

The Phenomenology of Initiative: Following Nabert

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ABSTRACT This article starts with the hypothesis that the measure of first-person experience of initiative is not, as it has been customary to believe, the present moment. Jean Nabert's philosophy (and especially his early work titled *L'expérience intérieure de la liberté*) provides tools that make it clear that the sense of initiating action that one has in the present moment carries the stigma of illusoriness. If I experience initiative in the present moment, it means that I have taken part in an activity initiated before. Therefore, even though the very moment of initiating action remains unavailable to me, the measure of initiative experience should be sought not in the present but in the past. To this end, one needs to consider the genesis of motives propelling my action. In line with Nabert's conception, these motives—manifesting themselves as some kind of representations—are grounded in actions that I have not completed. However, the fact that the initiative I demonstrate is conditioned by these unfinished actions does not imply that my actions so far make up, by definition, a harmonious arrangement. Nevertheless, all these actions coalesce in one history, embracing my “desire to be” that constitutes my existence.

KEYWORDS action; illusion; initiative; motive; Nabert, Jean; representation; sense of free will

INTRODUCTION

The main reason making it worth reflecting on the question of initiative is its elementary existential role. If we accept that the domain of existing being (i.e. being that is able to refer to its own existence) is not only experiencing but also acting, we have to concede that to exist means, in particular, to demonstrate initiative. Action occurs only where initiative has been taken. The trouble is, however, that if we attempt to capture the phenomenon of initiative, it becomes immediately clear that our means of appealing to first-person experience are rather limited. This is because, as indicated by Ricoeur, “we cannot be at the same time observer and agent” (Ricoeur 2007, 216). Granted, I can perceive myself as an agent, but this perception occurs, in some way, *post factum*, or with a delay. The living now of individual moments in which my acting is realized keeps eluding me all the time. This is where a certain aporia becomes relevant: on the one hand I, as agent, have a feeling that initiative is mine, but on the other I sense that I cannot keep up with myself as the initiator. To be sure, we could try to overcome this aporia by considering as initiative not only what plays out in “the first moment” of the action taken by me, but also what happens at every consecutive moment of its duration; even in this case, though, we may fail to perceive any of those successive moments other than *post factum*. The Derridean observation demonstrating the impossibility of capturing the “living present” (Derrida 2011, 73) retains its validity.

So, how to tackle the aporia just indicated? Perhaps it would be more auspicious to refer to the writings of Jean Nabert—especially his early work, entitled *L’expérience intérieure de la liberté*.¹ Why should we look for support in this thinker and no other? Crucially, in line with Nabert’s conception, which is in keeping with the “French reflexive philosophy” originated by Maine de Biran, it is by no means a foregone conclusion that the basic measure of our experience of freedom is constituted by the present moment. Furthermore, Nabert is far from assuming that we only have the possibility of casting light on this experience when our measure of it is determined by the present. On the contrary, he allows for the possibility that the present renders this measure in a warped, if not to some extent misleading, manner. Nabert proves helpful in this respect: by calling into question the claim that the present is the measure of the experience

1. This work was first published in 1924. The 1994 edition referenced in this article, however, besides the title treatise “*L’expérience intérieure de la liberté*” (Nabert 1994, 1–230), contains some other important texts, such as the articles “*La philosophie réflexive*” (Nabert 1994, 397–411) and “*Le Divin et Dieu*” (Nabert 1994, 413–26).

of freedom, he makes the said aporia seem less significant. To challenge this claim, after all—as we are entitled to suppose—implies (by definition, as it were) a questioning of the thesis ascribing to the present the role of a measure of the experience of initiative, which in turn makes it hard to try to overcome the aporia mentioned above. Should we, perhaps, instead of seeking to confront this aporia, abandon it as exposing too rashly, and without any prior critical reflection, the present moment? This uncertainty may itself offer us some guidance as regards our further considerations. In the first place, we should consider how much sense there is in trying to find, in the present moment, some kind of illusion pertaining to that initiative which I myself demonstrate.

THE ILLUSION CONCERNING THE PRESENT

What arguments, precisely, might show that I am indeed falling prey to the illusion mentioned above, and what is the latter, exactly? First and foremost, a proviso should be made that in order to prove that I am under an illusion, it is not enough simply to pay attention to the apparently most basic aspect of the shift in respect of temporalization, in which every “now” inevitably becomes a “former now.” The transience of the “now,” and the inevitability of its receding into the past, do not mean, necessarily, that the present as such wanes and only the past remains, but merely that the substance “filling” the present moment changes, being constantly “actualized.” However, the fact that I am dealing with constantly actualized data does not itself entail that my referring to them renders me subject to an illusion. The ephemerality and illusoriness of data are not the same thing. To qualify the experience of the transience of the present moment as being trapped in an illusion would make sense if, contrary to what I am in fact experiencing, I maintained that this moment was invariably filled with the same content. If, though, I acknowledge the inevitability of the constant actualization of the present, there will be no grounds for my experience of the present to be treated as illusory.

So how might we link the experience of the present moment with illusoriness, if we are not to seek it in the transience of the content filling this moment? Two answers spring to mind here. The first is that I assign to the present moment initiative when in fact it is not there. I am mistaken because—for some reason—I see it where it is not. The other is that while I correctly discern that the locus of initiative is in the present moment, I fail to perceive the connection between this present initiative and the “retentional” initiative (in the sense used by Husserl in his *Phenomenology of Internal Time-Consciousness*) situated in the just-lapsed moments. I am

mistaken because for some reason I fail to notice the continuity of initiative, or more specifically, its “distention” (this can be linked to *distentio*, which should be traced back, perhaps, to Saint Augustine’s famous *Confessions IX*), and therefore treat the initiative manifested in the present moment as fully autonomous and distinct from that manifested in such lapsed moments; I yield to the illusion of “atomism.” The common aspect of the two aforementioned variants of an illusion pertaining to the correlation between initiative and the present is that they attribute too much importance to the present. Whilst the first variant implies a total misapprehension (in that the present is held to actually be of no consequence whatsoever), the other is only partially wrong (as the present is taken to indeed play a certain role here, only not an exhaustive one).

Since, in both variants, the illusion I embrace about the temporal location of the initiative consists in my overrating the role of the present moment, we are, by the same token, presumably entitled to seek this initiative elsewhere, in the non-present—and in the past rather than the future. Our efforts go in this direction because we are presuming that at least one of the variants of the illusion about the “initiative–present” relationship pointed out consists in our underestimating the role of the very recent past. To fail to see that the initiative undertaken constitutes a continuum spanning not only the present moment but also a sequence of just-elapsed moments is to disregard the impact of the past as it relates to initiative. Also, it is worth noting that in the case of the above-indicated variant of illusion, involving the feeling that initiative occurs in the present when in fact it is not to be found there, the role of the past is likely to be underestimated. If I feel that I have this initiative now, in the currently experienced moment, the question arises of where this feeling originates in the temporal sense. Would it not make sense to assume that its locus is precisely in the past?

When deciding, in the context of our inquiry, to direct our attention to the past, we need to remember, nonetheless, that this must not be done too hastily. Although there seem to be reasons for believing that in succumbing to an illusion about the locatedness of initiative in the present I am failing to realize the uniqueness of its positioning in the past, we are bound to dwell in the realm of mere conjecture. So far, we have not managed to identify a valid argument that would prove that the present moment is, in fact, not the measure of whatever initiative I have. We will try to overcome this difficulty by referring precisely to Nabert’s analyses regarding the experience of freedom—or, more precisely, the experience that he calls the “sense of free will” (*sentiment du libre arbitre*) (Nabert 1994, 7–45).

THE SENSE OF FREE WILL

In fact, Nabert indicates that the sense of free will—that is, of decision-making—bears the stigma of illusion about what is happening now. Granted, he does not equate the experience of decision-making with that of initiating action; yet his analyses show that the two are closely intertwined.² Naturally, this element of Nabert's explorations captures our attention. If there is an intimate connection between the two experiences, and if, at the same time, one of them (the sense of decision-making) is marked by the stigma of illusion, won't this stigma affect the other experience, too? Let us take a look at this interconnection in light of Nabert's inquiry. The French thinker, in the first instance, notes that the moment when I feel that I am making a decision is simultaneously not the moment in which I have the feeling that I am acting at my full capacity, really intensively. In so doing, he is asserting considerably more than the common-sense formula invoked at the beginning of our reflections, according to which "we cannot be at the same time observer and agent." For while the one who strives to observe his own action locates himself (in temporal terms) within this action, as it were, the one who does have a sense of decision-making locates himself, rather, not within the action but at the beginning of it. The sense of decision-making seems to coincide with the sense of an action's initiation. While feeling that I am making a decision just now, I also have the sense that I am initiating some kind of action. But what is really going on in this present moment? Are we indeed dealing with the moment of *initium*? Nabert doubts that this is so. His argumentation rests on the premise that when I have a sense of decision-making, I am by no means suspended in a motivational void. On the contrary, I am oriented in my inclinations to just this resolution, having in mind a certain motive or set of motives. It is, after all, impossible to make decisions without being motivated in one way or another.³

As regards the pool of motives that make me prefer one resolution to others, it is not—as Nabert observes—created only at the point at which

2. It is of note that Nabert does not devote any separate analyses to the experience of initiative in either *L'expérience intérieure de la liberté* or any other work—hence our choice of a "middle way" in our attempt to elucidate this experience. (We are referring here to the "sense of free will" highlighted in the present text.)

3. Here we are examining Nabert's argumentation in a problem-based order, not a historical-philosophical one. Therefore, we are not concerned with the convergence of his observations about the question of motivation with the findings achieved in this respect by Husserl (*Ideas II*), or by such representatives of the phenomenological movement as Merleau-Ponty (*Phenomenology of Perception*) and Ricoeur (*Freedom and Nature: The Voluntary and the Involuntary*).

I see myself deciding. Individual motives that I am struggling with at the current moment have, in fact, been outlined before now—I do not so much create them as find them there. They affect me through my imagination, whose peculiar trait is that it is uncontrollable. Yet, as Nabert notes, this working of the imagination greatly amplifies my feeling that I am making a decision. Perhaps I at no time feel so free as when relishing the options my imagination lays out for me. Nonetheless, I have no control over my own imagination, and where it is concerned, the rules of the game are unclear to me. While it would be hard to furnish a valid argument to the effect that this game is rooted in the past, the opposite claim, that the game is fully autonomous in relation to my past experiences, seems even less convincing.

The supposition that my sense of decision-making in the present moment bears no stigma of illusoriness becomes even more doubtful if we consider the question of habit. Is it legitimate to deny that habit—already pointed to by Aristotle as “like nature” (*On Memory*, 452^a4), and then highlighted in French philosophy by Ravaisson (Ravaisson 1838, 32)—has a significant influence on what I do in a given moment? Likewise, is it justified to deny that what I do in a particular moment is affected by my character, which manifests itself in an instance of internal compulsion (or even “interiorized fatality”; see Nabert 1994, 154) and determines the style of acting that is representative of me? According to Nabert, this question calls for a negative answer. When I consider my options for future action, it seems to me at times that through the very act of consideration I gain a necessary distance from them, thus giving me full autonomy with respect to my decisions; however, when I start to look at my actions so far more closely, I cannot avoid thinking that they are characterized by a rather uniform style. It appears that—no matter how strongly I feel that I am not determined in any way—my style of action in this particular moment has been, in a way, imposed on me, determined by the way I have acted so far. The sense of autonomy with respect to decision-making that I possess just now seems oblivious to any data indicating that there is a strong correlation between what I am doing precisely now and what I have done in the past.

Although it is hard to see how one might refute the above-mentioned arguments showing that when I have a sense of decision-making, I am in one way or another conditioned by my habits and character, we should not, presumably, take them to be decisive. There is nothing that would block the counterargument to the effect that the supposed illusoriness of decision-making does not concern what is most constitutive for this sense. If we agree that the latter consists in the conviction that I decide “what” I do, the conviction about “how I do it” (i.e. “by what means” and also “in

what manner”) recedes, in a way naturally, into the background. Even if the stigma of illusoriness has a bearing on the sense of “how I do something” (because this turns out to be determined by character and habits), we must—as long as it does not influence the sense of “what I do”—dismiss the objection that the sense that one is making decisions (taken as a whole) remains in the realm of illusion. What is the use of me doing something “violently” or “calmly” in a particular moment, being driven by my character or habits, if what ultimately counts above all is “what” I do rather than “how” I do it?

“THE CURTAIN IS RAISED”

If, then, it is not “how” but “what I do” that comes to the fore with respect to the presumed illusoriness of the sense of decision-making, we should probably go back to the question about the status and nature of motives—that is, factors that we tend to consider essential in the decision-making process. Crucially, in the moment when I am making a decision, I am, as emphasized by Nabert, propelled by motives that make me lean toward this rather than any other resolution. How do these motives present themselves? As some kind of “thoughts,” or better, “representations,” they almost completely absorb my attention, and seem to outline the direction of my future actions. These representations are, in Nabert’s opinion, like a comment made about a play just before the curtain goes up (Nabert 1994, 45). Even though the comment seems compelling, the moment the play begins we watch the actors perform, and no longer focus on the comment—we somehow forget it. And if we happen to return to the comment when the play is over, we will have doubts (at least to some extent) as to whether or not it is relevant to what happened on stage. On the other hand, when recalling it, we may conclude that only the verbal part was irrelevant, while what was left unsaid but barely hinted at has relevance for the play just performed. Either way, it is somewhat doubtful that if we had been able to come up with a more or less clear comment on the play as soon as it had ended, we would have the right to claim that we had mentally retrieved a comment already in fact there before the play had started. As Nabert claims, it is even more doubtful whether, in this situation, we would be entitled to believe that as that comment seems clear after the play has ended, it must have appeared so before the play began. The different context of this comment (i.e. before the play begins versus after it ends) is so important here that it would be naïve to assume that it does not have a bearing on our reception of the comment. As regards the sense of presumed clarity of the comment, there is no guarantee whatsoever that we had this clarity before the play

started. It is, however, perfectly possible that the supposed clarity of the comment we supposedly experienced constitutes, in essence, a mere construct: a result of processing carried out after the play ended, projected in retrospect onto a moment when the curtain was not yet up.

Nevertheless, if the metaphor invoked above, showing the motives affecting me at the moment when I have a sense of being involved in making a decision—in connection with a comment made on the play just before the curtain rises—leads me to doubt that they are transparent to me, shouldn't we question the choice of this kind of metaphor? If, perhaps, we agree that the sense of the clarity of the comment on the play made just before the curtain went up is most likely deceptive, can we defend the claim that the sense of transparency in regard to our motives is not so? In keeping with Nabert's conception, we see that it is hardly possible to effectively defend this position. Indeed, it turns out that after having discarded this metaphor when examining the possibility of capturing the motives I am subjected to in the supposed moment of my decision-making, it is no easier (if not harder) to prove that they are transparent to me. For while the stage-commentary invoked as part of the above metaphor appears to me as a relatively closed system, and by the same token susceptible to thematization (in some measure at least), the pool of motivations as such, considered independently of the metaphor, appears to me rather as a non-closed and multipolar system, not easily prone to thematization. Granted, we cannot exclude the possibility that, in a given moment (when I have the feeling of making a decision), I will be able to recognize all the motives affecting me, put them in a line and, as it were, catalogue them; however, this would be only a borderline case, one that is purely theoretical, and most likely not corresponding to my actual experience. Nabert adopts a rather detached perspective on the view that while having a sense of decision-making, people not only place all of the motives affecting them in one category, but also reflect on them. Such reflection might consist in putting together all of the motives, weighing up all the reasons for or against each of them, comparing those reasons, and determining which motive turns out to have the best justification. Such a view, referred to by Nabert as "Socratic determinism" (see Nabert 1994, 82–92), is not compelling chiefly because it actually marginalizes what makes me an inimitable person. It assumes that it is of little importance that the intellectual processing of motives—that is, a kind of calculation—is effected by myself, and that they count as motives for nobody else but me. In this case, just such a calculation takes prominence, and it seems to have, by definition, not so much a personal but rather an impersonal character. Indeed, the view raises even

more doubts when we consider the consequences it entails with respect to the sphere of action as such. Since we are seeking the genesis of action in “impersonal” calculation, we may well encounter only a causal chain with Spinozian overtones (Naulin 2010, 28).

WHERE IS THE MEASURE OF THE EXPERIENCE OF INITIATIVE SITUATED?

The above-mentioned critique of the sort of view that presupposes the clarity of the motives acting on me just as I have a sense of decision-making no doubt merits our special attention, because it is a valuable argument in favour of a hypothesis that is key to our reflections on why the sense of decision-making has a stigma of illusion. A different interpretation of this sense is hardly possible, given that we know that in the moment when I have it, I am unable to penetrate the motives acting on me. It must be stipulated, however, that by qualifying this sense in this way, we may have made considerable progress in our study of the experience of initiative; nevertheless, our research has not reached its final stage yet. Importantly, we should consider the question of whether, while agreeing that the sense of decision-making bears the signs of illusoriness, we are bound to concede that the sense of initiative is illusory as well. A conclusion like this seems only partially justified. We need to remember, after all, that in keeping with this observation the sense of being involved in decision-making is characterized by illusoriness only to the extent that it is located in the present moment. This, though, is not to say that “I never decide about anything,” which is tantamount to saying that “freedom as such is fiction” (see Naulin 1980, 33). In other words, the observation merely tells us that the present is not a measure of the sense of decision-making. It also implies, indirectly, that the present does not constitute a measure of the sense of initiative; nonetheless, this fact must not be overstated. That the present is unreliable in this regard has different implications for the sense of decision-making and the sense of initiative. Where is the difference? Well, whereas in the former case this unreliability means that it does not take place in the present, in the latter instance this unreliability amounts to the fact that the initiation of action itself does not happen in the present. Yet the fact that the initiation of action does not occur in the present by no means implies that there is absolutely no action in the present, or, by the same token, that there is no initiative, which is an inseparable component of action. So long as the action undertaken by me takes place, the initiative I am taking is happening. Acting is a continuum of initiative. To this we should add that we probably need not fear a possible objection challenging the obviousness of the fact that the action I am pursuing is happening for real. The latter

would claim that I have no guarantee whatsoever that my sense of my acting just now is not deceptive. In response to this claim, it should suffice to note that the objection loses its validity once we stipulate that what we are interested in here is a sense of being involved in decision-making *qua* something more than merely a kind of “mental state” or “emotional state.” What matters here is our sense of action, interpreted as the experience of some kind of dynamic situation that occurs in the world as an event perceptible to both me and others. Now, precisely because the sense of action is an event in the world (and unlike in the case of that of decision-making discussed above, which can hardly be considered an “intersubjective” world-event), trying to discern in it a stigma of illusoriness does not make sense.

So given an embrace of the thesis that my having a sense of action makes my acting real, and that insofar as I act I show initiative, how can we describe the very experience of initiative in more detail? We already know that this experience must be interpreted extensively, as embracing not only the present but also the past; moreover, we know that the present is not the measure of this experience. For this reason—as we suggested at the outset—such a measure must be sought in the experience of the past. But if we pursue this direction, should we not primarily try to look for the experience of the initiation of action: that is, the moment that could be termed the “initiative-initiating moment,” or that of “meta-initiative”? In line with Nabert’s conception, it is not necessary to seek this moment. There are at least two reasons why such a search should be abandoned. First, there is no chance of identifying the exact moment. My experience is that I have had the initiative for some time, but I am unable to state exactly since when. Second, identifying this first moment among all moments making up the continuum of action and distinguishing it as the most important one is too arbitrary. There is no sufficient basis for claiming that this initial moment is in some way conclusive for a given action. The commonplace argument that “the action now being realized must have been initiated at some point” does not suffice, because it can be countered with an equally banal argument asserting that “the action now being realized must not only have been initiated at some point, but also continued until now.” If this action had been suddenly interrupted or stopped at some point, it would not be happening now—it would have the status, at best, of an “unfinished action” or “semblance of action.” In this particular sense, all successive moments within the action’s occurrence *per se* are as important as its initial moment.⁴

4. In his article “La philosophie reflexive,” first published in 1957, Nabert invokes the concept of eternity when stressing that activities one has undertaken in the past can, in a way,

TOWARDS THE PAST

Having agreed that we are under no obligation to seek a single and seemingly most representative moment in our experience of initiative, we are again faced with the question of how to describe it more perspicuously. The answer that comes to mind here is that we—having recourse to our memory, and perhaps to the memory of others affected by our initiative—should simply recreate this experience as fully as possible. Nabert does not dismiss this solution. Instead, he identifies an interesting pointer, thanks to which that solution may turn out to be more effective. In order to follow the latter, we need to revert to the issue of motives manifested as representations, in whose origin we are interested. As already mentioned, such representations are furnished by my imagination just when I have a sense of involvement in decision-making. According to Nabert, though, I am not dealing with such representations only when I have the sense of decision-making. I also encounter them when the action undertaken by me is all of a sudden interrupted, or stopped, under certain circumstances. Of course, it may happen that the moment when my action is stopped transpires just as I am experiencing the sense of being engaged in decision-making, but this is a rarity. At any rate, in a situation where my action is stopped abruptly, my imagination reacts immediately and reveals to me—in the form of spontaneously generated representations—a feasible continuation of my action. These representations can manifest themselves not only now, when my action is being stopped, but also later—in a moment when I have the sense of decision-making. So, the nature of those representations is that while having roots in the past and echoing my unfinished actions, they are at the same time capable of masking their connection with the past. It should be noted, though, that when I have a sense of being involved in decision-making they reveal themselves as *data* that are fully autonomous in relation to the past. This is where (as we said earlier) the “deceptiveness” of those representations resides.

So why, exactly, does it help me to analyse my experience of initiative if I discover that the representations my imagination furnishes me with at the moment when my action is stopped (which is sometimes also the moment when I feel I am making a decision) somehow echo that action? As Nabert’s conception suggests, this discovery can be of use mainly because it allows me to consider each of my initiatives in a broader context: one that

be “renewed” in the present. On this view, the present—a moment when the past becomes renewed—gains, as it were, an inter-temporal (supra-temporal) status, making it possible to seek in it an eternal dimension (see Nabert 1994, 400).

includes the relationship occurring between the action being realized right now and actions already completed. If the motives that make me pursue a specific course of action, or at least some of those motives, are in fact traces or signs (Ricoeur 1989, 215) of various past activities, should these motives not be analysed in this vein, given our wish to clarify the action happening right now? Nabert by no means suggests that by undertaking this kind of inquiry one can cause these motives to become clearer; however, he points out that insofar as I manage to find in them traces of previously undertaken actions, I will discover another, even more important meaning of the action I am undertaking, and thus my initiative. The point is that what I do has a strictly existential meaning. As I discover this meaning, I am increasingly aware that although I find it hard to answer definitively how it happened that I came to undertake a given action and be so deeply involved in it, the initiative I have at this moment is a component of my "desire to be" (*desir d'être*),⁵ which holds my existence together (Nabert 1943, 138, 49; 1969, 118, 28). Examining the experience of the initiative occurring now, and that of initiatives undertaken earlier, ultimately leads me to ask about my existence taken as a whole.

CONCLUSION

How can we address the question of existence seen as a whole when starting from the phenomenon that is the experience of initiative? Much as we would like to continue following Nabert while trying to answer this question, we should be wary of all suggestions to the effect that the inalienable characteristics of existence as such are coherence and organisation. The fact that representations acting as motives underlying my actions carry the trace of various unfinished activities does not imply that all of these actions, when taken together, constitute some kind of harmonious whole. In keeping with Nabert's theory, quite the opposite holds true, since the individual projects that I have not completed are, for various reasons, so very different from one another that juxtaposing them may be suggestive of chaos rather than order. Furthermore, it is by no means a foregone conclusion which of my unfinished actions will reveal themselves in "trace" form if I take further action. It may even transpire that it is difficult to discern any thematic continuity between successive actions.

5. It should be noted that even though the problem of the unity of my existence is already visible in *L'expérience intérieure de la liberté*, the "desire to be" category (probably Nabert's most representative formula expressing this unity) is accentuated for the first time in *Éléments pour une éthique*, published in 1943. See Nabert 1943, 107, 113, 116–117, 138, 149, and Nabert 1969, 87, 93, 96–97, 118, 128, as well as English translations of his works.

Nevertheless, as Nabert underscores, all my activities—despite their diversity—make up, in one way or another, a uniform history of my life so far (Nabert 1994, 184; 1943, 74–5; 1969, 54). By reflecting on this history, I accommodate my actions anew, as it were; I discern my existential effort in them, achieving an existential focus of sorts. And it is absolutely possible that the latter will help me revive my initiative once again (Levert 1983, 55; Udaga 2014, 65).

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