

## **Against Compatibilism: Compulsion, Free Agency and Moral Responsibility**

Free agency is incompatible with compulsion. Free agency is also necessary for moral responsibility. Acting under compulsion, therefore, entails the absence of free agency and moral responsibility. One cannot be legitimately judged morally blameworthy (or praiseworthy) for any act that is compelled by conditions that lie beyond one's ultimate control. Compatibilists will agree that free agency is necessary for legitimate ascriptions of moral responsibility, but will also argue that we often act freely and can be held morally responsible for our behavior because we often act in the absence of constraint or compulsion. Even in the face of causal determinism (i.e. the hypothesis that all events are subject to causal determination by antecedent conditions and laws of nature), compatibilists claim that we can and do, nonetheless, act freely.

In this paper, I will argue that free agency and moral responsibility are incompatible with causal determinism precisely because causal determinism entails that all human choices and actions are ultimately compelled by originating conditions beyond the agent's control. If causal determinism is true, then a complex chain (or web) of causal antecedents and laws of nature nomologically necessitate all deliberation, choice and action. If conditions beyond the agent's control ultimately determine the choices that the agent makes and the behaviors that result from them, then it follows that ascriptions of *moral* responsibility are unjustifiable (though praise and/or blame may serve pragmatic functions – e.g. conditioning future behavior). The compatibilist position is, I claim, inconsistent. Behaviors that compatibilists identify as *free* are ultimately subject to compulsion and should, by the compatibilist's own account, be identified as *unfree*.

## Causal Determinism

Both compatibilists and hard determinists (i.e. determinists who deny the compatibility of causal determinism and free agency) will assent to something like the following account of the nature of causal determinism:

**D:** Any event, E, is causally determined, just in case, given the actual antecedent conditions and laws of nature, it is not nomologically possible for E not to have occurred.

In other words, if all events that have actually occurred prior to, and/or concomitantly with E, taken jointly with the relevant laws of nature, constitute a nomologically sufficient condition for producing E, then E is causally determined.

For example, given that I pick up a book, hold it above my desk, and then release my grip on it, then, given that the book is not otherwise supported and is subject to the earth's gravitational field, the book must fall to the desk. For the book not to fall, the antecedent conditions must be different than those described, or the laws of nature must be altered. The antecedent conditions for the book falling are many. They include: the formation of the planet earth, the evolution of human beings, my birth, my picking up the book, etc. The relevant laws of nature include: the law of gravity, those laws of neurophysiology governing my bodily behaviors in their relation to brain states and environmental stimuli, etc.

If the determinist's thesis is true, then all events in the universe are subsumable under the description D (i.e. all events are causally determined). Compatibilists claim that causal determinism does not preclude the possibility of morally significant free agency. One can be causally determined to perform some act and, nonetheless, perform

that act freely. But how, according to compatibilists, can such an act be legitimately called “free”?

### **Free Agency**

Both compatibilists and hard determinists will assent to something like the following as a necessary condition for free agency:

**F:** If a person, P, acts freely, then, on the occasion in question, P must not be subject to compulsion - and her act must be causally determined by the exertion of her will.

Surely, a "free act" requires at least this: the act in question must be attributable to the agent's will and not compelled by conditions beyond the agent's control, such as neurological disorders, muscle spasms, external force, etc. If this condition is not met, then a free act does not occur. Both publicly observable behaviors and also “internal” acts of will (e.g. choices, deliberations, etc.) must be attributable to the will of some agent if that agent is to be legitimately described as acting freely on the occasion in question. An agent that is compelled to choose, deliberate, or behave in a certain fashion does not do so freely.

### **The Compatibilist Position**

Compatibilists claim that the hard determinist (as well as the libertarian incompatibilist) tacitly assumes a faulty account of free agency that does not accord with the common usage of the relevant terms (e.g. "We are *free* to travel whereas prisoners are not.") We can make sense of the distinction between actions that are compelled or constrained by forces beyond the agent's control and those that are not, so, the

compatibilist insists, it follows that *free acts* are commonly understood to be voluntary acts or acts in the absence of constraint or compulsion. We all recognize and understand the distinction between voluntary and non-voluntary behavior, hence we should all recognize and embrace the phenomenon of free agency (causal determinism notwithstanding).

So, W.T. Stace argues that an act is free so long as it is causally determined by internal psychological states (e.g. beliefs and desires) of the agent performing the act and not by conditions external to the agent. In other words, voluntary acts are free. Involuntary behaviors, on the other hand, are not free because they do not proceed from the agent's will but result instead from external compulsion or constraint. Stace suggests that we compare sets of hypothetical conversations and ask ourselves if there is not a clear distinction between the causal determinants of the behavior in each type of case described, and a concomitantly clear distinction between descriptions of free acts and descriptions of acts that are not free (according to common usage of "free" and related terms). The following is the first of the comparisons he offers, and it is, I believe, the most felicitous illustration of the bunch:

Jones: I once went without food for a week.

Smith: Did you do that of your own free will?

Jones: No. I did it because I was lost in a desert and could find no food.

To be contrasted with:

Gandhi: I once fasted for a week.

Smith: Did you do that of your own free will?

Gandhi: Yes. I did it because I wanted to compel the British Government to give India its independence.

After presenting a number of similar illustrations, Stace provides an analysis that he believes to be in accord with common usage of expressions such as “of his own free will”.

We have now collected a number of cases of actions which, in the ordinary usage of the English language, would be called cases in which people have acted of their own free will. We should also say in all these cases that they *chose* to act as they did. We should also say that they could have acted otherwise, if they had chosen. For instance, Mahatma Gandhi was not compelled to fast; he chose to do so. He could have eaten if he had wanted to. [1952: pp. 250-1]

So long as Gandhi’s choice to fast is determined by his desire to force the British out of India and his belief that fasting may produce the desired result, his act is free (though causally determined) and is an expression of his internal psychological states. There is nothing more required for free agency. Jones, on the other hand, is compelled to fast by an external condition, namely, the absence of food in his immediate environment. Hence, Jones does not decide to fast (he is *compelled* to do so), and his doing so is not a free act. No further analysis of the causal antecedents in each case is required to understand the distinction between free and unfree acts. Anyone not embroiled in a philosophical debate over free will would say that Gandhi’s act is free and Jones’ act is not. Stace claims that the issue is thus resolved.

Similarly, A.J. Ayer (1954) argues that the absence of internal compulsion (e.g. neurosis such as kleptomania) or external compulsion (e.g. a gun to one’s head) entails freedom of the will that can be translated into free agency. In other words, the absence of internal or external compulsion is all that is necessary for freedom of the will and morally significant free agency. But can this condition ever actually be satisfied in a deterministic world?

For the sake of argument, I am willing to grant Stace and Ayer the claim that the absence of constraint or compulsion is sufficient for free agency. However, I will argue that it is impossible ever to be free of constraint or compulsion in a deterministic world, at least insofar as one's will is concerned. Given that the agent's will is causally determined by antecedent conditions and laws of nature, the agent is ultimately compelled to will, to choose, to deliberate, etc. as the antecedent conditions and laws of nature have determined. But antecedent conditions and laws of nature are, ultimately, originating conditions external to the agent – though the agent may be “submerged in,” and part of, the causal stream that determines all deliberation, choice and behavior.

### **Compulsion and Moral Responsibility**

If any event, E, is causally determined, then it cannot have not occurred - given the prevailing laws of nature and the actual causal antecedents of the event in question. Suppose the event in question is an “internal” act of will (e.g. a choice resulting from causally determined deliberation). In what sense is the agent not compelled to perform this act of will (i.e. make the choice in question), if the act is causally determined by the prevailing laws of nature, the agent's environment, the complex causal relationships between the agent's brain states, psycho-physical history, heredity, current environmental stimuli, and the natural laws that govern such complex relations? In Stace's scenario, the external world compels Gandhi to choose as he does, just as the absence of food in the desert compels Jones to fast. Causal determination of externally observable behavior *by* an act of will, does not preclude prior causal determination *of the act of will* by conditions that originate in the external world. Gandhi's beliefs and desires are determined by his

heredity and environment – his initial cognitive endowment and all modifications thereof resulting from environmental impingements. These compel him to deliberate and choose accordingly. If Gandhi's choice is compelled, then it seems that the resulting behavior is compelled as well. The mere fact that one's body behaves in accordance with one's will does not imply that one's will is free.

The question is this: Can one, given the actual antecedent conditions and laws of nature, choose otherwise than one actually does? As C. A. Campbell (a libertarian incompatibilist) puts it:

We do not consider the acts of a robot to be morally responsible acts; nor do we consider the acts of a man to be so save insofar as they are distinguishable from those of a robot by reflecting an inner life of choice. Similarly, from the other side, if we are satisfied that a person has definitely elected to follow a course which he believes to be wrong, but has been prevented by external circumstances from translating his inner choice into an overt act, we still regard him as morally blameworthy. Moral freedom, then, pertains to *inner* acts. [1957: p. 160]

The implications for moral responsibility are fairly straightforward. To hold any agent morally responsible for his "inner acts", they must not be the result of compulsion.

Moral claims are ultimately normative. If any agent is morally obligated to choose in a certain way, that agent must have the capacity to so choose. One cannot be obligated to do that which is ultimately beyond one's power. If it is not within one's power to choose otherwise than as is determined by the relevant antecedent conditions and laws of nature, then one cannot be obligated to choose otherwise. Claiming that one *should* choose differently than one actually does is tantamount to claiming that one *should* have had a different history than one actually does. Campbell, again, nicely articulates the point:

The proposition which we must be able to affirm if moral praise or blame of X is to be justified is the categorical proposition that X could have acted otherwise because—not if—he could have chosen otherwise; or, it is essentially the inner

side of the act that matters, the proposition simply that X could have chosen otherwise. [1957: p. 164]

If determinism is correct, the claim that I could have behaved otherwise if I had chosen otherwise, is vacuously true because I never *could* have chosen otherwise given the actual causal antecedents of my choice. The claim that I *should* have chosen that which I *cannot* have chosen (not to mention the moral blame attending that claim) is indefensible. It is no different than suggesting that I *should* have been born with blue eyes and blaming me for my brown eyes.

### **Compatibilist Reply**

Ayer complains that this type of incompatibilist argument conflates the concepts of causation and compulsion:

That all causes equally necessitate is indeed a tautology, if the word 'necessitate' is taken merely as equivalent to 'cause': but if, as the objection requires, it is taken as equivalent to 'constrain' or 'compel', then I do not think that this proposition is true. For all that is needed for one event to be the cause of another is that, in the given circumstances, the event which is said to be the effect would not have occurred if it had not been for the occurrence of the event which is said to be the cause, or vice versa, according as causes are interpreted as necessary, or sufficient, conditions: and this fact is usually deducible from some causal law which states that whenever an event of the one kind occurs then, given suitable conditions, an event of the other kind will occur in a certain temporal or spatio-temporal relationship to it. In short, there is an invariable concomitance between the two classes of events; but there is no compulsion, in any but a metaphorical sense. [1954: pp. 281-2]

But it is not metaphorical compulsion that results from the conjunction of one's brain states and the laws that govern the translation of such states into acts (including "inner acts" such as deliberation and choice). In such matters, the distinction between "necessitate" and "compel" is a distinction without a difference. If causal determinism is true, then one is quite literally compelled to act as is nomologically necessitated by one's

overall neurophysiological state, and one is quite literally constrained by the relevant laws of biology, chemistry, physics, etc. Furthermore, the fact that the agent's brain states and other physiological states are "internal" to her is irrelevant to ascriptions of freedom and moral responsibility. A kleptomaniac or a person with a gun to her head behaves as her brain states determine that she must, but Ayer lists these as agents who do *not* behave freely (because they are compelled by forces beyond their control). The statistical abnormality of the causal determinants of psychological states in these cases is irrelevant. Compulsion via quotidian psychological processes is no less necessitating than compulsion via psychosis or threat. Sanity does not liberate the agent from the laws of nature, but merely consigns her case to the "usual" mechanisms of necessitation – and compulsion.

Again, Ayer claims that the incompatibilist position assumes an unsatisfiable account of free agency that is not in accord with common usage, and that misses the real intention behind common ascriptions of freedom and moral responsibility:

...to say that I could have acted otherwise is to say, first, that I should have acted otherwise if I had so chosen; secondly, that my action was voluntary in the sense in which the actions, say, of the kleptomaniac are not; and thirdly, that nobody compelled me to choose as I did: and these three conditions may very well be fulfilled. When they are fulfilled, I may be said to have acted freely. [1954: p. 282]

What Ayer ignores is the fact that in a deterministic world, the third condition (which clearly should state that *nothing*, rather than "*nobody* compelled me...") cannot be satisfied. He also ignores the aforementioned vacuity of the first condition (one *cannot* have chosen otherwise). Perhaps not *someone*, but *something*, namely, the antecedent conditions and laws of nature (taken jointly), always compel one's choice in a deterministic world. The laws of nature and the antecedent conditions determine every

one of the agent's internal psychological states, and these in turn determine each of the agent's behaviors. Ultimately, therefore, all causal power is rooted in conditions that originate externally to the agent. If forces beyond our control compel us to believe, desire, and choose as we do, then our beliefs, desires and choices are not free. Hence, if our internal states are causally determined, then there is no meaningful sense in which we can be ascribed ultimate responsibility for the behaviors that result from them. The fact that causal mechanisms proceed, in part, through the medium of our beliefs and desires, in no way diminishes our compulsion or endows us with freedom.

### **Conclusion**

Even if we assume the compatibilist account of free agency, we must conclude that free will is an illusion in a deterministic world. If determinism is true, human behaviors, including *acts of will*, are compelled by antecedent conditions and laws of nature, and none of them could have been avoided – unless the world had turned out differently. But the world is, of course, as it is and not as it might have been. Similarly, the agent's causal history and environment are fixed antecedents and concomitants of each of the agent's internal states. These conditions compel the agent's choices. Compelled choices compel behaviors. If determinism is true, we are not free and we cannot be legitimately held morally responsible for our actions.

## References

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