an account that does attempt to explain the agency in making a decision by looking to the appropriate psychological causes, see Shepherd (2015).
5. This develops a proposal made in Soteriou (2013, ch. 12).
6. Compare Husserl's (1905) account of time-consciousness, and the discussion of the perception of events in O'Shaughnessy (2000).
7. In his *Lectures on Metaphysics*, Kant writes, "Freedom is a mere Idea and to act according to this Idea is what it means to be free in the practical sense" (1821, §29: 898).
8. For seminal discussions of this idea, see Bratman (1987). See also his (1999) and (2006).
9. It also differs from a belief about one's future that one might acquire by testimony. Much has been written on the difference between prediction and decision. See, for example, Hampshire/Hart (1958), Ginet (1962), Taylor (1964), Gauthier (1967), O'Connor (1967), Pears (1968), Levi (1986), and Joyce (2002). A good deal of this literature focuses on the question of whether practical deliberation excludes foreknowledge of one's decisions. Here I am focusing on a different issue, namely the difference between prediction and the assumption one makes about one's future having decided to act – i.e. *after* having decided to act, and in virtue of having decided to act.
10. Compare Velleman's (1989b) discussion of the "epistemic freedom" associated with intention: "Even if the future is going to turn out a particular way, we don't have to describe it as turning out that way in order to describe it correctly, since there are several other, incompatible ways in which we would be equally correct to describe it as turning out" (Velleman 2000b: 34).
11. One may of course be subject to non-epistemic requirements to do something, which may impose non-epistemic requirements not to change one's mind without a change in one's evidential situation, but the point I am making here concerns what is epistemically permissible for a subject to do.
12. And if a subject decides to do something that she is capable of doing, then when the assumption is false there is a respect in which the fault lies with the action and not the assumption. Compare here Anscombe (1959: 56–57): "The mistake is not one of judgment but of performance." See also Hampshire/Hart (1958). For discussion of this view, see also Soteriou (2013, ch. 12).

13. Here I depart from Velleman's account of intention. Velleman argues that intention is a kind of self-fulfilling prediction that presents itself as such. See Velleman (1989a, 2000a).
14. Compare Ismael (2013), who writes, "We do not experience our own future as though it were a movie whose outcome we are simply waiting to see. We experience it as something that we actively bring about, something that is no more settled than our decisions, and whose outcome hangs in the balance until those decisions have been rendered" (162). In the quoted passage, Ismael is commenting on our attitude to our future "until our decisions have been rendered." Here I am remarking on our attitude toward the future *after* the decision has been rendered, but before the action decided upon has been completed.
15. This is a point that I think is missed in Ismael's (2013) interesting discussion of the respect in which we regard the future as open.
16. Velleman's account of intention highlights the significance of both.
17. Shah (2008) denies that a normative judgment is identical with an intention, but nonetheless argues that deliberation that aims to conclude in an intention whether to  $\Phi$  can proceed by settling the question whether one ought to  $\Phi$ . I think that view captures something of the spirit of understanding (C).
18. On Velleman's view, an intention is a self-fulfilling prediction which presents itself as such. It might be thought that the epistemic requirements imposed by such a prediction are in some sense self-imposed. However, although the epistemic requirements associated with the prediction are imposed by a prediction one may not have been epistemically obliged to make, the epistemic requirements one is subject to, having made the prediction, are not self-imposed. This can be brought out by considering a self-fulfilling prediction that one makes about the behaviour of another. Consider Velleman's (1989b) discussion of a doctor saying to a patient, in the presence of a nurse, "Nurse will now take you to the operating theatre." When the nurse has left the room with the patient, the doctor is epistemically required to continue to assume that the patient will be taken to the operating theatre.
19. This is a point that is often overlooked in much of the literature about decision, prediction and foreknowledge. For references to that literature, see note 9.
20. For further discussion of the connection between decision and memory, see Soteriou (2013, ch. 12.4).
21. This point is one that isn't accommodated by belief accounts of intention – e.g. those proposed by Velleman (1985, 1989a, 1989b), Joyce (2002), and Ismael (2007, 2013). As the account that I am proposing differs from such belief accounts, it is not susceptible to the sorts of objections that Fernandes (2016) levels against them.
22. This means that whether you have made a decision at a particular time depends on what happens after that time – i.e. whether you subsequently behave as one who has decided. But of course, that does not imply any kind of backwards causation.
23. This includes the constraints imposed by your assumption about what you will do.
24. I intend my use of the notions of present, past, and future "selves" here to be taken as a *façon de parler*, denoting the tensed perspective you have on yourself. As Korsgaard puts it, "the choice of any action, no matter how trivial, takes you some way into the future. And to the extent that you regulate your choices by identifying yourself as the one who is implementing something like a particular plan of life, you need to identify with your future in order to be *what you are even now*. When the person is viewed

- as an agent no clear sense can be made of a merely present self” (1989: 113–114).
25. I take this point to be relevant to Kavka’s (1983) “toxin puzzle.” You cannot now intend to drink the toxin at a later date, if you believe your self-determining future self will have no reason to drink the toxin when the appointed time for action arrives.
  26. The idea that there is such a tension is something that Ginet (1962), for example, tries to bring out. See also Goldman’s discussion of the “book of life” (1970, ch. 6).
  27. One thereby governs one’s capacity for belief revision; and in revising one’s beliefs, one can re-open what one previously treated as epistemically closed. Compare Price (2005): “We plan under certain assumptions about what the future will be like, which we take as KNOWNs – e.g., normally, that the sun will rise tomorrow. But this seems to be very context-sensitive: if we want to consider an action that involves eliminating the sun, we won’t take the fact that it will rise tomorrow as a given – its rising will be in OPTIONS, not FIXTURES” (276). We can also apply our capacity for belief-revision to our beliefs about our own future actions. Suppose you decide to  $\Phi$  and you have overwhelming evidence that you are able to act as decided and that you won’t change your mind. Let us assume you take yourself to know that you will act as decided. Can you nonetheless be epistemically entitled to assume that you won’t act as decided? Yes. For you are epistemically entitled to believe there is no purely epistemic obstacle to changing your mind and making alternative plans. In which case you are epistemically entitled to believe that there is no purely epistemic obstacle to your rendering your previous evidence inconclusive – thereby making it the case that you didn’t in fact know what you thought you knew. It might be assumed that if you really did take yourself to know that you would act as decided, then you would not see changing your mind as an option. But that assumption, I suggest, leads to the dogmatism paradox – a paradox that leads to the conclusion that whenever one knows, one should not heed any evidence suggesting one is wrong. (For discussion of the dogmatism paradox, see Kripke (2011), and see also the discussion in Soteriou (2013, ch. 15)).
  28. Compare Velleman (1989b): “There being no unique answer to the question ‘What will I do?’ – unlike your mere ignorance of the answer – is easy to mistake for there being no unique thing that you’ll do.”
  29. By the “psychological” future, I mean the temporal region containing the actions the agent is deciding to perform – which in the case of the time-traveller may be temporal regions earlier than her current temporal location.
  30. I am very grateful to Sebastian Schmidt and Hemdat Lerman for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

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