

CARLOS VAZ FERREIRA ON FREEDOM AND DETERMINISM

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Abstract: Carlos Vaz Ferreira argues that the problem of freedom is conceptually distinct from the problem of causal determinism. The problem of freedom is ultimately a problem regarding the *ontologically independent agency* of a being, and the problem of determinism is a problem regarding explanations of events or acts in terms of the totality of their antecedent causal conditions. As Vaz Ferreira sees it, failing to keep these problems apart gives rise to merely apparent but unreal puzzles pertaining to the nature of freedom and its relation to determinism. In this article, I present my interpretation of Vaz Ferreira’s distinctive ideas regarding the nature of freedom and its relation to casual determinism.

The goal of this article is twofold: one, to bring some attention from the English-speaking philosophical community to an interesting early twentieth-century philosopher from Uruguay, namely Carlos Vaz Ferreira (1872–1958);¹ and two, to provide a substantive interpretation of some of Vaz Ferreira’s main contributions to the philosophical discussion on the nature of freedom and its relation to causal determinism.

Vaz Ferreira claims that much of the history of philosophical discussions on the nature of freedom is plagued with conceptual confusions. Many of these confusions are predicated upon failures, he argues, to properly differentiate conceptually between the problem of freedom and the problem of determinism. On the one hand, the problem of freedom is ultimately a

¹ Vaz Ferreira is an intellectual celebrity in his native Uruguay (Tani 2011; Gerardo 2013; Oliver 2019). As early as 1952, in a work dedicated to summarizing Vaz Ferreira’s thought, Arturo Ardao unapologetically states that Vaz Ferreira is “the maximum figure of philosophy in Uruguay during the twentieth century” (Ardao 1961, 17) “whose name is today fatigued with celebrity” in Uruguay (7). Beyond Uruguay Vaz Ferreira also enjoys some attention in contemporary philosophical discussions in Spanish (e.g., Cerrano and Garcia 2021; Acosta 2020, 2009; Carriquiry 2018; Drews 2010; Vega 2008). In general introductions to Latin American philosophy in English, Vaz Ferreira is typically given a passing reference (Gracia and Millan-Zaibert 2004, 19, 81; Gracia and Vargas 2018, §2.1; Perez 2018, §2.4; and Nuccetelli 2021, §1.1), but his thought is not given much consideration in any detail. A few exceptions of works in English dedicated to Vaz Ferreira are Haddox 1966, Perez-Ilzarbe 2011, and Oliver 2019.

problem regarding the *ontologically independent agency* of a being,² and on the other hand, the problem of determinism is a problem regarding explanations of events or acts in terms of the totality of their antecedent causal conditions. As Vaz Ferreira sees it, failing to keep these problems apart gives rise to merely apparent but unreal puzzles pertaining to the nature of freedom and its relation to determinism.

Here is the plan. In [Section 1](#), I briefly sketch some historical background and highlight important parts of Vaz Ferreira's methodology. In [Section 2](#), I present what Vaz Ferreira thought was his most important contribution to the philosophical discussions on freedom and determinism—namely, a careful conceptual delineation of these as two different problems. I also provide interpretations of some of Vaz Ferreira's more ambitious philosophical positions about the nature of freedom and its relation to causal determinism.

1 Background and Methodology, a Sketch

Francisco Romero, himself an important Latin American philosopher of the early part of the twentieth century, has influentially labeled Carlos Vaz Ferreira a member of “the generation of founders” of Latin American philosophy (1952, 64).³ Romero used this label because he sees this generation as inaugurating an authentically philosophical period in the history of Latin American thought. Up until this point, the two major currents of Latin American thinking were scholasticism, dominant during the colonial period, and positivism, dominant during the second part of the nineteenth century. What separates members of this ‘generation of founders’ from previous thinkers in Latin America is that they grew increasingly dissatisfied with aspects of their positivistic training. These founders developed various philosophical objections to positivism and thus facilitated an important philosophical transition in Latin American thought.

Carlos Vaz Ferreira is thus a transitional figure away from a great influence of positivism in Latin America to its overwhelming abandonment

² This expression makes it seem like what matters for Vaz Ferreira's account of freedom is whether a being is the *agent-cause* of her actions. I think that in some sense of the expression, this is correct. However, I refrain from using the label ‘agent causal theory’ to describe Vaz Ferreira's account of freedom because even though this label captures and highlights central elements in Vaz Ferreira's thought, it can also obscure other elements of his thought. This is so, in part, because Vaz Ferreira's account is complex and thus requires important qualifications, but also because his views have remarkable affinities with views often classified under the competing contemporary labels: ‘compatibilism,’ ‘two-standpoint view,’ and even ‘revisionism.’ All these labels apply to some extent to Vaz Ferreira's views. Thus, the task of adequately classifying Vaz Ferreira's views in terms of contemporary labels is best situated in a larger project in which explicit and careful comparisons can be made between Vaz Ferreira's views and these contemporary positions; this project is best left for another occasion.

³ [Gracia and Vargas \(2018\)](#) reinforce this categorization in their influential taxonomy of the history of Latin American philosophy.

roughly halfway through the twentieth century. Because he is to a large extent still in the grip of positivism, he inherits some of its paradigmatic strengths and weaknesses. For its strengths: he is clear, concerned with language and precision, attentive to the sciences of his day, and careful and meticulous in his reasonings. For its weaknesses: he is a bit too quick to dismiss the past and a bit too optimistic in his linguistic analyses.

Some of these strengths and weaknesses are on full display in Vaz Ferreira's articulation of his methodology at the beginning of his important work on freedom and determinism: *Los problemas de la libertad* (hereafter *Problemas*).⁴ In *Problemas* he writes, "most philosophical problems have been raised during an era in which ideas about their subject matter were still confused; knowledge still insufficient; analyses still very deficient or completely null" (P, 39).⁵ Vaz Ferreira labels a philosophical problem raised in these underdeveloped eras a "primitive problem" (P, 39). He laments that philosophy has not seen the kind of advances enjoyed by the empirical sciences, and diagnoses part of this malady as coming from the original conceptual confusions in the articulation of the primitive problems of philosophy and the way in which these confusions have infected the historical development of these problems (P, 40). As he sees it, this diagnosis itself points to the path forward, to the path for advancement or progress in philosophy:

There is then a way of proceeding that delivers great results: it is that of completely dispensing with the primitive problem; to study the facts and to try to coordinate theories as if such a problem had never been stated; and, thus breaking the artificial ties that united them, allow the ideas to reorder themselves naturally according to their logical relations. (P, 40)

There is much packed in this important quote. Vaz Ferreira thinks that much of the history of philosophy is plagued with conceptual confusions;

⁴ This work was published in parts beginning in 1903 in *Anales de la Universidad*; it was published as a single work in 1907 at Vaz Ferreira's relatively young age of 35. Over thirty years after its publication, Vaz Ferreira describes this book as the only one that he tried "to write with proper time, study, concentration, [and] profundity and for these reasons it is the least imperfect" of his books (F, 35; see footnote 12). (Note: translations are my own). Another reason that singles out *Problemas* as unique in Vaz Ferreira's vast corpus (no less than 25 volumes singled out for publication as an homage by the Uruguayan Representative House in the early 1960s) is that it foreshadows and, in several respects, anticipates parts of Vaz Ferreira's distinctive method of philosophizing as encapsulated in his *Logica viva*, originally published in 1910. Ardao tells us that many commentators find *Problemas* to be Vaz Ferreira's "masterpiece" (Ardao 1961, 45), but Ardao himself thinks that it is *Logica viva* that constitutes "the most seasoned and spontaneous fruit of [Vaz Ferreira's] mental prime" (Ardao 1961, 45). In either case, *Problemas* stands out as one of Vaz Ferreira's most important works.

⁵ P = Carlos Vaz Ferreira. 1947. "Los problemas de la libertad," *Revista de la Facultad de Humanidades y Ciencias/Universidad de la Republica*. Montevideo: FHC, UR, 1974, 1.1: 39–125. Originally published in 1907. Cited by page number.

he is optimistic about the prospects of adequately redefining many of these philosophical problems in light of the ‘natural’ and ‘logical’ order of ideas. As Vaz Ferreira sees it, part of what makes an order of ideas or analysis *natural* and *logical* is that it is uncontaminated by the conceptual confusions plaguing unscientific eras; the path for progress in philosophical thinking thus lies in divorcing itself from its unscientific past. As far as I can tell, Vaz Ferreira does not provide a precise and careful account of what he means by ‘natural’ and ‘logical,’ but his general meaning is not difficult to ascertain. In *Problemas*, he uses the word ‘natural’ in conjunction with, and apparently as synonymous with, ‘proper’ (P, 55) and ‘legitimate’ (P, 41), and in opposition to ‘artificial’ (P, 40; 41; 49; 54) and ‘fictitious’ (P, 49). Many times, Vaz Ferreira adds the qualification ‘naturally’ to mean something like ‘credibly’ or ‘reasonably’ or ‘plausibly’ (P, 40; 44; 45; 47; 54; 59; 60; 66; 76; 77; 82, and 87).

In an earlier work on logic, Vaz Ferreira claims that logic is divided into two parts; the first part is “pure or formal logic” which “studies the conditions under which thought agrees with itself” (LE, 2)⁶ and which is grounded in a single fundamental principle: “[formulated] in its positive form, this is the principle which is known as *the principle of identity* . . . A is A; [formulated] in its negative form, this fundamental principle which governs the agreement of thought with itself, or as it is also often called, [the principle] of consequence, or of contradiction” (LE, 3). As Vaz Ferreira sees it, “the principle of identity or contradiction has nothing to do with the truth of thoughts; it does not pertain with its matter, but with its form” (LE, 3). It is the second part of logic that “deals with the conditions of agreement between thought and reality, and which takes the name of ‘applied logic’ or ‘methodology’” (LE, 2). For Vaz Ferreira, this second part of logic includes “the principle of causality” (LE, 41) and what he calls “live logic”: a general subject matter that includes the study of logical fallacies, philosophy of language and the nature of signification, and the application of reason to philosophical topics pertaining to everyday life (LV, xxii).⁷ For Vaz Ferreira, then, ‘logic’ is a multifaceted notion governing proper thinking.

Returning to *Problemas*, Vaz Ferreira optimistically states that the successful implementation of his natural and logical “analysis” would:

verify and constitute a realized progress, it would dissolve apparent contradictions, and would allow for ideas to be reorganized naturally according to their veridical logical relations, leaving [the philosophical topics], in any case, in a state of having been clearly thought and usefully critiqued. (P, 44)

⁶ LE = Carlos Vaz Ferreira. 1899. *Apuntes de Lógica Elemental*. Montevideo: El Siglo Ilustrado, De Turenne, Varizi y Ca. Cited by page number.

⁷ LV = Carlos Vaz Ferreira. 1979. *Lógica viva* in *Lógica viva; moral para intelectuales*. Fundación Biblioteca Ayacuch. Cited by page number.

He plans to do this kind of analysis for the topics of freedom and determinism in *Problemas*, and he hopes that others would follow suit and apply his methodology to clean up other philosophical problems and allow philosophy to progress (P, 44).

Another central element of Vaz Ferreira's methodology, as presented in *Problemas*, is what I label 'conceptual framework relativity.' This relativity is twofold: (1) the *meaning* of philosophical problems and their solutions is partly settled by *the conceptual framework* in which philosophical questions can be meaningfully asked and answered, and (2) propositions can be *true* in some conceptual framework but *false* in another.

In *Problemas*, Vaz Ferreira describes what I call 'conceptual frameworks' as *levels of abstraction* in which thinking can operate and analyses of notions can take place. For example, metaphysics "is characterized by beginning its analysis from [scientific notions]; and . . . it is possible to go further in this analysis, given that there are different degrees of abstraction which constitute it" (P, 41). So, for Vaz Ferreira, metaphysics is a collection of levels of abstraction in which thinking and analyzing occur. The same holds for the empirical sciences; what distinguishes these from metaphysics is merely the degree of abstraction in which scientific thinking operates: "*In the sciences, the degree of abstraction in which thinking occurs is established by tacit convention. In metaphysics, it must be established by explicit convention in each case*" (P, 41, emphasis in original). The tacit convention is that scientific thought operates at a level of abstraction in which "certain notions" are taken simply as "data, without [further] discussion" because these notions "are common to all men precisely because these are the data of perception" (P, 40–41). Importantly, "the ease for thinking and discussing found" in the empirical sciences "results in part from words therein having a precise meaning; or, better, a meaning that is more or less the same for everyone" because of the tacit conventions that settle the meaning of these words (P, 40). The meaning of scientific notions, then, is fixed by the level of abstraction in which scientific thinking operates, and this is itself settled by the tacit convention to use the meaning of notions that arise from common perception. By contrast, the level of abstraction in which metaphysical thinking occurs "*must be established by explicit convention in each case*" (P, 41, emphasis in original). Metaphysics is thus a collection of different levels of abstraction, or conceptual frameworks, in which metaphysical thinking occurs and the meanings of the notions operating at each different level of abstraction must be explicitly articulated.

These conceptual frameworks help settle the meaning of the notions operating within them and thus help make intelligible philosophical questions and answers to philosophical problems. As Vaz Ferreira sees it, propositions can be true in some conceptual framework and false in others. He writes, "any proposition referring to" a given object "could be true or false, depending on the level of abstraction at which it is placed in thought" (P, 41). Vaz Ferreira provides the following example:

Let us take any notion: let it be that of ‘matter,’ just as it is given in perception. Stripping it of certain properties which psychology demonstrates to be no more than subjective phenomena, we obtain a more abstract notion, which we continue to call ‘matter.’ Taking the analysis further, we can make such notion more and more abstract; and, in all these degrees of abstraction, we always employ the same word ‘matter.’ The result from this is that any proposition whose object is the notion of ‘matter,’ or which has some relation to this notion, could be true or false (or better still, is commonly true and false) according to the degree of abstraction in which it is placed in thought. (P, 41–42)

The details of Vaz Ferreira’s account are not as clear as one would like, but the basic idea seems straightforward. Thought operates at different levels of abstraction which permit or prohibit different kinds of information about a given notion and in so doing settle the very meaning of that notion *at that level of abstraction*. Thus, a single notion can have different meanings at different levels of abstraction in which this notion is thought.⁸ The meaning of notions is based on the quantity and quality of information that is permitted to be a part of them at a given level of abstraction. The more distant one level of abstraction is from another (that is, the less information is shared between different levels of abstraction) the less the similarity of meaning between the notions operating within these different levels. Thus, for Vaz Ferreira, different conceptual frameworks make intelligible different kinds of questions and answers to philosophical problems by settling the meaning of the notions employed in these questions and answers, and thus settling the very *thinkability* of these questions and answers. These conceptual frameworks thus allow for a kind of relativity of truth. Propositions that involve a single notion, like ‘matter,’ can have slightly different meanings in different conceptual frameworks, depending on the quantity and quality of information that endows this notion with meaning *at that level of abstraction*, and thus these propositions can come out as true in one framework and false in another.

⁸ As far as I can tell, questions about the precise relationships between words, notions, and meanings do not preoccupy Vaz Ferreira here. It may be tempting to think that notions are individuated by their meaning such that if meanings vary from one level of abstraction to the next, so does the identity of the notions that go by the same name or word there. If so, it is only words or names that are shared between different levels of abstraction and not notions as well. This is not, however, how Vaz Ferreira presents his view. He speaks about the same notion thought at different levels of abstraction and thus having different meanings. My guess is that he speaks this way not because he is strongly committed to thinking that notions are not individuated by their meanings, but rather because these kinds of considerations are orthogonal to his main point in this work. My guess is that Vaz Ferreira would be happy translating his points in terms of a single notion with various meanings into terms of a single word with various notions themselves individuated by their meanings.

Vaz Ferreira further describes his methodology for his project in *Problemas*:

Now then: it can be believed that many of the theories that have been held in philosophy are true in some given degrees of abstraction, without prejudice of being, in others, false or devoid of meaning; especially if it is considered that it is possible, analyzing a notion contained in a theory, to get to another theory which is different or contrary to the first, this does not prove that the first is false *in its circle of abstraction*. (P, 42, emphasis in original)

Vaz Ferreira's main point here is that the fact that a proposition or theory is true, false, or meaningless in one conceptual framework cannot by itself be taken as justification for thinking that this proposition or theory is true, false, or meaningless in a different conceptual framework.

I have highlighted two elements of Vaz Ferreira's methodology: what I have labeled 'conceptual framework relativity' and his insistence that conceptual analyses must be natural and logical. For Vaz Ferreira, these methodological elements are complementary: some conceptual frameworks allow more *natural* or *logical* ways of addressing philosophical problems than other conceptual frameworks (P, 45ff). Put differently, for Vaz Ferreira, some levels or degrees of abstraction allow for more natural or logical analyses of some philosophical problems and as such provide more adequate philosophical answers to those problems.

With this background, we are in a position to understand Vaz Ferreira's main contributions to the philosophical discussion on the nature of freedom and its relation to determinism.

2 The Problems of Freedom and Determinism

Vaz Ferreira's *Problemas* was originally planned to include three main parts or books. In book one, Vaz Ferreira clearly and carefully differentiated a cluster of logically or conceptually independent philosophical problems pertaining to freedom and another cluster of logically or conceptually independent philosophical problems pertaining to determinism. The second book is dedicated to illustrating how many influential thinkers (of the caliber of William James, Schopenhauer, Bergson, and others) failed to carefully distinguish these philosophical problems in the way Vaz Ferreira did, and how this failure led to conceptual confusions in their discussions on freedom and determinism. The third book was going to be dedicated to Vaz Ferreira's own positive account, but this project never came to fruition.⁹ His work remains one of making conceptual distinctions to

⁹ Later in his life, Vaz Ferreira returned to this book and provided some commentaries, including one explicitly dedicated to enumerating the different conclusions that follow from the original book (C; see [footnote 12](#)). He never truly finished the third book in the academically

reach conceptual clarity before directly tackling the philosophical problems themselves. Nonetheless, much of Vaz Ferreira's own views do emerge in the first two books of *Problemas*, but lamentably without the systematic and careful defense and articulation that he planned for the third book.

As Vaz Ferreira understands *Problemas*, its main contribution lies in distinguishing the problem of freedom from the problem of determinism. This distinction, he argues, is philosophically fruitful for it reveals conceptual confusions plaguing much of the history of philosophical discussions on these topics.

2.1 Distinguishing Philosophical Problems

Vaz Ferreira insists that there are two *natural* "points of view" from which we can inquire into an event or act that occurs in the world. On the one hand, it is natural to think of a given event or act as embedded in the totality of the forces of the world and seek an explanation of its occurrence in terms of *all* its antecedent causal conditions and the way in which it follows from these (P, 45ff). On the other hand, it is natural to think of a given event *as an action of a being* and inquire into the extent to which the exercise of the agency of this being depends upon forces *external* to the being itself (P, 45ff). The former is the natural question of determinism, and the latter is the natural question of freedom.

As Vaz Ferreira sees it, these are not just two different questions, but two questions whose meanings emerge from two different conceptual frameworks. On the one hand, the conceptual framework within which the natural question of freedom emerges is essentially one in which the metaphysical questions about the identity, or individuation, of beings or agents is paramount. The main question here concerns the ontologically independent agency of a being with respect to the rest of the world. Using the example of a steamboat, Vaz Ferreira writes:

If it turns out that the vessel has been abandoned with its steam engine turned off [*fuegos apagados*], and it has been floating aimlessly [*sin gobierno*], we say that it is moved, that it is carried by the winds and the waters, that it suffers its act passively, that it depends upon external forces; and if, on the contrary, we come to know that the movement of the vessel results, not only from the external forces of wind and currents, but also from the concurrence, with these forces, of another [force] that is within the vessel itself, like steam, we then do not say that the vessel is moved, but that it moves itself . . . we say, not that it is passive, but that it

rigorous manner originally intended; it remained, he admitted, "inconclusive" (F, 35; see footnote 12).

is active; not that it is dependent, but that it is independent, at least partially. (P, 46–47)

As Vaz Ferreira sees it, the natural question of freedom is thus a question of whether an individuated being is active or merely passive. If the acts of this being are settled entirely by forces *external* to the being, then it is passive and thus unfree; by contrast, if the actions of this being are settled partly by its *internal* forces, then it is active and thus free.¹⁰ To claim that a being is free, thus, is to claim that the being “*is not completely dependent upon the external world*” for its agency (P, 46, emphasis in original). These questions are thus *intelligible* in a conceptual framework that requires the metaphysical *individuation* of beings;¹¹ and, at bottom, these questions are about the ontologically independent agency of a being in relation to what is external to this being.

For Vaz Ferreira the point of view in which the natural question of freedom is raised is the point of view of beings: “In the strictly rigorous sense that we have adopted . . . the notion of freedom fits intelligibly with beings and not acts” (P, 49). It is beings that are free and not acts. We can speak, however, of ‘free actions’ but only in an extended sense of the term: “*Free action* means here, then, *action freely executed* (by a being); such that *who is really free is, not the act* (to which the term is applied by extension), but *the being who executes it*” (P, 48, emphasis in original). To speak of ‘free actions’ is thus an indirect way of speaking about free agents, and this speech is still operating within the conceptual framework in which the natural problem of freedom emerges. Vaz Ferreira insists, “Even if the talk is about actions, the point of view adopted is the individuating point of view; the point of view of beings” (P, 48).

The natural problem of freedom is thus a problem of the ontologically independent agency of a metaphysically individuated being in relation to what is external to this being. This natural problem can be raised at multiple levels of abstraction or in different conceptual frameworks. Like Vaz Ferreira, we can ask whether a steamboat is free; answering this question requires inquiring into the metaphysical individuation of the steamboat and into the extent to which the steamboat’s actions are determined by causal factors external to the steamboat itself. A question in which philosophers are more interested is whether people are free. Answering this question thus requires inquiring into the metaphysical individuation of a given person and into the extent to which her actions are determined by causal factors

¹⁰ Vaz Ferreira recognizes that this conception of freedom is in some respects peculiar to him and does not capture the kinds of cases with which philosophers are typically concerned when they discuss the nature of freedom. I return to this topic in [Section 2.3](#).

¹¹ Vaz Ferreira’s exegesis is a bit more complicated than I am making it out to be. At least on one occasion (P, 63f) Vaz Ferreira treats the question of individuation in the context of the problem of freedom as a mere linguistic convention (something I claim is only true in the context of the problem of determinism). I am assuming that this is a misstep on his part, and not part of his considered view.

external to herself. If a person is a true individual and her actions are not fully determined by causal factors external to her, then she is free. If not, not. A different natural question is whether a particular *part* of a person is itself free. Philosophers have been interested in knowing whether the mind of a person or the will of a person are free. For Vaz Ferreira, these are just different particular versions of the natural problem of freedom (P, 58ff). For example, the will of a person is free only if the will can be metaphysically individuated (i.e., truly separated from what is not itself or what is external to itself) and its acts be explained in part by forces or causal factors internal to the will itself (P, 59f), and so on.

For Vaz Ferreira, these problems are conceptually independent because they are raised in different levels of abstraction in which different questions of metaphysical individuation are relevant. When inquiring into the freedom of a particular man, what matters is metaphysical individuation of this man “*in relation to what is not the man*” or in relation to what is external to the man (P, 53, emphasis in original). Importantly, for Vaz Ferreira the level of abstraction in which the question of whether a man is free is one that abstracts away from metaphysical individuation of things external—like other people or the laws of nature—or internal to the man—like the mind or the will (P, 53f). Whether these external or internal things can themselves be metaphysically individuated is strictly irrelevant at this level of abstraction. What matters here is whether a causal factor is *internal* or *external* to the metaphysically individuated being whose freedom is in question. Thus, it is possible to think that a person is free, for she enjoys some ontological independent agency in relation to what is not her, and that her mind is not free, for the acts of her mind are fully determined by forces external to her mind. Each such question must be asked and answered separately. The *meaning* of these different questions and answers emerges in different conceptual frameworks in which different questions of metaphysical individuation are relevant (P, 58ff).

This conceptual independence has its limits, however. On some cases, the answer to a problem in one conceptual framework might have implications for answers to other problems in a different conceptual framework: that a mind is free implies the person is also free, Vaz Ferreira insists (P, 66), even though these questions are raised and answered in different conceptual frameworks.

The natural question of determinism, by contrast, emerges in a scientific conceptual framework in which *predicting* events or acts from the *totality* of their antecedent causal conditions is paramount. Vaz Ferreira writes:

Regarding *acts*, the *most natural* question is not a question of independence or of freedom, but that of explicability or of determination. If we think, not in a vessel (a being) but on its movement (an act) at a given moment, we will present [*ensayaremos*] the explanation of this movement

as a result of the concurring forces; and this explication will be . . . between the movement of the vessel and its mechanistic antecedents . . . and from this point of view it does not matter whether a part of the antecedent force be produced or not in (or by) the vessel. (P, 47, emphasis in original)

What matters in this conceptual framework is adequately explaining acts in terms how they follow from their *total* antecedent causal conditions, not inquiring into whether the acts of a being can be explained by causal forces *external* to this being itself. Whether the causal forces that explain these acts are internal or external to a given being is strictly irrelevant for providing the kinds of explanations that matter in this scientific conceptual framework. In fact, for Vaz Ferreira the conceptual framework within which the question of determinism naturally emerges is essentially one that abstracts away from metaphysical questions about the identity, or individuation, of beings or agents (P, 55f). Terms that seem to individuate beings, or ‘individual names,’ may still be used in these conceptual frameworks, but this is a mere linguistic convention without interest or concern for the metaphysical individuation of beings. Using these terms is just a convenient way to speak about the phenomena. How individual names should be used in these conceptual frameworks is a merely “nominal or conventional question” (P, 64); whether we have a “right” to use individual names in a particular way or whether such use is “artificial or fictitious” are strictly irrelevant considerations in this conceptual framework (P, 50). Again, the questions that matter in this conceptual framework are questions of explanations of events or acts in terms of their total antecedent causal conditions and how they follow from these.

In sum, the natural problem of freedom—the problem of the metaphysical individuation and ontological independent agency of beings—is a conceptually distinct problem from the natural problem of determinism—the problem of the extent to which acts can be explained in terms of the totality of their antecedent causal conditions. Importantly, these problems can be raised only in different conceptual frameworks, so the answer to one is conceptually independent from the answer to the other.

2.2 Animate versus Inanimate Beings

For Vaz Ferreira, there is a fundamental ontological distinction between animate and inanimate beings: animate beings are always free because their individuating conditions involve their ontologically independent agency, and this is not the case for inanimate beings. This important distinction comes out in the context of discussing what Vaz Ferreira’s calls a ‘problem

of freedom' with 'retro-action' or 'retro-thinking' (F, 39f; P, 62f; C, 25f).¹² By this, Vaz Ferreira just means that built into the very formulation of a particular problem of freedom is not only the time in which the action takes place, but a longer period of time preceding the action. He writes:

when we consider the acts of a being in relation to the external world, we can think about what that being is during the moment or we can think of what the being has been or continues to be since before the act. If it is considered, for example, the elemental case of a steamboat, if we consider that steamboat at a determinate moment in which it is moving at sea . . . we consider the problem without retro-action or without retro-thinking; then I would say, in this sense, that in this moment and in this case, the vessel is free or acts freely. But it is just a matter of going backwards so we can get to a point in which the steam engine was turned on, the moment in which the carbon was introduced into the vessel [etc.]; and then with this consideration of retroaction, I would say, it no longer looks like the vessel is free, because it depends upon what was the external world, it depends upon what was not itself. (F, 39)

As Vaz Ferreira sees it, then, in the case of inanimate beings, like the steamboat, when the natural question of freedom is raised during the moment of action, the steamboat seems free and possessing ontologically independent agency. When the question is pressed far enough back in time, however, the steamboat seems unfree, for its agency seems to be entirely ontologically dependent upon things external to itself.

Does that mean that the latter assessment is the more accurate one? Vaz Ferreira's response to this question is complex and a bit tentative. On the one hand, he insists that these problems are conceptually different, raised in different conceptual frameworks, so that the answer to the problem with retroaction does not affect the answer to the problem without retroaction: "it is just a matter of different points of view," he insists (P, 62; see also P, 66). So, the proposition 'the steamboat is free' is true in the conceptual framework that only includes considerations during the time of the action, and false in the conceptual framework that goes far back in time to the

¹² It is not entirely clear to me why Vaz Ferreira uses these labels in particular. When he introduces the problem, he does more or less what I have done in the main text—namely, he introduces the label and says that by that he just means whether the formulation of a particular problem of freedom includes time prior to the moment in which the action occurs (P, 62; F, 39; C, 25). F = Carlos Vaz Ferreira. 1975. *Fragmentos sobre los problemas de la libertad y los del determinismo*. Ediciones de la casa del estudiante, Prologo y selección del Prof. Manuel Claps. Montevideo. Cited by page number; C = Carlos Vaz Ferreira. 1950. "Conclusiones de los problemas de la libertad y el determinismo." *Revista de la Facultad de Humanidades y Ciencias*, Universidad de la Republica. Montevideo: FHC, UR, 1950. 3.4: 23–36. Cited by page number.

point at which the agency of the steamboat was constructed out of things external to the steamboat itself.

However, these points about the conceptual independence of the problems of freedom with and without retroaction do not settle an important question. This important question is whether one of these problems is more *natural* than the other, and thus whether one of these answers is more accurate than the other. Vaz Ferreira writes:

But here emerges a question following nominal questions which itself is not [nominal]: which convention is more natural? The first one seemed to me to be so when I only thought of the present moment; thinking with retroaction, I adopted the second [convention], and I said that the locomotive was moved. Probably, seeming to us that this second point of view is more natural, we would end up, in this case, by retaining the second convention [and its results]. (P, 64)

There seems to be some tension here. On the one hand, Vaz Ferreira insists on the conceptual independence of these problems of freedom: “it is just a matter of different points of view” (P, 62). Yet, Vaz Ferreira allows that one of these problems can be more natural than another, and thus that one answer can be more accurate than another; in fact, Vaz Ferreira goes so far as to gesture toward thinking that, at least for inanimate objects, the question of freedom with retroaction is more natural than the question of freedom without retroaction (P, 64; see also F, 39).

Here is my exegetical suggestion for bringing these points into harmony. The main point Vaz Ferreira is making is that there are several conceptually distinct problems of freedom that are often conflated; as he sees it, making these conceptual distinctions is his most valuable contribution to philosophical debates on the nature of freedom. Making these conceptual distinctions, however, does not itself settle substantive philosophical questions regarding the nature of freedom; it just allows for conceptual clarity and dissolves conceptual confusions, and thus it enables productive philosophical debate to proceed. One way in which productive philosophical debate can proceed is by arguing about which of the conceptually independent problems of freedom is more natural. Vaz Ferreira is tempted to accept, but falls short of explicitly endorsing, that it is more natural to think of inanimate objects as ultimately unfree, for the problem of freedom with retroaction is more natural and supports this conclusion.

More generally, Vaz Ferreira thinks that these considerations about problems of freedom with or without retroaction bring out important points about the nature of freedom. He insists that the steamboat is unfree in the case of the question of freedom with retroaction because: “*the moment in which the energy [carbon, water, etc.] entered the object (the steamboat) is posterior to the moment in which the steamboat is thought*

as a steamboat and named as such” (P, 64, emphasis in original). This observation is central for Vaz Ferreira. As we have seen, the natural question of freedom is intelligible only in cases of legitimate metaphysical individuation of beings. So, it is intelligible to say that a steamboat is unfree only because there is a conceptual framework in which it is conceivable that there is a metaphysically individuated being and its agency is constructed from things external to this being. Importantly, Vaz Ferreira thinks that such is not the case for animate beings. There is a fundamental difference between inanimate and animate beings: animate beings come into existence as agents. Their agency is metaphysically connected with their being:

From the moment an animal exists as such; from the moment that we conceive it and name it as such, it has energy by which it acts. If we pose the problem of retroaction, then, starting with the time in which the animal came into existence, we would say that it acts by itself. (P, 65)

Vaz Ferreira thus thinks that in the case of animate beings, their agency is metaphysically connected with their identity such that any time in which the animate being exists its agency is also ontologically independent. Animate beings are free from the first moment of their existence.

2.2.1 *Animate Beings and the Consequence Argument*

In the previous subsection, I presented some metaphysically robust claims advanced by Vaz Ferreira regarding the nature of freedom and animate beings. These robust claims give rise to a potential challenge I would like to address in this subsection. The challenge I have in mind is structurally analogous to an argument against the compatibility of freedom and determinism, known in the secondary literature as the ‘consequence argument.’ In his influential *An Essay on Free Will* (1983), Peter van Inwagen presents this argument:

If determinism is true, then our acts are the consequence of laws of nature and events in the remote past. But it’s not up to us what went on before we were born, and neither is it up to us what the laws of nature are. Therefore, the consequences of these things (including our present acts) are not up to us. (1983, 56)¹³

The basic idea here is straightforward:

1. Determinism entails that all human actions are the consequences of the remote past and the laws of nature.

¹³ Van Inwagen develops this argument in 1983 and modifies it again in 2000 in response to a powerful objection from McKay and Johnson (1996). O’Connor (1993) and Huemer (2000) have also provided different developments of this basic argument. The details of these developments need not detain us here, however.

2. An agent acts freely only if her actions are up to her.
3. An action cannot be up to an agent if it is the consequence of the remote past and the laws of nature (for these are not up to her).
4. Therefore, determinism rules out freedom.

Many philosophers have found this argument to be persuasive (e.g., [Ginet 1966, 1983, 1990](#); [van Inwagen 1975, 1983, 2000](#); [Wiggins 1973](#); [Lamb 1977](#); [O'Connor 1993](#)). This argument can be modified and used to argue against Vaz Ferreira's claim that his account of freedom does not require answering the problem of determinism one way or the other. The two premises that must be modified are the following:

- 2a. A person acts freely only if her actions result from her ontologically independent agency.
- 3a. An action cannot result from a person's ontologically independent agency if it is the consequence of the remote past and the laws of nature (for these do not result from her ontologically independent agency).

If successful, this argument would show that determinism implies that no entity has ontologically independent agency as required by Vaz Ferreira's conception of freedom and thus that there are no animate beings in Vaz Ferreira's sense of the term. Thus, if successful, this argument would show that Vaz Ferreira himself, contrary to his protestations, is committed to thinking that freedom is incompatible with determinism.

The crux of this argument lies on premise 3a. Is Vaz Ferreira committed to 3a? Is 3a philosophically tenable? Vaz Ferreira does not directly engage with this problem. But he does address a problem in the vicinity from which it is reasonable to extract a potential answer to our problem. Vaz Ferreira asks whether it is reasonable to pose the problem of retroaction extending prior to the beginning of the existence of an animate being whose freedom is in question: "but if we give more retroaction to the problem [to before the existence of the animate being], what should we think and how should we speak?" (P, 65). He continues:

We would be overwhelmed with a mental state of confusion: we think that, even when we can't conceive anything clearly, at least the following has been established: there are beings that only possess energy that enters them after they have acquired their identity, and others whose formative elements were already provided when they were constituted; that these latter ones well deserve the name 'free' because they are [free] from the moment in which they exist. (P, 65)

As Vaz Ferreira sees it, animate beings are always free, and this is based on a kind of conceptual necessity: the conceptual necessity that the very question

of the freedom of an animate being makes sense only in a conceptual framework in which this animate being is metaphysically individuated, and this individuation itself requires the ontologically independent agency of the animate being. Thus, for Vaz Ferreira, it is *unintelligible* to ask whether the agency of an animate being ontologically depends upon causal factors external to it *prior to its existence*: “the very posing of this problem with retroaction is lost” if extended prior to the existence of the animate being whose freedom is in question (F, 40). But this is exactly what premise 3a states. Vaz Ferreira is not committed to this premise; in fact, Vaz Ferreira thinks that this premise is ultimately unintelligible: there is no conceptual framework in which this premise can be meaningfully understood.

Vaz Ferreira acknowledges that animate beings come into existence at particular times, and he is sometimes even willing to grant that the actions of these beings can be predicted prior to their coming into existence,¹⁴ but it would be a mistake to deduce from these things that the agency of animate beings is fully ontologically dependent upon things external to these animate beings. This does not follow from these considerations, and premise 3a, which states this connection, is ultimately unintelligible. Thus, the modified argument fails to show that determinism implies that there is no freedom or animate beings, understood as Vaz Ferreira understands them. Vaz Ferreira’s conception of freedom is not incompatible with determinism.

2.2.2 *Determinism and the Metaphysics of Agency*

There is one more way of thinking about how determinism may be incompatible with freedom. Addressing this possibility, I think, will help bring to light important aspects of Vaz Ferreira’s thought. Vaz Ferreira insists that the question of causal determinism is a question for empirical science, and as such it is a question that abstracts away from questions of the metaphysical individuation of beings (P, 55f). Vaz Ferreira also insists, however, that metaphysical speculations can emerge from scientific theories:

It has been seen that the truth or falsity of a scientific theory (or better of a verbal formulation) is very different from its philosophic truth and is independent from it; it has been repeated with all exactitude that it is possible to superimpose upon scientific theories different metaphysical

¹⁴ Early in his career (in 1899), he boldly asserts that “applied logic makes use of a principle that governs reality: the principle of causality or determinism” (LE, 41). In *Problemas*, by 1907, his endorsement of causal determinism is less prominent, but still comes across on a couple of occasions (P, 45f; 53f). Over thirty years after that Vaz Ferreira states: “a true intellectual weakness of the previous century was the ill use, the illegitimate and presumptive use, of practical determinism. Determinism was then the ‘scientific view,’ and was precisely the science in which my generation was formed. It was in part a pseudo-science” (C, 32). In this last work, he addresses Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle and argues that it is insufficient to prove that reality is indeterministic, and that the question of determinism is a scientific question and still unresolved (C, 29ff).

theories, just like it is possible not to superimpose any [such theory]. (P, 42)

Here Vaz Ferreira allows for metaphysical theories to be ‘superimposed’ on scientific theories. I will take this to mean that philosophers can develop metaphysical conceptual frameworks in which they can make intelligible metaphysical interpretations of scientific theories. In principle, this allows for beginning with the scientific thesis of determinism and developing a metaphysical position that may end up undermining Vaz Ferreira’s conception of the metaphysics of agency. I wish to sketch an argument along these lines in this subsection. If successful, this line of reasoning would bypass Vaz Ferreira’s insistence that it is unintelligible to press the natural question of freedom with retroaction to a point prior to the beginning of the existence of an animate being whose freedom is in question.

First, Vaz Ferreira himself begins his analysis of agency by talking about *forces* internal to an agent. He claims that his analysis begins with the scientific notion of ‘force’ which itself comes from scientific theorizing about the phenomena of perception and thus stands in no need of further analysis (P, 45f; 50f). However, he also acknowledges that the scientific conception of ‘forces’ is insufficient to ground his account of the metaphysics of agency (P, 51f). He needs a distinction between forces internal to a being that are *active* and features of a being that are *passive*—like shape, size, resistance, etc.—that must be taken into consideration in explaining acts, but which do not endow the being with agency (P, 52). At the end of the day, Vaz Ferreira must admit that the distinction between being active and being passive is a metaphysical distinction.¹⁵ But this is as things should be, for the question of freedom is a metaphysical question and not a scientific question.

Vaz Ferreira does not develop a metaphysics of agency in detail because he thinks that these details would vary “in any metaphysical plane which conserves the meaning of the terms ‘being’ and ‘action’” (P, 51). The core account of his metaphysics of agency is thus intentionally thin: a being *A* is *an agent* if and only if *A* is partly constituted by *active forces F* such that (i) *F* must be cited in adequate explanations of *A*’s actions, and (ii) *F* ground counterfactuals regarding what *A* would do in different possible situations.¹⁶ Again, for Vaz Ferreira, the details of this general account would themselves have to be spelled out differently in different metaphysical

¹⁵ I have not encountered a text in which he says exactly this, however.

¹⁶ Condition (i) is articulated on many occasions by Vaz Ferreira, as we have seen. Condition (ii), however, is not explicitly articulated in any text with which I am familiar. Vaz Ferreira does imply this condition when he discusses the natural point of view of consciousness: “If I feel and affirm, for example, that I can in this moment either continue writing or put down the pen, this ‘I can’ implies an ‘P’” (P, 55), and Vaz Ferreira insists that “this sentiment is not an illusion” (P, 54). It is important to note that for Vaz Ferreira, condition (ii) does not imply that there is a multiplicity of possible futures compatible with the totality of antecedent causal conditions, for this is a question of determinism and not freedom (P, 67–68).

conceptual frameworks or at different levels of abstraction in metaphysical thinking.

This conception of the metaphysics of agency can clash with a particular metaphysical reading of determinism, however. It is possible to begin with the scientific thesis of determinism and develop a metaphysical reading of natural laws as *metaphysically robust*: laws as non-reductive constituents of reality,¹⁷ laws that must be cited in adequate explanations of events,¹⁸ and laws that ground counterfactuals.¹⁹ My goal in sketching this general way of thinking of natural laws as metaphysically robust is not to defend this view; it is rather merely to illustrate one possible way in which a metaphysically robust conception of natural laws might undermine central elements in Vaz Ferreira's account of the metaphysics of agency.

Arguably, this metaphysically robust understanding of natural laws can undermine Vaz Ferreira's account of the metaphysics of agency by doing away with his important distinction between being *active* and being *passive*. Arguably, metaphysically robust natural laws preclude the existence of active forces, as sketched in Vaz Ferreira's basic account metaphysics of agency, by usurping their explanatory role. If so, this metaphysical reading of determinism would entail that there are no agents in Vaz Ferreira's sense, and thus no freedom either. In this sense, then, determinism can indeed be incompatible with freedom.

Would Vaz Ferreira be bothered by this kind of argument? I think not. I think he would be happy to accept it as a legitimate philosophical contender, as an argument aiming to solve substantive philosophical questions. However, even if successful, this line of reasoning would not establish that there is a *conceptual* interdependence between the natural problems of freedom and determinism. It is the metaphysically robust conception of natural laws that undermines freedom by undermining the metaphysics of agency. A similarly metaphysically robust conception of *merely probabilistic* natural laws would also undermine freedom by similarly undermining the metaphysics of agency. It is not determinism *as such* that creates a problem for freedom; determinism remains a scientific theory conceptually compatible with multiple metaphysical accounts of agency, freedom, and the metaphysics of natural laws. The natural problems of freedom and determinism remain conceptually distinct.

¹⁷ Some of the main proponents for thinking of natural laws in non-reductive ways are Carroll (1994) and (2008), Lange (2000) and (2009), and Maudlin (2007). This group of philosophers is opposed by proponents of antirealist conceptions of natural laws: van Fraassen (1989), Giere (1999), Ward (2002), and Mumford (2004).

¹⁸ This feature is advocated by one of the classic conceptions of explanation—namely, the deductive-nomological model of explanation advocated by Hempel and Oppenheim (1948).

¹⁹ This feature is advocated by Chisholm (1946, 1955) and Goodman (1947).

2.3 Morality and Pragmatic Justification

One of the interesting elements in Vaz Ferreira's thought is that he provides a pragmatic justification for his *natural* division between the problems of freedom and determinism. The problem of freedom is *naturally* the problem of ontologically independent agency partly because that problem captures what humans care about when they care about freedom. Humans care about freedom because they care about morality, and morality requires freedom. As we have seen, Vaz Ferreira's conception of freedom is thin and applies widely; for Vaz Ferreira not all free beings are morally responsible for their actions. Instead, moral responsibility pertains only to free *conscious* beings, for humans care about morality as it appears to human consciousness (P, 49f, 60; C, 25f).

Vaz Ferreira addresses a potential objector who may insist that the "truly important" questions are the ones that can be addressed by science, and that one's account of freedom and morality should be based on our best scientific theories (P, 49f). Vaz Ferreira claims that this is a mistake. On the contrary, scientific theorizing abstracts away from what is truly important to humans (P, 55f). This is revealed in the natural point of view of human consciousness:

The natural point of view of consciousness is that of considering its acts, not in relation to the totality of the forces of the universe, but in relation to external forces, in relation to that which is not itself, for it is her that is doing the consideration.

Consciousness corresponds to a being. Its point of view is the point of view of beings, the individualizing point of view.

When the being executes an action whose production it contributes by its own force, consciousness senses it this way; it senses that the action is not caused by the external world; it senses, in sum, the freedom of its being: *its* freedom, and the indetermination of its actions in relation to the antecedents that are not itself. (P, 54, emphasis in original)

What makes the point of view of beings the natural problem of freedom is precisely that this is how the problem of freedom *naturally* appears to human consciousness. The problem of freedom appears to a conscious being as *her* problem "for it is her that is doing the consideration" (P, 54). Thus, the problem of freedom essentially requires the individuation of the conscious agent inquiring into her own freedom.

Vaz Ferreira's main move is to insist that what matters for the natural problem of freedom, as it appears to consciousness, is whether that which is *external* to a conscious being settles her actions. This is the true threat

to conscious freedom, Vaz Ferreira insists. Whether actions are settled by the totality of their antecedent causal conditions is not the natural worry of the conscious being when she raises the problem of her freedom; in fact, it takes “the effort of abstraction” (P, 55) to pose this determinism problem, for it goes beyond a faithful phenomenological description of the problem of freedom as it appears to consciousness. Vaz Ferreira’s justification for this main move is to appeal to the reader’s own experience. It is this introspective basis, and not theoretical postulation or description, that, Vaz Ferreira thinks, ultimately justifies his claims about how the natural question of freedom appears to consciousness.

It is this problem that humans care about, and it is this human concern that *pragmatically justifies* treating this problem as the natural problem of freedom. It is this formulation of the problem that engages “with vital problems” that could be of “any practical” or “moral” interest to humans (C, 25f; see also F, 40f; P, 60). Vaz Ferreira writes:

The individuating point of view is that of our common and *vital* relations with other men: *from being to being*. Love, hate, gratitude, counsel, vengeance, punishment: *from consciousness to consciousness*. (P, 55–56, emphasis in original; see also C, 26; F 40f)

These moral concerns are the main concerns that drive humans in their investigation into the nature of freedom, and these concerns are *naturally* addressed within the point of view of beings, not within the point of view of acts. This is Vaz Ferreira’s *pragmatic justification* for the *natural* difference between the problem of freedom and that of determinism.

Vaz Ferreira goes further. Sometimes he provides a pragmatic justification for treating one’s experience of freedom as *veridical*. At the heart of the experience of freedom is the experience of agency: “I sense, when I produce an act, that it is I who produces it (or contributes to its production). I sense myself free,” (P, 55) and such experience is not illusory: “this sentiment is not an illusion, nor is there in it a minimal part of illusion” (P, 54; see also P, 59; F, 40f; C, 26f). Vaz Ferreira often leaves undefended his claims of the veracity of the experience of freedom. Sometimes, however, he supplies a pragmatic justification for treating our experiences of freedom as veridical: we are pragmatically justified in treating our experiences of freedom as veridical precisely because doing so enables us to address our vital concerns or problems of practical importance (P, 60; F, 51; C, 26).

Vaz Ferreira also goes beyond pragmatic justification and advances an intriguing metaphysical argument for the veracity of our experience of freedom. He argues that if the nature of consciousness it to be a mere epiphenomenon, then there is no conscious freedom, for freedom requires agency (P, 59ff; 93f; 100f). A conscious being is free only if its consciousness

(or spirit²⁰) is active or has internal forces that causally contribute to settling its actions (P, 59ff; 93f).

After contrasting this passive, and merely epiphenomenal, conception of consciousness with an active conception, Vaz Ferreira asks which of these conceptions is “*the natural and proper*” from “*the point of view of consciousness?*” (P, 54; emphasis in original). He answers:

To provide an answer, which is clear and emerges by itself, it suffices to keep in mind what we do, artificially and from outside, when we consider the acts of a being in relation to what is not this being, this consciousness does, but naturally and from within. Consciousness, in a given moment, corresponds to a being, *it senses itself being that being*,²¹ it identifies with it; consequently, by the mere act of being, by the mere act of giving herself,²² of being conscious, she *subtracts something* from the totality of the forces or the causes; and that subtracted something are the forces or causes that she senses herself as being. (P, 54; emphasis in original)

In this dense passage, Vaz Ferreira gestures toward an intriguing metaphysical argument for thinking that conscious experience of freedom is veridical. Here is my interpretation of this argument. Conscious experience of freedom is self-authenticating and even self-creating. To be conscious is to be conscious of oneself as active or as a being with agency. Importantly, this consciousness of oneself as active involves the *identification* with some active forces, or causes, *as oneself*. This act of identification with active forces helps to *individuate* the conscious being and thereby makes her identical with the active forces with which she identifies herself.²³ Thus, conscious experience of one’s freedom is self-authenticating and veridical. Two pages earlier, Vaz Ferreira makes a similar point: “And, overstepping the scientific point of view, a speculation in the following direction seems very legitimate: being, by the act of being, is free; it is not made free, he is the one who gives itself [its freedom]” (P, 52).

²⁰ Vaz Ferreira uses these terms interchangeably. He writes, for example, “After having asked whether man is free with respect to the external world, we ask ourselves if, within men, consciousness, spirit or however one wants to call it, is free with respect to the body” (P, 56; see also P, 54; 72; 74; 77; 91; 94).

²¹ This is a tricky passage to translate. Vaz Ferreira writes “*se siente ese ser*,” which I translate as “it senses itself being that being;” a more literal translation would be “it senses itself that being.” What Vaz Ferreira means, I take it, is that act of being conscious is the act of being conscious of being a particular being.

²² Vaz Ferreira writes “*por el solo hecho de darse*,” which literally translates as “by the very act of giving herself,” but this sounds incomplete. What is it that consciousness is giving herself?

²³ There are several remarkable similarities between these views and those of Frankfurt (2004).

Perhaps an example can make Vaz Ferreira's suggestion more intelligible. Suppose that after a long day of tedious work at the office, I come home and see my adorable six-month-old baby smiling at my sudden appearance. I feel a strong sense of tenderness and love toward this enchanting being and proceed to hug her. I cherish the experience; these moments bring meaning to my life. Contrast this example with the following. Suppose that after a long and unfulfilling day of work, I walk to the parking lot only to find my car with a serious dent; someone has hit it and has failed to leave a note taking responsibility for the damage. I feel a strong sense of anger and suddenly find myself uttering an obscenity. After the anger subsides, I feel ashamed of the entire episode. There is a fundamental phenomenological difference in these two examples. In the former case, I experience myself as the agent partly by identifying with the motives that brought about the action; I see myself as a loving parent and the tenderness and love I experience are *mine*; they are constitutive of my identity. In the latter case, I experience myself as overwhelmed by forces that usurp my agency and thus feel alienated from both the action and the motives that brought about the action.

Vaz Ferreira's story takes these experiences seriously.²⁴ As he sees it, "motives" are "states of consciousness" (P, 100) or "subjective states" (P, 70), which include things like "ideas and sentiments" (P, 74), "perceptions," "reasonings," and "affective states" (P, 70). These motives "are part of a man; they *are* the man" (P, 70), and they are "internal causes" that help explain the actions of the conscious being they constitute (P, 100). As Vaz Ferreira sees it, I *know* it is *me* who is hugging my baby partly by identifying with the sense of tenderness and love that helps bring about the hug; more fundamentally it is *I* who is hugging the baby partly *because* I identify with the sense of tenderness and love that helps bring about the hug. My experience of freedom is self-authenticating because it involves the act of identifying with internal motives that help settle my actions, and this act of identifying itself helps to metaphysically individuate my conscious self.

2.4 Dissolving Some Conceptual Confusions

Before concluding, it would be useful to briefly consider a couple of the purported confusions that Vaz Ferreira's conceptual distinctions are meant to dissolve. After all, Vaz Ferreira thinks that the history of philosophical discussions on the nature of freedom and determinism is plagued with conceptual confusions, and one of his major goals in *Problemas* is precisely dissolving some of these confusions. A central conceptual confusion addressed by Vaz Ferreira is treating questions of freedom and determinism as though they are questions pertaining to a single problem with only two

²⁴ At least it takes the experiences in the former case seriously. I have not yet encountered a text in which Vaz Ferreira explicitly addresses experiences of the latter case.

answers: either determinism holds and freedom is thereby ruled out, or freedom holds and determinism is thereby ruled out. This conflating of what Vaz Ferreira sees as two conceptually distinct problems give rise to what he calls “spurious problems of freedom” (P, 70ff).

As Vaz Ferreira sees it, one important spurious problem of freedom is a purported problem regarding the way in which motives determine actions (P, 70f). One example of this confusion comes from G. L. Fonsegrive’s *Essai sur de libre arbitre*:

Fatalists, determinists, are, then, in agreement over some conclusions, regardless of other ways in which their doctrine differs; in effect, why do I care that the necessity that enchains me comes from inside or outside, that I be bound by an external fatalism or by an internal determinism? Am I by this any less bound? (P, 82)²⁵

Vaz Ferreira thinks that Fonsegrive’s thought is infected by the mentioned spurious problem of freedom. Vaz Ferreira diagnoses Fonsegrive’s confusions this way:

It is clear that it makes no sense to speak of a being, of an ‘I,’ enchained by an internal determinism; what does make sense, is to say, that the acts of that ‘I’ (some of them) obey (at least partly) an internal determinism to the being who produces them, and not purely to that which is exterior to it. In that case, the being, the ‘I,’ is free and the act is determined. I am not enchained, bound, forced, or any such thing; the author has been taken to employ these expressions because of its state of mental confusion. (P, 82)

As Vaz Ferreira sees it, then, part of the rhetoric employed by thinkers like Fonsegrive to formulate their philosophical positions on freedom relies upon conceptually confused sentences. When Fonsegrive insists that freedom requires that motives fail to determine the action of an agent lest the agent be ‘enchained’ or ‘bound’ by these motives, he is abusing language. To speak of an agent being *enchained* or *bound* to act, in the context of addressing the problem of freedom, only makes sense in reference to forces *external* to the agent whose freedom is in question. If those external forces completely determine the acts of the agent, then those external forces enchain or bound her, and she is not free in that case. By contrast, if forces *internal* to the agent help determine her actions, then she enjoys some amount of ontological independent agency and is thus *free*, not enchained or bound.

²⁵ Note: this is my English translation of Vaz Ferreira’s Spanish translation of Fonsegrive’s original French.

Fonsegrive may also have in mind considerations pertaining to the question of the freedom of the will. In this case, it *does make sense* to speak of motives enchaining or bounding the will: if the acts of the will are fully determined by motives that are *external* to the will, then the will is indeed *enchained* by these external motives and is thus unfree. Vaz Ferreira's main point, however, is that Fonsegrive's thought is operating in a confused fashion. Fonsegrive is conflating considerations relevant for the natural question of the freedom of the person with considerations relevant for the natural question of the freedom of the will and is unduly deriving conclusions from one problem to the other. Dissolving these confusions is a condition for the prospects of advancement in philosophical discussions on the nature of freedom and its relation to causal determinism, Vaz Ferreira insists.

3 Conclusion

The main philosophical contribution of Carlos Vaz Ferreira's *Problemas* is that of distinguishing between the problem of freedom and the problem of determinism. He thought that much of the history of philosophical discussions on these topics were plagued with conceptual confusions and that the path forward had to begin with a clear conceptual distinction between these topics. In this article, I have presented in some detail my interpretation of the core of Vaz Ferreira's account of the nature of freedom and its relation to determinism.

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