Rescuing Responsibility – and Freedom. A Compatibilist Treatment

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Abstract: This paper confronts two questions: How is it possible to be free if causal determinism is true?; and relatedly, How then is the practice of holding persons responsible for their actions to be justified? On offer here is a compatibilist account of freedom, tying it to control; the relation – argued to be a necessary connection – is considered in some detail. Then the question of ability to 'do otherwise' is discussed, which has held a fascination for many in regard to free choice. Our ability to learn to choose rationally is key here, to becoming able to choose well and (hence) freely, freedom being understood realistically. A developed rationality is necessary for maximal free choice, and (as argued here) is also key to the justification of the practice of holding persons responsible for their actions – a practice which is both necessary (socially indispensable) and capable of being justified, on both moral and pragmatic grounds. There is nothing in determinism that threatens that justification, but rather enables it.

Key words: control, determinism, freedom, 'free will,'rationality, responsibility.

Causal determinism has sometimes been thought to threaten human freedom in choice, or our capability of bearing responsibility, or both; this paper offers a compatibilist solution and argues that there is really no such threat. In the literature, there have been many positions taken and arguments offered; I shall not deal with opposing views here.[1] Also, I make no use of the term 'free will,' which has become a term of art with no naturalistic basis, and has been used to designate notions which cannot be considered reasonable extensions of our ordinary concept of freedom. There is, I shall argue, no reason to believe that determinism renders us incapable of acting freely – which were it true would mean there is no proper example of such a thing as freedom in choice. Determinism, an aspect of causal theory, is not a thing capable of sabotaging our choices. It has to do with the regularities that occur in interactions of matter and so create the possibility for organization, which in turn supports our control system of voluntary motion – which is where our inquiry should focus.

In the first part of what follows, a characterization of human freedom is offered – for it is crucial to establish what is in dispute and what its nature. Then the question of whether one 'could have done otherwise' in making a choice is

[1] For a sample of recent views, see "Recent Work on Free Will and Moral Responsibility" by Neil Levy and Michael McKenna. In my book (Douglass 2015) I discussed some alternative views, such as appeared the most worthy of attention.

considered, which has sometimes been taken as diagnostic of freedom in choice. In the last part, the possibility of responsibility is considered. I claim that when freedom is properly understood, the problems disappear.

I. Background: Characterizing Freedom

In the controversy over freedom in choice, there is a latent scenario that is inherently misleading. If one sees causal determinism as bringing about a world of necessary processes proceeding inexorably onward to fixed results, there can seem to be no room for freedom there. But this view leaves out the agent. And without an agent, there should be no question of freedom: for freedom is not to be sought among the basic causal processes. Freedom appears and is a concern only on the level of agency – it involves the agent's abilities to choose and act. These abilities – whose degradation involves a loss of freedom – derive from control. The concept of freedom must be developed on the level of and in relation to agency, and to do that one must see the agent as a controller, exercising control and making choices. This is key to seeing agents as potentially free, even in a deterministic world. Whereas, the concept 'freedom' cannot apply to mere processes, as these have no goals – they simply occur. In nature, it is living creatures that inherently have goals.

In characterizing freedom I adopt a naturalistic stance, appealing to a science-based understanding. The sort of freedom that we are to be concerned with is everyday freedom, and such extensions of that as can reasonably be thought to arise from it. Our everyday, familiar freedom is always concerned with and connected to our abilities; and it is when some ability of ours is compromised that we feel our freedom is interfered with. Our abilities are species-specific: we are not free to fly as birds do, nor are birds free (and able) to write. Freedom to choose also depends on an ability, or abilities; indeed, our ability to act presumes an ability to choose.

Our key to characterizing our freedom is the concept of control – the voluntary motor control that we, and creatures like us, exert over our bodies in action. That is not an entirely new claim; but here this control is to be understood naturalistically. Though some earlier writers[2] have also emphasized the tie to control, often these have not been concerned to adhere to naturalistic constraints. Here engineering control theory and biology provide the background for understanding the appropriate concept of control – a crucial consideration.

Freedom is tied to control – for neither is practicable or really intelligible without the other, at least implicitly as a background condition. It is controllers that can initiate and guide actions and create behaviors – whether in humans,

[2] For example, Daniel Dennett in *Elbow Room* (1984), J. M. Fischer, *The Metaphysics of Free Will* (1994), and Robert Kane, *The Significance of Free Will* (1998). Of these, my treatment is most similar to Dennett's. Some arguments here are also prefigured in Hobart (1934).

other creatures, or in robots. Such a controller can drive its 'plant' (a name commonly used in engineering for that which is being controlled – in humans and other creatures, our bodies) dynamically from one state or position to another, or through a series of positions according to a 'plan' (thereby generating an action). It is controllers, then, that can be free to operate – and only controllers can be free, since only they have goals and exercise control to reach them (i.e., they act), and so can be interfered with in the pursuit of those goals. I have characterized the relation between freedom and control as one of complementarity, since each complements the other and since these two – freedom and control – must be understood together. One might say that the two imply each other, since controllers must be free in order to operate, and freedom must apply to, and only to controllers.[3]

In biological controllers as in man-made controllers (whose goals come from us), the obtaining of superior results is really the implicit, ultimate goal: for obviously some outcomes (which better serve the conditions of life) are better for creatures than are others, and the obtaining of superior (or at least acceptable) results is of the essence. (There would be no point to control were all outcomes or states equally valuable or indifferent to creatures.) One can say that obtaining superior or at least acceptable results is the supreme and implicit, ever-present goal of creatures in choosing and acting, that for which their control systems have evolved.

Hopefully, it is clear that choice belongs to control: to choose, to select an option from various possibilities and initiate an action based on that is a control function, as much as perseverance in a state or continuance through an action to its completion. Choice is the required first step to acting to attain a superior outcome or situation. Indeed, the ability to select from a set of feasible options and attain what was selected – an output or state – is roughly what is meant by 'controllability.'[4] Choice is required to initiate an action to shift from one situation to another as needed, in order to effect a change for one's benefit. Thus there is an inherent directionality to be discovered in all serious matters involving choice: a shift of situations in a favorable direction is what is wanted, and that begins with choice.

This characterization leads straightaway to an understanding of the oft-noted distinction between negative freedom and positive freedom. The negative

[3] The general argument given here involving the tie between freedom and control derives from my book (Douglass 2015), where it is developed in greater depth. The basic argument there regarding complementarity occurs in Chapter 5.

[4] A more precise, formal definition of controllability is as follows: "a system is completely state controllable if it is possible to cause the state vector to move from any initial value to any other value, in a finite time." (Dutton, Thompson, and Barraclough1997, 311) (The definition of output controllability is analogous.) Note that it is possible that a system is only partially controllable, which means that only some elements of the state or output vector can be so manipulated.

aspect is generally characterized as an absence of coercion or impediment, in action or in choice, to an agent – or, we can also say, to a controller. The positive aspect of freedom then corresponds to the controller's 'power' to do and to choose. This 'power' or ability – really a synonym for control here – can be disrupted by a number of sorts of conditions, many or most having become well-known through human experience. Through these losses we have come to recognize the types of freedom that we enjoy (the negative aspect again). We are free in relation to the operation of abilities that we possess; and these are species-specific and have a range of normal functioning. And our freedom is always a matter of degree; unlimited freedom is a fantasy.

Types of freedom are typically recognized through their absences, as made out against a background of normal functioning; and this is how various sorts or aspects of freedom are differentiated.[5] Thus coercion and intimidation, perhaps the most widely recognized sorts of loss of freedom, are understood everywhere. Also, there are various sorts of internal failures, such as those due to injury or disease, which can compromise our abilities and hence our freedom.[6] Regarding specifically the ability to choose, it is clear that whatever interferes with this limits our freedom in choice, whether of external or internal origin. And in all these cases, degree of freedom appears as an indicator of the well-functioning of control.

The sort of control that we exhibit in relation to choice is 'targeting control' – which means the recognition, evaluation and selection of potential targets. We choose options as objectives or goals – as 'targets' for our actions, which are about obtaining or achieving them. First one must recognize (categorize) something as a potential target.[7] Then evaluation of the potential targets is of critical importance, since some will be more difficult than others (perhaps not being worth the risk or time required); and some may be too dangerous altogether. Since the same system would also be used defensively, things may be targeted for avoidance sometimes (threat recognition and also evaluation). The actual decision is then based on evaluational criteria, whether

[5] The noted ethologist Konrad Lorenz said: "Far from being an insurmountable obstacle to the analysis of an organic system, a pathological disorder is often the key to understanding it. We know of many cases in the history of physiology where a scientist became aware of an important organic system only after a pathological disturbance had caused its disease." (1973, 5)

[6] The collection of the 'failure modes' for a type of controller – all the sorts of failures it is susceptible to – would be collectively specific to and so taxonomic for that type of controller, as its abilities would be. And being taxonomic for the sorts of control available, hence it is so also for the types of freedom that we are capable of.

[7] This, I suspect, is why our consciousness has the 'aboutness' of intentionality: it is the target-seeking mechanism continuously operating, focusing on objects of interest and also on inner objects or goals to be realized, and around this supporting functions serve to identify objects, recall what has been learned about them, generate evaluations, expectations and insights, and so on.

learned or not, and whether presented consciously or not. And, of course there may be further decisions, as of method of approach or attack, and perhaps a plan may be developed. (The control connection is discussed at greater length in my book – Douglass 2015.)

In a complex and changing world, there is a need for flexibility and improvability in the evaluation of targets – which for us occurs largely through learning. What is at stake is the ability to match our choices up well to things 'in the world,' for the sake of our success.[8] That is the primary function of our rationality: and it is our rationality which represents the full development of our natural abilities as sensitive learning controllers, able to discriminate between potential targets and to choose the best, or what is suitable or good enough ('satisficing'). If, as I maintain, rationality is a type of biological learning control[9] whose development and purpose in evolution has involved the detection, evaluation and choice of targets (and recognition of threats – targets for avoidance) – the most advanced such type found in nature – then we can readily understand its importance for sensitive evaluation of situations and choice of responses. A rational being is able to learn from experience and so to become a reliable recognizer and judicious evaluator of options, with sensitivity to detail and insightfulness, and with an emotional connection that empowers evaluation and choice. (One may also evaluate a type of option as of no interest, and even cease to recognize it.) This sort of learning controller continues to upgrade its performance possibilities through reconsideration and re-evaluation of what has occurred together with what has been learned through experience, of what has been chosen and what resulted from that (a type of recursion), as well as being open to other sources of learning, such as teaching and criticism, for the purpose of improving its performance. Indeed, we become rational through learning, in particular leaning what – and how – to choose in a variety of situations. In so doing, we also develop our latent ability for forethought, to serve which we make cognitive 'models' of the world and of ourselves which are revisable with experience. Foresight (derived from reconsidering past events and generating expectations) is crucial to choosing in advance and to making a series of such choices – which is what planning consists in.

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[8] Realistically, our freedom is always limited: when we must choose, we must try to "fit our actions to the world," to borrow John Searle's phrase, in order to promote our success and functioning well, and there are always constraints that must be observed thereto. Unlimited freedom, interpreted as total absence of constraint, is a fantasy. For Searle's development see *Rationality in Action*, especially pp. 36 – 47. My usage is intended to focus on the constraints imposed on choosers by situations they face: one has to take in what is the case and consider what sort of action would effect change in the best direction. This can be seen as a navigational problem of sorts.

[9] The character of rationality is further discussed in my book (Douglass 2015). Suffice it to say that we are target-seeking learning controllers who utilize learning to improve our target selection.

At some point in their evolution, our ancestors became able to have insights. That opened the way to a greater depth of understanding to aid choice and planning, thus increasing the creature's adaptability. With this development, our ancestors were no longer limited to inherited ('instinctive') goals or categorizations learned from experience, but could attain a penetration and discernment involving aspects of situations, with an attendant expansion of ability to understand their world. And surely one of the most basic insights is that some options are better for us than others. With this ability, what was formerly implicit (in control – the need to choose well) became explicit, as one chooses 'what is best' (or at least adequate) on recognizing it as such. Now one can thoughtfully develop an ability to choose – and understand what is involved in and required for choosing well – and to plan, as one can sort through expectations and choose a 'best' option. Forethought and insights are key to planning (a plan being a sequence of actions directed toward some goal) and also to solving problems (which can be seen as planning a solution path). These abilities are central aspects of our rationality.

Rationality characterizes our principal choices when we choose most freely. For the fundamental implicit goal of choice is to choose well; and it is our rationality which is the sensitive, improvable instrument for discovering and evaluating options and choosing among them that we rely on for that discrimination. Maximal freedom implies maximal control, and for us in all our important decisions, that implies rational choice, which involves sensitive evaluation and discrimination among a set of recognized options based on criteria derived from knowledge. There is an art of choosing well, which can be learned; it involves learning what to value and also of our own tendencies and biases. Rational self-discovery is a means to the enlargement of our control and freedom: when focusing on ourselves as choosers we can discover more completely the set of evaluational characteristics we employ, inasmuch as these can be learned about and then perhaps modified or compensated for. This makes for more complete use of the abilities of developed rationality, and facilitates our making our best possible choices, and so attaining our greatest possible freedom, avoiding the pitfalls to choosing well.[10] Put differently, through developing our

[10] We can say that one is free when their choice is their own (i.e., not coerced or unduly influenced). But they can be more free if they are able to choose well. For the only realistic extension of our freedom in choice beyond what is basic (i.e., no coercion or interference nor internal breakdown or 'blockage') is through learning and self-improvement, and so becoming able to choose well, especially across a broad range of situations and circumstances. This follows from freedom's tie to control: for control is about functioning well – that is its inherent purpose. Choosing well (a learnable skill) indicates greater control – unless one were just lucky (inasmuch as we must sometimes choose in ignorance). Being able to recognize and choose the best available options in general indicates maximal control, and hence also maximal freedom. We maximize our achievable freedom by choosing well, from options available to us.

rationality, we can become sufficient for discerning and choosing well in a variety of situations.

It is also fairly obvious, but should be pointed out, that control requires causal determinism or something approximating it, to achieve the regularity of effect following cause and reliability in events and in our own responses on which control must depend. Were it not so, were there no such reliable connection between initiating cause and resulting effect on the controlled object, no efficacious control could be developed or achieved, either through learning or some other (presumably inherent) provenance, nor could this have occurred in evolution. (Thus, for example, the addition of noise to a control signal can be devastating.) Effective control needs underlying causal regularities, as determinism would assure, as a condition for successful operation.

II. The question of being able to 'do otherwise'

An often used criterion of freedom in choice is the question of whether persons in choosing 'could have done otherwise' than to choose as they did. The basic underlying idea is that if one 'could not do otherwise' then one is somehow forced into choosing a certain way, and so is not free.[11] (Whereas, being unforced, one might choose otherwise.) This is paradigmatically true of one who is coerced into doing something against his or her will. Similarly, one who is in the grip of a mental illness or addiction may be thought not free, for much the same reason: that in choosing badly they were not really capable of choosing otherwise. So it would seem that these unfortunates have in common a lack of ability to 'do otherwise.' Some have been led to claim that, by extension, since it may seem that persons are never able to 'do otherwise' than they actually do if causal determinism is true, then they are not ever truly free. But how seriously should this proposed extension of a 'could have done otherwise' concern be taken as a criterion of freedom? I shall argue, against this proposed radical extension, that the defeat of freedom by incapacity should be seen as restricted to certain sorts of special cases and situations, as it generally has been in practice.[12]

Thus, tieing freedom to control leads to the understanding that our freedom is tantamount to not having – or overcoming – restrictions or impediments of external, internal, or conceptual sorts.

[11] This is the basic claim of the well-known Consequence Argument, which has been used to undermine belief in free choice or 'free will.' This is discussed in some detail in my book (Douglass 2015). Basically, that argument misunderstands freedom, by styling it as something which is automatically defeated by causal necessitation and offering no understanding of how we really choose.

[12] Worries about our being bound by causal necessitation have led some philosophers to view alleged occasional occurrences of indeterminacy in our choices as being necessary for our freedom in choice. In my book (Douglass 2015) I characterized this as an 'escape' requirement put on freedom; I argued that such a requirement does not constitute part of, or a reasonable extension of, our normal concept of freedom.The fundamental goal of choice – from which there can be no escape – is our need to choose well. What we must try to 'escape' from are

How shall we understand the demand for an ability to 'do otherwise'? Clearly, 'doing otherwise' cannot be a strategy for choice, nor could it be an objective of choice: for it is by definition unattainable (and even, in a way, self-contradictory). Neither can it be a true ability, properly speaking – for the same sort of reason: that it would be directed toward the accomplishment of something that necessarily cannot be done. What we have is only an ability to choose, which is a target-selection ability – one which identifies and evaluates potential targets according to criteria for selection (which may also be chosen, and whose selection may be investigated). To repeat, choice is a basic control function and in choice situations of a serious nature there is an inherent directionality to be discovered: we must "fit our choices to the world," to borrow a phrase from John Searle. At least in all serious matters, choosers are properly impelled to seek superior (or at least satisfactory) results. We have to select from recognizable options which appear to be 'open' to our choice (or they are not really options[13] for us), seeking for what best suits our needs and values. In choosing, our proper concern is not 'doing otherwise' but discovering what would be best for us to do under the circumstances. If there is no failure or mistake in target recognition, evaluation or choice, then there is no reason to 'do otherwise,' nor should one wish to.

All our control involves abilities, and all our abilities are subject to failure. So also the ability to choose is subject to interference and breakdown. Our notion of freedom in choice derives from cases where it is absent or impaired; which become clearer by being understood against a background of normal functioning. Thus, our failures to choose well – which are the cases where we come to wish that we might have done otherwise – lead us to consider ways that choice can go wrong. What is implicated in the usual sorts of cases of true inability other than coercion are the failure modes of abilities associated with choice: due perhaps to some internal failure caused by disease or injury, one's ability to discern, evaluate and choose properly is compromised. Rationality comprises a set of abilities involving learning that must be developed; and like all true abilities it also has its failure modes: characteristic ways that rationality in choice can fail, that can also restrict our freedom. It is through the development of rationality that we become sufficient for making good choices across a broad range of circumstances and situations; through the loss or incapacitation of one's rationality – or its failure to develop normally – one can lose or fail to develop

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such tendencies as may cause us to choose badly. There is an underlying directionality to choice, as 'fitting our choices to the world' for the sake of our survival and success. The predictability of so choosing should not be taken as indicative of diminished freedom: indeed, to choose well is a sign of rational choice; and rational choices tend to be more predictable than irrational ones.

[13] As Aristotle observed, no one deliberates about that which is thought to be unattainable: we only deliberate about "things that are in our power and can be realized in action." (NE 1112a20-33)

that ability. That ignorance and inability to see into the future constitute limiting conditions on choice is well known; but such cases are the stuff of common experience, and are not those paradigmatic of inability, which are generally held to be exceptional – and not such as to be cured by more information. Such exceptional cases I shall call 'blockages,' wherein one is unable to choose to do something for a physical or psychological reason.[14]

Nor is a choice less free for being predictable: rational beings, well informed as to each other's character and interests, can often predict one another's choices; indeed, so doing is part of the way we understand each other. The proper (and implicit) objective of choice is choosing well. If so, then it is only when the phrase 'doing otherwise' signifies certain conditions – either external interferences with choice or certain internal interferences with the ability to choose well – that it properly betokens a condition of inability, such that there is a proportionately diminished freedom. The freedom-constraining internal conditions to choice or choosing well – call them 'blockages' – can indicate the sort of control involved; and we come to understand our freedom better by understanding what threatens or disrupts it. Freedom appears clearly to us when cases of its failure (really control failures) can be seen in contrast to the (more usual) cases of the well-functioning of our control. Our control, and hence freedom, is a composite in that it depends on an assemblage of abilities functioning well together.

There are other sorts of cases in which someone may claim to have been unable to choose otherwise: due to a certitude that one's choice is the right one, or perhaps to a commitment to some belief that can then become determinative of one's course of action. Such for example is indicated in the celebrated statement of Martin Luther.[15] A commitment to certain sorts of goals can become determinative of one's life-course in various ways (for example, in the case of religious commitment). That can result in some options for choice appearing to

[14] By a 'blockage' of an option to choice, I mean that the individual is simply unable to choose an option that would be open to being selected were there not a malfunction in the ability of selection. This is not in general due to a failure to recognize the option as such, nor to a bias against it: those can of course occur; but they are such as to be cured by acquisition of relevant information or knowledge. Such a blockage could be due to conditioning, addiction, or to an irrational fear (were the fear rational, it would not count as such a blockage, the avoidance then being rational). Of course, it could also be due to a mental or neural disease. Such a 'blockage' represents a controllability deficiency – a failure of access to certain options. (Indeed, the question as to ability to 'do otherwise' is really just about the organism's controllability – whether it is normal or partial.) There is no such blockage of an option were it excluded because one rationally determined that it was not the best option available. To make such determinations is basic to rational choice; whereas 'blockages' tend to undermine rational choice.

[15] Martin Luther's famous statement to the Diet of Worms – "My conscience is captive to the word of God … Here I stand, I can do no other" – has been discussed in various writings; a discussion of it appears in my book (Douglass 2015). Luther's stance seems a paradigm case of prechoosing.

become, and perhaps really being, foreclosed to choice. Yet such 'prechoosing,' though a constraint on choice, is not necessarily an abrogation of freedom: if such prechoosings are one's own choices and based on values that one strongly holds, and arrived at after careful thought, then they only serve to further one's pursuit of one's major goals by making it more unlikely that one would choose amiss at a critical moment or under temptation.

Merely having more options to choose among is not always an advantage for choosers: for that can lead to an increase in the time and effort needed to make a choice, which can be costly or even disastrous if a rapid choice is needed or if temptation is to be avoided.[16] There is a time cost to sorting through numerous options; and if in every case a decision procedure must revert to foundational considerations, there is an increased chance of error. With development of ability for forethought, experience can be used to generate expectations and anticipate situations for evaluation; then one can in effect make some choices in advance, so as to use what has been learned to save time and avoid mistakes at the moment of decision. When such 'prechoosing' utilizes one's own preferences and values (choice criteria) it can be a means to save time and also to help insure that superior choices will be made, inasmuch as one has enough knowledge to classify in advance certain sorts of situations as being such that one would do X, say, as a best choice; or one may choose to avoid or not choose certain types of actions. Being able to do this requires both knowledge and forethought; but it is commonly done, and can lead to development of habits, which as Aristotle observed (NE 1152a33) can be formative of character. It is not a diminution of one's freedom inasmuch as it represents one's own choice and one's own values; rather it is both a self-construction and an extension of our power to achieve better outcomes through rational choice. Done carefully and thoughtfully, one may be 'giving rules to oneself,' to guide one's future conduct. Indeed, if we always knew just how to choose, we could save time, eliminate errors, and be maximally free. (In such a case, to do otherwise would be to make a mistake.) We would have 'escaped' errors and their consequences.

Consider a limit case: imagine an ideal chooser, a perfectly knowledgeable being who always knows how to choose – there is no reason to suppose that such a being would exhibit unpredictability in its choices. Its 'power' in choice would consist in its unfailing ability to choose well. Presumably such a being would have no interest in 'doing otherwise.' But, could it? Perhaps not consistently with its (ascribed) character. Yet it should have no such 'blockages' as we associate with certain diseases, say: lesser options are ignored just because they are lesser. So other options were in this sense 'open' to choice (they

[16] There is a discussion of this in the book *The Art of Choosing*, by Sheena Iyengar; see Ch. 6 there. Indeed, our lives are replete with choices. Most of the time we hardly notice them, because we basically know what to do, based on our previous experience and learning. We choose most efficiently when we know what to do, and even perhaps hardly recognize it as choosing.

were 'reachable'). The choice of lesser options was prevented by rational evaluation and/or knowledge of what and how to choose; which is what is proper to and required for rational choice. Being a superb chooser in a way works against 'doing otherwise,' yet such choosers are the most free: they exercise maximal control in choice.

A control-based way to think of the attainability or 'openness' to choice of options is in terms of the concept of 'reachability': roughly, a reachable option is one that is in the feasible, attainable range for the controller (it can drive its 'plant' to that condition), is recognizable as an option, and not somehow 'blocked' from being chosen. One thing to note immediately is that such 'reachability' is linked to 'controllability,' the latter being understood as the ability of a controller to drive its plant through the full range of states that are within its capability.[17] A 'blockage' of many such states would correspond to a significant loss or restriction of control – and hence a likely decline in the functionality of the controller. Whereas, options that were not chosen can still be said to have been 'open' in the sense of reachability if they were not 'blocked': indeed, controllability requires it.

The sensitive discernment and evaluation of options available through rational consideration serves the reachability of multiple options, in multiple ways. Abilities to learn, to reconsider and to have insights should lead to a wider range of options presenting for choice. One who has learned what sorts of action work well in various situations is prompted by that recollection upon recognition of relevant similarities. One who has developed a set of values and/or rules to guide decisions toward better outcomes has that to draw on. One may have learned how to make inquiries, if there is time, to draw out crucial bits of information on aspects of choice situations. If one thinks of finding out what to do as problem-solving, rationality clearly aids and enables that. In multiple ways, rationality opens to us possibilities for investigation, to discover and discern what options are available and then to compare and evaluate them. Thus through learning and becoming more rational we become able to choose better and so more freely: we become the rational chooser who is also the most free.

Yet at the same time, rationality always serves the reachability of options in a discriminatory way: for what is really wanted is access to knowing what best serves the interests of the chooser. If one has attained the solution of a problem

[17] Here is something by way of further definition of the control-theoretic concept of reachability of states and outputs. Reachability "requires that there is a [control input] u(t) that drives any given initial state to any desired final state." F. L. Lewis in Levine (1996, 765.) The close connection to controllability is obvious. Here is a definition of (output) reachability from robotics: "A reachable grasp configuration is one which is within the work envelope of the manipulator, and one for which a collision-free path to the grasp configuration is available." (Schilling 1990, 378) Thus, a reachable state or output is one which is obtainable or 'open' to choice, loosely speaking. The subject is discussed at greater length in Ch. 9 of my book (Douglass 2015).

of choice, one wants to act on that and not something else. Choosing according to valuations and rules can be a way of utilizing choice criteria based on (a theory of) external factors and of one's needs, directed toward choosing 'for the best.' To develop criteria for choice through values and rules, and an understanding of situations through experience and theory, makes for choosing well, which is the implicit overall goal of choice. Indeed, had one no criteria, how could one choose? And one who could not choose when choice is necessary would not be more free but less so.[18] So in multiple ways, rationality serves the reachability of options; but it is always a differential reachability, one that aims at choosing 'for the best' – which requires excluding other options.

To increase our freedom in choice to the fullest extent, subject to the constraints inherent in choice situations, would mean to become able to choose better – to choose well more often and/or across a still broader range of situations. For that indicates an enlargement of our control in choice, and hence also of our freedom, maximal freedom corresponding to maximal control in choice. Using various learned methods, one can become adept at the art of choosing well;[19] then better options become more available to us, and we can better 'escape' the consequences of choosing badly. The implicit supreme goal of choice, choosing well in all situations (or as many as possible) is thus served – not that of 'doing otherwise,' which cannot be a goal or strategy of choice for us.

One sees also that causal determinism is in no way implicated in a potential loss of freedom for us – it is in no sense a 'failure mode' of ability in choice. And there must be a stable basis for these abilities, and a basis for evaluation as well as an ability to evaluate, or one would not be more free but unable to really choose at all; and that basis should be keyed to things 'in the world.' Determinacy or something approximating it must obtain in order to provide the causal regularities which all our control – and hence, our freedom – are based on; it is really implicitly a condition for control. Nor could one learn through experience of determinacy as a cause of lack of freedom, or even from a theory of the function of any mechanism, inasmuch as causal regularities are required in every choice and action, and underlie our understanding of everything that occurs. Causal determinism is in no proper sense such a

[18] This is the situation of persons with certain types of brain injuries, as discussed in Antonio Damasio's book, *Descartes' Error*. (See p. 193, for example.) Such persons may understand the choice situation they face, yet lack the ability to choose.

[19] For example, one can learn of one's own tendencies and possible biases, in order to compensate for those as needed in choosing. One can learn techniques of self-control, as useful in decision as in follow-through. One can make use of forethought to anticipate situations in which choices must be made, and make use of both experience and theory to come to better understand such situations. Techniques of how to compare and value options can be studied; and one can become more experienced in problem-solving. One can 'prechoose' in advance to do – or not do – certain sorts of acts (a sort of advance planning for choice). Strategies for obtaining additional information can be pursued, if there is time. This appears as a project of self-reconstruction; but if one really pursues it, one should become more rational.

'blockage' as noted here. Restrictions on our freedom of choice always derive from some particular condition of external or internal origin, which can come to be known – reflection on such failures is the basis of our understanding of our freedoms. Hence the usual conditions associated with freedom in choice, which are based on human experience and knowledge, point to particular sorts of failure modes of our control apparatus as the real limitations on our freedom of choice, which include those that reasonably and legitimately count as excusing conditions, and the discrimination of which serve to demarcate the bounds of our freedom.

III. The Possibility of Responsibility

In view of the likely truth of causal determinism, is it ever reasonable to hold people responsible? Some have claimed that responsibility cannot really hold where determinism holds.[20] Here I offer a compatibilist argument, denying that determinism is a threat to responsibility. What I consider and defend here is not specifically moral responsibility, but a capability of responsibility in general: the key question is of ability, not that which it is directed toward the achievement of or motivated by. We must consider what makes it possible for people to behave responsibly and so to be (reasonably) held responsible.

In order to address this question properly, we require to know the basis of responsibility in human abilities: that is, what enables persons to become responsible and to behave responsibly? What, then, are the particular abilities relied upon in its performance? Clearly, one who is to be responsible must be able to understand what it is that they must do; they should also be willing and able to accept that and in so doing, choose to do so, and be able to persevere in the choice made. Inasmuch as making responsible choices is choosing properly and well, one can say that the requirements are those that make for choosing well. What then enables persons to become and be able to make good decisions and then to abide by them? This is the crucial question; and the answer is surely through the development and possession of rationality.

It is an observed fact that in human development, children and youths become able to assume responsibility and tend to behave more responsibly as they mature and become more rational. This ordinarily happens through a normal course of development, both biological and social. Conversely, it is also well known that it is through failures of such normal development of rationality when due to some biological cause (for example, certain mental illnesses) that persons may become incapable of behaving responsibly and so of bearing

[20] For example, Saul Smilansky (2012) seems to regard it as a secret that must be kept from the public so as not to undermine the socially necessary practice of holding people responsible. One can of course say that determinism does not hold universally – quantum theory shows that. But it appears to largely if not entirely hold on the level of non-micro-scale phenomena.

responsibility. This is the source of the well-known excusing or 'defeasibility' conditions, such that persons may become excused from normal expectations of responsible behavior: such ascriptions of blame as would ordinarily be generated are defeated by proving a mental incapacity such as would render the person incapable of reliably rational choice and action. But real evidence of such a debilitating condition must be available: as rational acceptance of responsibility is basic to all human organization, and so is a necessity for a modern society, so such excusing conditions as are allowed must be carefully restricted.

To become and be responsible (and so to be recognized as such), persons must be able to understand the requirements or obligations which are to be put upon them, and to be able to commit to so doing, undertaking thereby certain obligations of performance in appropriate circumstances. It is rationality that enables this, inasmuch as it is rationality that provides the suite of (self-) control abilities that enable persons to understand, to evaluate options, to choose well and to perform accordingly. Responsibility in performance requires considerable agential control in order for persons to reliably act and behave as responsible persons should; and the full flower of that control comes for us in the development of our rationality, which is the basis for our ability to learn to understand situations and to identify and evaluate options properly and then to choose accordingly.

It is clear that rationality is a necessary basis for responsibility: for to become and behave responsibly one must be able to understand what is required and accordingly be able to commit to so doing. This often involves a 'prechoosing' (or a series of prechoosings) in which persons choose in advance to perform – or not – certain sorts of acts when circumstances are appropriate. What is required is that, as abilities for understanding, foresight, 'prechoosing' and choosing based on reasons and self-control develop, one becomes attracted toward behaving responsibly and comes to acquire the character of a responsible person. In this way, through choices and actions and also through 'prechoosings' one constructs in oneself the character of one who is responsible.[21]

[21] However, rationality does not appear to be in itself a sufficient basis for the development and acceptance of responsibility; for example, certain behavioral tendencies may work against it in practice. Also needed in addition to a developed rationality is that persons (in general) possess certain instincts or tendencies that enable socialization; these include a capacity for sympathy and that persons not be inclined to be overly aggressive toward others. And persons should also find that their situations enable expectations of reciprocity, such that they can share in benefits as well as obligations. All this serves to create a social background for the choice of responsible behavior, such that choosers can feel that others are not enemies but are trustworthy and that they can benefit from acting responsibly. For people to rationally and willingly accept it, responsibility should be attractive to them (unless it is just brought about by compulsion – an unreliable and unstable means).

In all cases, the social requirements of responsible action should be such that most people can satisfy them.[22] 'Normal' persons should be able to understand what is expected, to evaluate well and to choose the responsible act, across a broad range of situations, understanding the benefits and costs in given cases and also that of upholding the practice as a whole. The normality of responsible action as well as the inherent normativity of human rationality should be our assurance of this. Indeed, enabling us to understand and accept reasonable conditions for responsibility is one of the things our ability for rationality does for us.

As rationality is crucial, so another sort of requirement is a society in which it is rational to be responsible. Thus, an expectation of reciprocation of benefits as well as obligations also belongs to the notion of responsibility: for otherwise one would not reasonably agree (to the aspects of obligation). For if benefits are not reciprocated, then the relationship is more like that of master to slave, which is based on coercion and fear. For voluntary compliance, conditions of acceptance should be such that members can reasonably agree to them.[23] One's responsibility as a group member should be understood, and understood to be fair (involving a mutuality of benefit), or one would not reasonably and fully accept it.[24] If all this is understood to hold, one should have something like a sense of citizenship, of belonging. Ideally, one should come to understand and accept one's role and what one is responsible for, and what one can expect in return. And in so doing, one 'prechooses' to do (or not do) certain sorts of acts, and thereby becomes a responsible citizen.

That responsibility, or responsible behavior, is subject to failures reminds us that it is based on underlying abilities of rational self-control, and such abilities can fail or be compromised in certain cases. Some of these distinctive failure types constitute the standard defeasibility conditions, which are the customary and allowable excusing conditions. Such failure types (usually due to injury, disease, developmental problems or addiction) tend to render it very

[22] There is another implicit responsibility, which is the responsibility of the group or of its leaders to make sure that the standards of what is expected are not unreasonably high, so that all or at least most people can achieve them.

[23] Some might claim that persons do not really need to be rational in order to be made to become responsible – they can just be indoctrinated – conditioned to react in certain ways. But this overlooks the reciprocity which we should take a basic fairness of arrangements to require. And many persons will develop rationally anyway; these then may discover that it is rational for them to ignore such conditioning on occasion. Thus, being dependent on rationality and its development, codes of behavior which persons are taken to be responsible for should (ideally) also embody a reasonableness and reciprocity in order to hold stably. Another alternative is the use of fear – which has served rulers throughout history. But to go further into such political matters is beyond the scope of this paper.

[24] There is evidence that a feeling for fairness or reciprocity is more widespread than the human species – it appears to be instinctive in various social primates. For example, see de Waal *et al.* (2006, 42 – 49).

difficult or impossible for an afflicted individual to make rational decisions or abide by them. The failure types are specific to the real abilities that correspond to them. It is by coming to understand these abilities and their limits and modes of failure that we become able to discern which sorts of cases should be taken as excusing – i.e., in which it is not reasonable to believe that afflicted persons could have overcome them.[25] Of course there can be hard cases; but such difficulties are to be expected. And due to the importance of the practice of holding persons responsible, the group or authorities must err on the side of upholding standards of behavior when such standards are necessary to the welfare of the community.

There are multiple reasons for maintaining narrow conditions for excepting persons from responsibility: if there is any serious difficulty or risk involved, persons will not reasonably agree to perform if others are to be excused, unless that is under carefully circumscribed conditions. Indeed, it would be irrational to do so – to accept stringent dictates on responsibility for oneself when broad-brush excuses are being granted to others could put one at a disadvantage and even in danger. Granting overly broad excusing conditions would undermine the practice of holding persons responsible, which cooperation depends on. Further, those to be fully or generally excused cannot be considered as full citizens – for they can't be counted on to do their part or to follow the rules and uphold the standards of the society. It would be a betrayal of those who were full cooperators to treat non-cooperators as if they were cooperators. It would be collectively irrational as well as irresponsible for the group to excuse too much. For members of society are also responsible for upholding the basic concept of responsibility, and its attendant practices, on which human cooperation depends. Hence the usual defeasibility conditions, which require clear breakdowns in ability to behave responsibly, or similar narrow conditions, are a social necessity.

It is clear that determinism is not like the usual defeasibility conditions: it is not a 'failure mode' of rationality or of control. It is an aspect of the general theory of natural causes, proclaiming the universality and necessity of causal regularities. So it in no way belongs among the usual 'excusing conditions,' which

[25] There are various sorts of problems that can interfere with one's ability to act responsibly, which can be characterized as failures of rationality. There are various mental illnesses that can interfere with ability to decide or to choose well, or which make for mental instability. Then there are cases of akrasia or 'weakness of will,' which is common (some such cases may be developmental failures on the way to becoming fully rational and self-controlled) and commonly thought to be avoidable and blameable. (One may be held to be responsible for becoming the sort of person who can be held responsible, as a requirement of citizenship.) There are cases of self-deception; and some may fail to adequately develop a rational mentality. (For a more thorough discussion, see Alfred Mele's book *Irrationality*.) Of course, borderline cases can occur; and to what degree such conditions can be excusing can sometimes be debated. The main point here is that rationality is a real ability – or a suite of abilities – that can fail in characteristic ways, and in so doing thwart establishment of a capability of responsibility in persons.

are failure modes of the capability of rational choice. To consider determinism as such a failure mode would be a category mistake. Accordingly, it is not reasonable to consider determinism as in any way requiring an extension of the defeasibility conditions.

We can further assert that determinism is no threat to responsibility because it is no threat to rationality. For rationality is a species of control, and control depends on reliable means of achieving its modes of performance. (Whereas irruptions of acausal randomness, the sort that is considered to be the opposite of deterministic phenomena, would undermine these abilities.) Rationality's abilities rely on the reliability of response made possible by causal regularities in order to function effectively. Causal regularities are essential to reliable performance and also to learning; and there is no reason to believe that rational controllers could operate without such causal regularities in nature. Nor are any other conditions necessary for responsibility threatened by determinism. Accordingly, we can conclude that there is no reason to think of determinism as an obstacle to persons' ability to become and to be responsible persons; rather, it is a necessity for that.[26]

Conclusion

To recapitulate the main points discussed here: control is ever the complement of freedom – that is key to understanding freedom's nature. We are controllers, of the sort that seek and choose targets. Choice is also a control function (an aspect of targeting control); and in choosing our goals, our implicit ultimate goal is our well-being – our survival and success. Our ability to achieve this implicit ultimate goal is greatly enhanced by the development of rationality. We develop our rationality and become rational through learning (rationality being a species of learning control). Being able and unhindered in choosing makes one free; but one is most free (subject to a situation's limitations) when one is also able to

[26] Here is one more argument against the notion that morality – or moral concern – somehow requires the abandonment of responsibility. Morality cannot require the abrogation of responsibility, as that is a necessary grounding for social cooperation and hence for morality (all that which is constructed as opposed to being merely instinctive, such as an instinct of sympathy). There would be no point to the elaboration of moral codes were people not to be taken as being capable of being responsible to obey them – that is a necessary, if implicit, condition for any sort of agreement on cooperative action. The concept of responsibility and its practice in groups must have preceded, or at least been simultaneous with, any claims that there are moral 'oughts' or rules: for inasmuch as these are or imply rules for the group, they will require responsible compliance. So there is something close to circularity in the claim that something in morality repudiates responsibility. It can't be the case that we are responsible to not be responsible, nor to hold others not responsible. Responsibility being necessary to social cooperation and a necessary basis for morality, it could not be the case that morality requires us to dispense with it.

choose well, as becomes possible for us through the development of our capability of rationality. As with any sort of ability, our control is subject to occasional failures, which are characteristic. But determinism does not constitute such a 'failure mode' of control or of rationality; in fact, such causal regularities as it would assure are required for our ability to control ourselves and to learn.

There is no such ability as an ability to 'do otherwise.' Choice is a selection between options ('targets'), which are thought to be open to us. Rational choices are likely to be predictable by other rational beings – which in no way impugns their having been freely chosen. The required 'openness' of options to choice may be seen as 'reachability'; options that are feasible should be presumed reachable unless they are 'blocked.' (Such blockages – really controllability failures –are often due to disease, injury, or addiction, and are exceptions to normal functioning.) But rational choice is always discriminating, and options not chosen are in general valued less.

Responsibility is a necessary basis for social organization and cooperation. Rationality is a necessary basis for assuming responsibility. Persons are commonly expected to become responsible citizens as part of their normal development, which includes learning and becoming more rational. One means of so doing is through 'prechoosing' – choosing in advance to perform (or not) certain sorts of acts on appropriate occasions – which is a means of character development. As there are 'failure modes' of rationality and control, so there can be excusing conditions for noncompliance in regard to responsibility – the standard 'defeasibility conditions' which are well known. The importance of responsible behavior mandates that excusing conditions be restricted to the known and understood types of 'blockages.'

Determinism is not a 'failure mode' of rationality as it is not of control. (To think so would be a category mistake.) Again, determinism or something approximating it is necessary to assure the regularities of natural causation that are required for us to operate as learning controllers. Nor is any other aspect or requirement of responsibility threatened by determinism.

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