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Manipulation and Moral Responsibility

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Consider a case of manipulation:^[1]

Beth is a talented student with a well-rounded life. Her professor wants her to focus all her energies on school, at the expense of Beth's hobbies and relationships. After failing to convince Beth to spend all of her time studying, the professor orders some neuroscientists to secretly "brainwash" Beth to make her care more about school and less about other things.

Unaware of what has happened, Beth is surprised by her newfound desire to skip a camping trip that she'd planned and to study instead, but she assesses the reasons for and against her two options and decides to skip the trip and to study instead. As a result, she offends her friends who were expecting her to go camping.

Clearly, Beth has been wronged.^[2] But is Beth *morally responsible* for choosing to skip the camping and to study instead? Would it be appropriate for her friends to *blame* her for ditching them?

While not everyone agrees, many judge that, since she was manipulated, Beth is not responsible.^[3] Some philosophers argue that this result has important implications for *compatibilist* theories of responsibility.

1. Compatibilism

Compatibilists maintain that we can be responsible for our behavior—i.e., appropriately praised or blamed, rewarded and punished—even if our behavior is ultimately the unavoidable result of the past and the laws of nature, i.e., even if *determinism* is true.^[4]

There are different types of compatibilist theories.^[5] Some hold that if a person *wants* to perform a certain action *and* also *wants to want* to perform that action, then she may be responsible for that action; people *without* this "mesh" between desires would not be responsible. A person who does what she wants to want to do *endorses* or affirms the desire that leads to her action, unlike, say, compulsive people (e.g., kleptomaniacs) who act (e.g., steal) despite not wanting to act and so are not responsible. Moreover, a person can meet these conditions even if determined.

Compatibilism seems like a natural, default position.^[6] But it is not without challenges.^[7]

2. Manipulation Challenges

2.1. An Initial Worry

Perhaps the biggest challenge for compatibilism stems from cases of manipulation. An initial concern is that many compatibilist conditions for responsibility could be met by manipulated persons—persons who, many think, are not responsible. Consider Beth. After her manipulation, she not only wants to study, but she also *endorses* this desire (she *wants to want* to study). Since Beth meets these conditions but appears not to be responsible, this case seems to undermine this simple endorsement view.

Some compatibilists respond by proposing that for a person to be responsible, she must at the very least *not have a history in which she was manipulated*: this is adding historical conditions to their theories of responsibility. Others "bite the bullet" and accept that Beth is responsible despite being manipulated.^[8]

2.2. The Manipulation Argument

But some have appealed to manipulation cases not with the aim of undermining *particular compatibilist conditions* on responsibility but rather to undermine *compatibilism itself*—the thesis that responsibility and determinism are compatible.

The worry is that manipulated persons (like Beth) seem not relevantly different from ordinary determined persons: just as Beth's action is the product of factors over which she had no control (namely, the intervention of the manipulators), so too the actions of persons in deterministic worlds are the product of factors over which they had no control (namely, what the world was like before they were born and what the laws of nature are).

This concern can be regimented into the *Manipulation Argument* against compatibilism:^[9]

1. Beth is not morally responsible for choosing to study.
2. There is no responsibility-relevant difference between Beth's choosing to study and any action performed by an ordinary determined person.
3. Therefore, no ordinary determined person is ever morally responsible (and thus compatibilism is false).

2.2.1. The Soft-Line Reply

In response, some compatibilists reject premise two and propose some relevant difference between ordinary determined persons and manipulated persons. This is called the "soft-line reply" to the argument.^[10]

One notable difference between Beth and ordinary determined persons is that Beth has been "tinkered with" by the manipulators: her character traits were altered without her consent. Perhaps this explains why we think she's not responsible for deciding to skip the camping trip.

One worry for this response is that the manipulation scenario can be altered such that the "manipulation" occurs before the person develops any character traits.^[11] Suppose that Diana, a goddess in a deterministic world, creates a zygote, Z, knowing that Z will develop into an ordinary person, Ernie, who will perform some action that Diana wants him to perform thirty years later. In this case, there is no mid-life "tinkering," yet many judge that Ernie is not responsible for acting as he's been created to act. (Is he?) And if we modify the Manipulation Argument sketched above to refer to Ernie instead of Beth, it's harder to see how to maintain a soft-line reply.^[12]

2.2.2. The Hard-Line Reply

Others compatibilists take a "hard-line reply" to the Manipulation Argument, accepting the second premise and rejecting the first.^[13] This might seem counterintuitive, but if we start off thinking that ordinary determined people are responsible, and if we accept the second premise (the "no-relevant-difference" premise), then we should infer that the manipulated person is responsible as well. Moreover, perhaps even ordinary persons undergo radical transformations (e.g., religious conversions, changes upon becoming a parent) that might not seem relevantly different from manipulation.^[14]

Some see this response as "biting the bullet," raising the theoretical "cost" of endorsing compatibilism.^[15] If so, then the Manipulation Argument would not in itself undermine compatibilism, but it may make a difference in an all-things-considered comparison of positions in debates about responsibility.^[16]

3. Conclusion

Manipulation challenges compatibilist accounts of responsibility and perhaps compatibilism itself. To respond, compatibilists must either explain why manipulated people are different from ordinary determined people, or concede that, perhaps surprisingly, manipulated people are responsible for what they do.

Notes

[1] The following story is based on the one found in Mele (1995: 145-146). It is an extreme case of manipulation, one that involves covertly changing someone's character in a way that bypasses their agency or choice on the matter. We can distinguish this case from more common types of manipulation that rely on deception and "playing on" another person's emotions, to which a person may rightly respond, "You manipulated me!" (Kantian ethics describes this as using someone as a "mere means." See Introduction to Deontology: Kantian Ethics by Andrew Chapman.) We can also distinguish manipulation from *coercion*, which involves getting a person to do something by means of a threat (e.g., give me your wallet, or else!). There is another related phenomenon, which has come to be called "nudging," in which people are subtly influenced toward some course of action, and perhaps this is a type of manipulation, though not the kind at issue here.

[2] Some may disagree, but the way Beth is treated appears to undermine her autonomy, or to use her as a mere means, which many find morally problematic.

[3] In fact, many take cases like Beth's to show that responsibility is an essentially historical concept (i.e., whether an agent is responsible is not just a matter of whether she has certain time-slice properties), though some (e.g., Frankfurt) disagree and maintain that Beth is responsible given her condition at the time of action. More on this to come.

[4] For more on determinism, compatibilism, and related concepts and views, see *Free Will and Moral Responsibility* by Chelsea Haramia, *Alternate*

Possibilities and Moral Responsibility by Rebecca Renninger, and Free Will and Free Choice by Jonah Nagashima.

It is *possible* (in principle) to be a compatibilist about determinism and free will (or the freedom to do other than what someone actually does) and but *not* about determinism and responsibility, but most compatibilists about free will are also compatibilists about moral responsibility. In fact, many people think “free will” is the name for whatever sort of control is necessary for moral responsibility, and so freedom and responsibility are either both compatible with determinism or both incompatible with determinism.

[5] What follows is a simplified statement of Frankfurt’s (1971) hierarchical account (hierarchical because responsibility is a matter of having a certain hierarchical psychic structure). Many compatibilist accounts build on Frankfurt’s, but another popular type of account includes “reasons-responsiveness” conditions, which requires that the person be sensitive to reasons for doing otherwise at the time of action (e.g., Fischer and Ravizza 1998; Sartorio 2016). There’s disagreement about what it means to be sensitive to reasons, but one popular thought is that an agent is sensitive to reasons when she is able to recognize reasons for doing otherwise and also able (in some sense) to translate those reasons into action.

[6] There are positive arguments *for* compatibilism, too. For instance, some think that whether an agent is responsible depends on whether (it is appropriate for) other agents *hold* her responsible and that determinism is not relevant to such practices. This is a very rough statement of the compatibilist strategy made popular by Strawson (1962).

[7] There are, of course, other views than compatibilism. *Incompatibilists* deny the compatibility of responsibility and determinism, and some incompatibilists think that we *are* responsible for at least some of what we do (i.e., libertarians about freedom and responsibility [which is distinct from political libertarianism]) and some *deny* that we are ever responsible (i.e., hard determinists, hard incompatibilists, or responsibility skeptics). The focus here, following the recent literature, is on challenges to compatibilism that stem from thinking about manipulation. It is widely thought that libertarians (again, not political libertarianism) are not vulnerable to worries about manipulation, since

their distinctively incompatibilist conditions for responsibility cannot be satisfied by manipulated persons. However, see King (2013) and Cyr (2016) for a parallel manipulation argument against (some) incompatibilist theories.

[8] These two types of responses mirror the “soft-line” and “hard-line” replies, respectively, to the Manipulation Argument discussed below.

[9] See Mickelson (2016) for an introductory discussion of the current debate about the Manipulation Argument.

[10] See Demetriou (2010) for development of this soft-line reply to the argument.

[11] The following case is based on the one found in Mele (2006: 188). I say “manipulation” because, in my view anyway, initial design cases like this one are not actually instances of manipulation, but we can set this point aside.

[12] Though see Waller (2014) for a response according to which the effective intentions of the designer (Diana) makes the original design scenario relevantly different from ordinary determinism. It is worth noting that many compatibilists, including McKenna (2008), Fischer (2011), and Sartorio (2016) do not think the intentions of another agent makes a relevant difference.

[13] See McKenna (2008) for the terms “soft-line” and “hard-line” and for the original defense of the hard-line approach, and see Fischer (2011) for an application of the approach to the Ernie case. Also, see Sartorio (2016, chapter 5) for a more recent defense of the hard-line approach.

[14] Arpaly puts it this way: “There are cases of profound conversions in a person’s values that are just as inexplicable to their possessors, just as uninvited, and just as irrational as Beth’s conversion” (2003: 127). She goes on to give several examples of ordinary persons experiencing such conversions.

[15] See Todd (2011).

[16] It is also worth noting that compatibilists may adopt a hybrid response, maintaining that some (but not all) manipulated persons are relevantly different from ordinary causally determined persons. See Sekatskaya (forthcoming) for a defense of a hybrid view. Another response is to say that the manipulated agent’s responsibility is significantly mitigated in traditional manipulation cases (like the

Beth case) but that cases of initial design (like the Ernie case) do not involve mitigation of responsibility. One way to defend this approach would be to argue that the sort of mid-life tinkering that takes place in the Beth case mitigates responsibility, but since there is no such tinkering in initial design cases, responsibility is not mitigated. This view would count as a thoroughly hard-line approach (since it does not claim that responsibility is undermined by manipulation even in the Beth case), but it nevertheless maintains that there is some important difference between traditional manipulation, on the one hand, and initial design, on the other.

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