

# ‘Options and Agency’ by John T. Maier

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John Maier’s *Options and Agency* is an excellent book. It is brimming with insights and original ideas; in just about 160 pages of text, it provides the reader with an entirely novel perspective on different issues in metaphysics, semantics, and the philosophy of action. It is lucidly written and a joy to read. While we disagree with some core points (to be elaborated below), we highly recommend the book to anyone interested in agency, modality, and the intersection between the two.

Maier voices an attractive ambition: we should work towards a philosophy of *agency* that emphasises the possible and the future, not a philosophy of *action* that privileges the actual and the past. To understand agency, Maier argues, we must start from the plurality of options that agents face at every stage of their lives. These options are practically indispensable, analytically irreducible, and key to explaining how human (and perhaps also other) beings can have free will.

The book can be divided into three parts. The first part motivates a theory of agency which has options at its core. The second part aims to demonstrate that other modal phenomena, in particular abilities, affordances, and dispositions, can be analysed in terms of options. The third part develops a novel compatibilist account of free will, based on the view of options developed in part 1. In what follows, we will elaborate and comment on each part in turn.

**Part 1: Options.** To have an option, for Maier, is to stand in a particular relation to an act-type. Chapter 1 describes this relation as simple and familiar: we encounter options across various choice situations, we deliberate about them, and often regret not having taken them. We thus have a good pre-theoretical grasp on them. This - so the argument goes - is why theoretical disciplines like decision theory take options to be methodologically primitive.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, Maier argues, any strategy to analyse options in more familiar modal terms fails: neither conditional nor modal analyses can do justice to the familiar notion of an option. Therefore, we should take options as primitive. This is not to say that options are the ‘atomic’ building blocks out of which everything else is composed, or that they are epistemically transparent, as they have often been taken to be in decision theory. Instead, options are primitive in the sense that

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<sup>1</sup>For further comments on the indispensability of options, see Maier 2015.

they are ‘not fit to be an analysandum’, but ‘well-fitted to be an analysans’ (p. 2).

Although there are no necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for an act-type’s being an option for an agent, Chapter 2 introduces a ‘simple account’, on which options are governed by two logical principles. The *Possibility Principle* says that if A’ing is an option for agent S, then it is possible that S A’s. The *Performance Principle* says that if S performed an act of A’ing, then A’ing was an option for S. Importantly, these are *all* the principles that are true of options. The Possibility Principle is one half of a modal analysis of options (where A’ing is an option for S iff it is possible that S performs A). Maier (correctly) rejects the other direction of that equivalence because options do not obey (K), a basic logical principle for possibility. Unlike possibility – but like abilities (Kenny 1976) – options do not distribute over disjunction. The reason, as Maier puts it, lies in the fact that our options are ‘more coarse-grained than the world itself’: we ‘control the world, but control it only imperfectly’, up to a certain level of specificity but not beyond (p. 30). Thus we may have the option of hitting a dartboard with a dart, without having the option of hitting any particular point on it, despite the fact that if we realize our option there will be some exact point that we have hit.

We see two tensions within Maier’s simple view of options. One concerns the choice of principles for the logic of options. On the one hand, as we have just seen, options must be coarse-grained enough to be under our control, and hence to be that which we can reasonably deliberate about. On the other hand, the Performance Principle tells us that whatever we actually do was an option for us. Since what we actually do is a determinate action, the Performance Principle entails that we must have had much more fine-grained options from the start. If an agent hits a particular point on the dartboard, then the Performance Principle tells us that she had that option all along. But given her lack of control over the exact point she would hit, it was never reasonable for her to deliberate about hitting that exact point – as Maier stresses in rejecting a modal analysis of options. Thus it seems that hitting this particular point was *not* an option, looking forward, when deliberating about what to do; and also that it *was* an option, looking backward, given the agent’s performance. Between its rejection of (K) and its adoption of the Performance Principle, the simple account of options turns out to be unstable.

A second tension is more general. Options are supposed to be simple in the sense of being wholly familiar as the objects of deliberation. It isn’t clear that the entities that Maier takes to be basic to a theory of agency – entities that an agent may never know she has, and that are governed by only two general principles – are the same things that are so familiar to us. Put differently, do we indeed have a strong pre-theoretical grasp on options if they are the sort of things that Maier tells us they are?

**Part 2: Abilities, affordances, dispositions.** While part 1 rejects various analyses of options, part 2 showcases their explanatory power by using options as an *analysans*. Specifically, Maier argues (ch. 3) that options are needed to formulate appropriate truth-conditions for sentences of the form ‘S

is able to  $\phi$ '. On Maier's view, such sentences really just express that an agent either has an option, or a particular pattern of options.<sup>2</sup> Metaphysically speaking, he suggests this indicates that abilities are "a shadow cast by our way of speaking about options" (p. 61). Claims about affordances and dispositions, in turn, are analysed in terms of ability in Chapter 4. The novelty of this approach can hardly be overstated: where other accounts have started with dispositions as the most general notion of power and tried to fit abilities into their mould, Maier turns the tables and begins with the agentive.

The resulting metaphysical picture, set out in Chapter 5, elucidates an uncharted path between more familiar, broadly Humean and Aristotelian approaches. Unlike the Humean, Maier proposes that there is a distinctively agentive modal element to our world, which cannot be reduced to facts about what is true in other possible worlds. And contrary to the Aristotelian, Maier refuses to explain this element in terms of irreducibly modal powers, which are supposed to help us understand agentive and non-agentive modality alike.

The picture is captivating, but is it correct? Given the brevity of the book, Maier does not discuss alternative views in detail, and his criticisms of other views, especially in this part, tend to be at a rather general level. This makes it difficult to compare his view to competitors. For instance, Maier takes the austerity of the picture to be part of its attraction, stressing his deflationary approach to abilities in particular. It is questionable, however, whether this is austerity in the right place: why reduce abilities and retain options? What is so metaphysically problematic about the former but not the latter?

**Part 3: Freedom.** Like his metaphysical picture does, Maier's view of free will traces a surprising and novel trajectory between well-trodden paths of the debate. In accordance with his simple view of options, he proposes a 'simple compatibilism' that understands freedom in terms of options and uses the results of part 1 to dispel any appearance of their incompatibility with determinism.

The discussion of freedom begins, in Chapter 6, with a compelling methodological proposal: we should start from our best theory of agency, and only then assess whether free agency is compatible with determinism. On the theory presented, having free agency is having unexercised options. Moreover, a theory of agency shouldn't decide on issues that aren't under the purview of philosophical theorizing, such as whether determinism is true. Consequently, incompatibilists must provide an argument as to why having unexercised options - which, Maier acknowledges, intuitively *seems* incompatible with determinism - *is in fact* incompatible.

The most significant attempt to provide such an argument, Maier proposes, is van Inwagen's Consequence Argument (Inwagen 1983). The challenge that remains for the compatibilist, taken on in Chapter 7, is to show why this argument fails. The crux is to reject one of its premises, *Inheritance*, which says (roughly) that having unexercised options in conjunction with the truth of determinism entails that you can render the past or the laws of nature false. Reflection on

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<sup>2</sup>For an earlier version of the idea that ability is to be understood in terms of options, see Maier 2018

options, Maier argues, shows that we can discard Inheritance. For one thing, it simply does not follow from either of the two principles for options (Possibility or Performance). Moreover, it can be shown to be false by the same reasoning that led us to reject principle (K): changing the laws or the past isn't under our control, because "our actions aren't fine-grained enough". By holding onto the simple view of options, the simple compatibilist, contrary to more 'reconciliatory' compatibilists, staunchly resists the forceful but ultimately deceiving intuition that agents don't have unexercised options if determinism is true.

Simple compatibilism, of course, depends heavily on the simple view of options, a view that we have questioned above. There may well be room for more principles concerning options: part 1 dismissed some candidates but by no means proved that there could not be others. The simple compatibilist, then, has more work to do. But it is thanks to Maier's book that this work seems worth doing.<sup>3</sup>

## References

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