

## I

The other day I was listening, while driving to work, to a YouTube video where Noam Chomsky was elaborating on what 'making a decision' is. At a certain point professor Chomsky mentioned Benjamin Libet's famous experiment from the early 1980s which showed that very tiny fractions of time (some 500 milliseconds) before a human agent makes a conscious decision (presses a button for whatever reason, for instance), relevant electrophysiological activity can be traced in his/her brain, namely that cerebral activity precedes a fully endogenous voluntary act. And then, as he continued to elaborate on the subject, prof. Chomsky asked: *was that cerebral activity **the** 'act of deciding?'*, leaving the question open.

That question struck me and made me think. I wondered how such a question could be posed in the first place? The inquiry into whether X is Y depends on certain prerequisites, doesn't it? Prof. Chomsky asked whether a specific electrophysiological process could amount to a decision, and I wondered how he could at all consider the former as a candidate for the latter.

Given that a 'decision' is unobservable as such and cannot be measured against a definitive prototype, a reasonable approach to making sense of what it is would start from the way we employ this notion in practice – in our common discourse and daily behavior. Indeed, not how we *perceive* or *conceive of* it (if only because we never ever do so), but how it is inextricably woven into our functional existence as beings within a world. The claim that the core reality thereof (in case it is reduceable to electrophysiology) is fundamentally divorced from its phenomenological manifestation constitutes an exceptionally radical proposition. Let us explore it a little more.

## II

Here are a few examples of how the concept of a decision is typically employed:

- a) A person may *decide* to prepare herself or others dinner.
- b) A person may *decide* to buy a car.
- c) A person may *decide* to pursue a certain career (to become a physician/dancer).
- d) A person may *decide* to marry or get divorced.
- e) A person may *decide* to lie, seek vengeance, murder another person, look the other way, provide help or make a sacrifice.

What is the 'decision' in each of these cases? Is it the same throughout?

A fascinating property shared by all these cases is that the conceptual integrity of the statement remains intact even when the verb 'decide' is omitted (regardless of its tense or modality). All intentional human actions are predicated on the concept of decision, regardless of explicit articulation. To deny this necessary link would result in a breakdown of language itself, making the actions linguistically untenable and, therefore, nullifying them all together.

So what is that element which is there even when seemingly absent?

### III

In everyday usage, a 'decision' represents the sovereign exercise of agency – the sovereignty-implying link – that bridges the gap between the individual and the action performed. 'Decision' is the concept which indicates that we deal with an agent and not an automaton or a Golem.<sup>1</sup> But what is the source of that linkage in our practical, everyday existence, irrespective of any further pursuit after its "true" nature in a supposedly scientific manner?

Let's have a look at the practice itself; simply check out what's happening there:

- a) **She *decided* to make dinner.** She might have *felt* hungry pursuant to a physiological process. But the specific scenario which followed – setting to prepare dinner – was one of several available options upon the strike of hunger (unlike the same situation being applicable to a creature in the wild, she could go on cleansing her email box, doing this or that or simply thinking or worrying), and it was pursued – that specific scenario – by the sole entity to whom those variants were relevant – her subjective self.

It follows that we take a person to be able to *decide* to prepare herself dinner – the very possibility to say such a thing of anybody and/or treat them as such – as part of a complex situation where several options are available, whereby our protagonist – what we call the *Agent* in us – prefers and chooses (consciously, half-consciously or sub-consciously, it doesn't matter) one of them over the others in a way that cannot be accounted for except as *preference*. What we call 'a leap of will'; by way of will-directed-action.

**This is the clear, explicit and straightforward way we apply that notion across the board in the first place, with no practical or theoretical exceptions whatsoever.<sup>2</sup>**

The same way we never see a decision *made* or the *making of it* by someone, we also don't – ever – see a person *deciding to make herself or us dinner*.<sup>3</sup> There is

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<sup>1</sup> We may ask: at what precise juncture along our cognitive or other development do we internalize that concept? We hear the word/phrase ("I/he/we decided") and (assuming we understand it) *already* know that that link is there. *We* know it's *there* upon hearing (interacting; in which shared sphere – 'we' and 'there' interact?). *We* want to know of something *he/she* (the decision maker; the speaker) had never doubted. *We* want to know what's *there*, although there was no doubt *there* (our interlocuter and/or any conceivable realm about him/her) at any point (nor in our real-time apprehension). Maybe the right (and important) question is: what are we really wondering/asking about?

<sup>2</sup> If in real life I doubt whether a person has *decided* or not, my predicament refers to whether his/her act consisted in what I initially take to be a decision or not (namely in something completely different or in nothing) rather than to whether the decision he made consisted in or amounted to something different than what *I* understand as 'decision'. Similarly, if I am not sure about his/her decision, the gap in my comprehension refers to what he/she actually did (which is bridgeable through additional information thereabout) rather than to whether he/she taking themselves to decide complied with some criterion for what a decision is.

<sup>3</sup> We can even ask whether there is at all something like 'to decide to make oneself, or others, dinner' as distinct from the "real-life" '*children, dinner will be ready in 10 minutes*' decision to that effect. The decision, as distinct from any empirical data/qualia, is never witnessed but is embodied in our very lingual behavior. The very fact that it is a decision and not something else is embodied therein, in the initial application of the term. There is a kind of transparency (I know what I'm doing when I say that I *decided* such and such) in that situation which is absent from the equally real-time interaction of a curious mind with the empirical world outside, be it the physical, chemical or biological [and even psychological] one. We apply the word 'decision' in a way that is prerequisite to us being what – the way – we are. When our ancestors looked at the night sky with awe and wonder, they were confronting and interacting. They could easily switch, pursuant to the initial confrontation, into a mode of observation which was followed by reflection and so forth. The attempt to acquire a similar – external – perspective on 'decision' is like

no experiment we can construe to witness that happening. When someone says: *'I decided to make dinner'* or, for that matter, *'buy a car'* or *'apply for medical school'*, it's always a part of a complex situation in the first place. No one would ever say the word 'decide' in case there was only one possible course of action in the first place, since in such a situation there wouldn't be anything to *decide* upon and no "need" to say so would emerge or no grounds would exist for such a concept initially to evolve.

A decision is free in the sense that the agent is accountable for the fact that his/her choice has been made in such a complex scenario, namely in pursuit of a certain specific path out of several available ones (each assuming further layers of complexity). The decision is the very element which injected sense, clarity, and a thread of direction into that complexity. And it all comes back to the special link contemplated above: it (the link) makes sense to us in the first place in so much as it introduces non-chaotic indeterminacy into our being: a measure of authentic, non-reducible control over a certain sphere of one's immediate being.

- b) **He *decided* to lie, seek vengeance, commit murder, look the other way, provide help or make a sacrifice** – he/she might have *entertained* all these possible ways to act; he/she might have been willing to lie, desperate for vengeance, tempted to murder, apt or overwhelmed to look the other way, aspiring to help or fancy to sacrifice, but once he/she 'decided' to pursue any of them, he/she "murdered" the sets of complexity in which all the other options were immersed. He/she had shed light upon a certain thread which hadn't existed

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attempting to observe the foundational principles of a system while simultaneously operating within that system (to question the very rules which make questioning possible), or to ask, during a basketball game, why a shot made from beyond the three-point line was registered as three rather than two points on the board. When one throws the ball from beyond the three-point line during the game, one [eo ipso] attempts a three pointer and there is no "perspective" from which that fact is blurred in any possible way (as distinct from a situation where one watches the game for the first time). The same "happens" (or applies to a situation) where one *decides*. If he or she decides, they *decided* not because they followed the "map" of the matter properly, but because they followed the rules of the game of their very being. And while it is possible to step outside a basketball game and analyze its rules, if only for the fact that we had set them up in the first place, it is impossible to do so for *speaking*, namely making sense of anything at all: we cannot step outside that which is the condition to meaning as such. One may argue that in our interaction with the world at large (with the empirical reality around us) we also follow the rules of a game in which we are no more than participants, so how come we are nevertheless capable of exploring it? The answer is that in that latter case we – the human creature and the human mind alike – are a part of a larger scene/picture/environment, which we at least partly perceive, in/with which we interact and the rules and secrets of which are in a very substantial sense (at least partly) accessible to us and which we therefore try to explore and harness/mobilize. We need no expertise in the physiological process of breathing in order to breathe and the fact that *we* breathe does not prevent us from wishing to investigate and understand the process: it is "there" for (at a conceptual and phenomenal "distance" from) our inquisitive dispositions to engage with. In the case of our mental orbits/states it is the rules of the very evolvment of our own 'existential game' – not as organisms, races, citizens, moral agents or members of any kind of homo sapiens' related group or even individuals, but as the very "plate" of meaning – the inhabitants of a realm where something means something: the "mechanics" of meaning-[generation] from the other side of the mirror – the creatures that can wonder and ask a question in the first place. The rules that make it possible to 'wonder' are the same rules that make it possible to decide, doubt and pass a judgement. Perhaps it's not really 'rules' as we apply this concept to the physical world or the social sphere, although it's definitely a game and even a strictly orderly interaction. We learn to follow them by no process which is familiar to us (from within or from without) and which resembles the one by which a child "learns" that hot is hot, namely that hot objects are not embrace-friendly (no process of 'teaching' or demonstrating what 'hot' is whatsoever can ever imitate or penetrate/reflect the apprehension of the child as to what hot is via the raw physio-mental apprehension that hot objects are not embrace-friendly. To be precise: not that hot objects should not be touched but *what 'hot' is*. And the same way there can never be doubt of whether hot is hot (but only whether its only warm or very hot), there cannot be doubt of whether to decide is to decide (as distinct from wondering whether it is to *decide*, still *hesitate* or *react instinctively*). The transparency is, as it were, absolute.

before. Here too, it was pursued by the sole entity to whom each of those sets was relevant – his/her subjective self.

If she decided to prepare dinner, we expect food on the table in a little while. If he decided to murder, some other person should certainly beware and in case he attempts to realize his decision, he will be held accountable in certain specific ways precisely because of the decision that preceded his action.<sup>4</sup> In other words, at the most basic level, we consider a person to have *decided*[something] where accountability of some kind is attributable to him/her. There is no *decision* where none exists.

#### IV

And here I come back to Prof. Chomsky's speculation: *Was that cerebral activity the 'act of deciding?'*

And I ask in return: how can cerebral activity as such qualify for something the core property of which is an agent's accountability?

Cerebral activity is nothing more than cerebral activity. As complex, labyrinthine and mysterious as it (or some sense of its "implications") may be, it is cerebral activity. Were it anything else, or *more*, we would need a word for it we do not yet possess, know, master.

Deciding is "grounded" in cerebral activity. We *are* bodies and organisms. But the latter do not exhaust that which we are – the whole of us. We are accountable on a different, further level. We therefore also *decide* there.

Accountability is not a product, effect or result of a strictly physical or physiological process in the way influenza is. It is a product of interaction. Of *our* interaction. An interaction altogether different from whatever electrochemical processes that pervade our brains.

Those 'our', 'us', 'you' or 'I' are... what? They are, first and foremost, lingual entities. Products of language.<sup>5</sup> How do products of language evolve in the first place? How do they form 'objects'? How do they form a 'world'? How do words connect to such seemingly remote/alien "stuff" as Q-bits?

These are the questions to be asked and pursued.

#### V

Indeed, one may argue that the scenario Prof. Chomsky possibly alluded to in his question is that each such preference or consideration or any other type of mental performance or deliberation is ultimately underpinned by a distinct, correlative

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<sup>4</sup> He will be tried and *punished* as opposed to hospitalized and *treated* in case that no 'decision' preceded such attempt.

<sup>5</sup> The dynamics of our mental sphere manifest themselves not in cerebral activity but in the way we speak/behave – *We*, not the organism in us. Since it isn't the *organism* that speaks, but *we*. There is no "scientific" perspective for differentiating between the two, if only because the supposed differentiator is one of them and it is bound to apply that which makes it what it is for the alleged mission. A person can teach a biology class, but not "speak" on a level that "sees" it and the human organism from without (if only since *speaking* makes the person what it is, which excludes the prerequisite leap).

"measure" of cerebral activity which determines its further "form" in our lingual, meaningful plane of existence, whereby the latter is just an illusory reflection (the sense of choice or sovereign decision) of something that is "determined" on a deeper – strictly electrochemical – level: that what we treat as essentially accountable is actually and ultimately grounded in something over which we – people, agents – have no control at all and which is alien to the familiar notions of human interaction.

Even if we overlook all the above, this idea it comes across insurmountable conceptual and practical difficulties, as fascinating and intellectually interesting as it may appear. To name only a few out of a truly eerie chasm of perplexity: 1) distilling the existential depth of everyday decision-making into the language of electrophysiology is a conceptual chimera. A lab experiment like 'raising one's hand' is a poor surrogate for the lived experience of agency. There is a profound disconnect between the primitive conditions of the Libet trial and the reality of human choice. The latter is rarely an isolated motor impulse; rather, it is an existential negotiation amidst the turbulent currents of conflicting motives and values that define the agent's world in essentially vague, contradictory and informal ways which exclude the possibility of a corresponding coherent electrophysiological synthesis. 2) 'Meaning' is not a mere correlate of any physical process, event or state of affairs, and the dynamics in a domain that yields semantic coherence are much more complex and divergent than the coordination between a single, primitive agentic gesture and the corresponding electrophysiology of the brain may suggest. Whatever such correspondence does represent or capture, it's not these dynamics.

Indeed, the world we articulate, perceive, and reflect upon – integral as we are to its fabric – is not a 'product', 'effect', or 'reflection' in any conventional sense of these terms. Our "entanglement" therewith and therein is far deeper than any laboratory can suggest. Laboratories, as already suggested above, fail to contain the authentic lifeline of human language, whereby their otherwise formidable contribution to human knowledge and understanding is irrelevant to the questions it evokes.