

John Perry's Neo-Humean Compatibilism: Initiative and Free Agency

John Perry has recently developed a form of Compatibilism that respects the Principle of Alternatives (PA), according to which free agency requires having the ability to do more than one thing.¹ Eschewing so-called Frankfurt counterexamples to this intuitively plausible principle, long the *bête noire* of those who would like to believe in free agency *and* Determinism, Perry argues that there is an important sense in which we can act differently than we do. It signifies the “natural” property of having a latent ability, a notion free of the mysteriousness surrounding accounts based on religious or even philosophical considerations, yet sufficient to ground our assignments of praise and blame. Perry goes on to advise abandoning such accounts in favor of his common sense approach.

I argue that Perry's Compatibilism (PC) leads to the same objection as other Humean accounts (as explicated below) and fails to account for certain intuitions regarding self-control and initiative. I conclude with an assessment of the prospects for his proposed revision.

PC

I am grocery shopping. Looking at my wife's list, I see ‘2 Spartan paper towels (fruit and vegetable print)’. Sans the parenthetical part of the directive, I'd grab the two closest Spartans and move on. But, it's a small request, so I stop and search until I have secured the listed items. To comply with it, certain simple movements were required of me, which I performed because of my desire to please my wife. But neither the

¹John Perry, 'Wretched Subterfuge: A Defense of the Compatibilism of Freedom of Natural Causation', *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, volume 84:2, 93-113.

awareness of that desire nor the performance of those movements rendered me incompetent to perform the (even simpler) movements amounting to my druthers- any more than batting right-handed against Sandy Koufax took away switch-hitting Pete Rose's ability to go up to the plate left-handed when Bob Gibson was pitching.

Perry's switch-hitter analysis (SHA) as I shall call it, of the freedom present in such a case contains three clauses: the convention clause, according to which there are "accomplishments" entailed by the execution of series of movements of different types within a situation of a certain sort and the opportunity and dual competency clauses, which require an agent to be positioned and have the "unimpaired competence" to bring about more than one such accomplishment.² Putting them together: an agent in performing an action satisfies PA (so as to be free) if he is in a situation where movements that he has the unimpaired competence to execute would be an alternative accomplishment: free agency is a matter of being in a position to bring about more than one accomplishment, thereby making oneself an appropriate object of a reactive attitude.

Whether or not this standard is met is not dependent upon antecedent choices: an agent either has the required opportunity and unimpaired competence to do something else or he does not. For this reason, Perry distances himself from the Conditional Analysis of PA satisfaction popular amongst Compatibilists prior to their coming to prefer the use of Frankfurt counterexamples.³ On this view, it cannot be said that of even a free agent that he can categorically act otherwise, it being only conditionally true that he could do something else: had he chosen differently he would have taken different course of action.

² John Perry, 'Wretched Subterfuge', pp. 100-101.

³ John Perry, 'Wretched Subterfuge', p. 101.

SHA is undoubtedly widely applicable.⁴ Were I to inconsiderately disregard my wife's simple request and then try to justify it by appealing to hurriedness, I would rightly be met with indignation of the form 'You mean to tell me that you couldn't have taken a few extra seconds to look for the paper towels I asked for?', the suggestion here being that my repertoire at the time included such a search capacity- and for that reason my failure is blameworthy. We laugh easily at a comedy of errors because the character involved is usually the victim of his own lack of effort to do some simple thing. Were he not competent in this area or lacked the required opportunity, derision would be out of place. (The same thing is true of many real life cases of *schadenfreude*, I suppose.) Where harmful negligence is concerned, opprobrium tends to be inversely proportional to the ease with which the neglected duty could have been performed: 'If you had just done what you were supposed to do, none of this would have happened', the lament expressing the conviction that the offending party was perfectly situated and more than competent to meet certain modest expectations. The ramifications of being subject to laws of nature hardly ever enters our minds in such situations, let alone the possibility of being empowered to make choices beyond their reach. No, typically our sole concern in justifying our reactive attitudes is with an agent's opportunities and skills.

But won't satisfying the last two clauses of SHA mean being able to violate a law of nature? After all, if one of my motives and an ensuing action are nomologically related, then, if I am able to do anything else under the circumstances, then I am able, *per impossibile*, to sever that tie. And, in retrospect, agency does appear as self-initiated, not the effect of conation, a point upon which I shall elaborate below. But SHA obviously must not be taken to have this implication, that anything but one's mental states are

⁴ John Perry, 'Wretched Subterfuge', pp. 95-7.

responsible for his conduct. To avoid it, Perry contends that motivation and competence/opportunity are separate matters.⁵ Reasons for acting merely determine the accomplishment for which an agent strives, without negating either his other opportunities or skills. Thus, his motives should be prescind in applying SHA: Perry denies what I shall call the principle of the Fixity of Motives (FM). To do otherwise is to “enrich the circumstances” surrounding his accomplishment, making it appear as if no other doable options existed. Were there other movements that I knew how to make in the store? Were impediments to them lacking? Would making them have amounted to another accomplishment, say, selecting plain towels? If yes on all three counts, then I could have acted otherwise, my unwillingness to do so notwithstanding. Should I come to regret not taking advantage of this opportunity, I would fault my motivation, not my skill set. Thus, we retrospectively evaluate our conduct much like an accomplished chess player reviews his matches, looking to see if more would have been accomplished had other known gambits been tried. It’s all about getting the most out of one’s learning. A miscue is still a miscue, even if conatatively determined.

Conceiving of agency in terms of SHA comes naturally to us. It is, if you will, the default justification of our reactive attitudes. Left to our own devices, scientific discoveries would have given us no reason to doubt that we act freely, since it is obvious that our actions do not exhaust (physically) possible accomplishments. But our judgment in this matter has been hijacked by philosophers with religious agendas, bent on convincing us that we do not fully belong to the natural order, that we must exercise a sovereign power in making choices in order to be moral agents and stand for God’s Final Judgment. Thus, tension exists between our knowledge of how nature works and our

⁵ John Perry, 'Wretched Subterfuge', pp. 105-7.

self-image. But if we could just get beyond this two millennia old false consciousness, we would regain the quiet assurance of our ancestors, secure in the knowledge that human persons can and do act freely, even while being subject to natural laws.⁶ Thus, PC consists of applying SHA to PA, denying FM to rebut counterexamples, and his neo-Rousseauian plea for us to return to our conceptual roots, which he calls Revisionism. I proceed to examine each strand.

Conditionalism

To begin with, SHA yields a Conditionalist account of what PA satisfaction means, Perry's protestation to the contrary notwithstanding. After all, it is put forth as a defense of Hume, who is unabashedly a Conditionalist:

By liberty, then, we can only mean *a power of acting or not acting according to the determinations of the will*. Thus, liberty means that if we choose to remain at rest, we may; if we choose to move, we also may. But this is the situation of everyone who is not a prisoner in chains.⁷

Further, in discussing FM, Perry himself says:

If I choose the skim rather than the lite, it will annoy my wife. I don't want to annoy my wife. If I wanted to annoy my wife, that's what I would do. Since I don't want to annoy my wife, that's not what I am going to do. It would be crazy to pick the skim and not the lite, unless I wanted to annoy my wife. My not being crazy is part of factor X. So it is *not* open to me to bring about the conjunction of picking the skim and having just the desires and preferences that I do, because the only motivation I would have for picking the skim and not the lite is that I would have different preferences than I do. If I pick the skim, given that my memory is intact, and I am not crazy, that will be because I want to annoy my wife.⁸

The Conditionalist need not deny that an agent's skills and opportunities are categorically possessed, existing independently of his interests. His point is that what a free agent attempts to accomplish depends upon his will- what *he* wants and, hence, has

⁶ John Perry, 'Wretched Subterfuge', pp.94-5; 110-11.

⁷David Hume, *Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) ch.8.

⁸ John Perry, 'Wretched Subterfuge', p.109.

chosen to do, rather than the coercive will of another. That is to say, which ability such an agent exercises in a given situation is a function of what he intends to ‘get out of it’, dictated by his desires, not the demands of others. Were they significantly different, he would be relying on another skill, as he availed himself of another opportunity: he could do otherwise, if only he were so willing. It is unconditionally true that this other skill and opportunity exist; that he can take advantage of them and, thus, satisfies PA, is only conditionally true, which is precisely what Hume maintains. Thus, unless one conflates ability with its exercise there is no distinction to be drawn between PC and Conditionalism.

But if the former is not an upgrade on the latter, then it begs the same question: Could the (mental) action of making a choice be free? Is it unconditionally possible to do anything to avoid one’s choices? Perry declines to discuss free choice of the will; but if SHA does not entail that we can satisfy PA on the basis of our skills and opportunities alone, then that discussion is unavoidable. As we shall see, advantages along those lines do not entail freedom given the possibility of motivational shortcomings.

Self-Control

The competency clause (CC) of SHA could only be a *facon de parler*, given that it is intended as (part of) a defense of Hume. Speaking of execution of movements by an agent makes it appear as if something like Agent Causal Libertarianism is being endorsed, according to which persons themselves are the uncaused causes of their volitions and the resulting actions.⁹ But Hume, of course, famously rejected the notion of a person or self existing independently of his/her states (their subject), controlling the

⁹Randolph Clark surveys contemporary versions of this philosophy in *Libertarian Accounts of Free Will* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003). Cf. also E.J. Lowe, *Personal Agency* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

contents of his/her will.¹⁰ Perry's own analysis of selfhood is constructed along Lockean lines, so that it does entail substantiality.¹¹ Nevertheless, since he also endorses the doctrine of "natural causation," according to which a person's conative and doxastic states are the immediate causes of his volitions, there is no self-control in his philosophy either, no substantial executive at work in the production of volitions.¹² Instead, the CC must reduce to something like 'There is a type of movement M that the "agent's" strongest desire (reducible, in turn, to a neural process) can produce'. But this way of putting things exposes a flaw that PC shares with other forms of Compatibilism: it belies our sense that we *do* exercise self-control of the sort the agent-causalists posit. That is to say, it implies that these basic movements would be done *for* one (a mere "bundle" of states, to the extent that one exists at all, in Hume's version of the philosophy) rather than one being their executor. I am not my desires/beliefs, the intimacy of our relationship notwithstanding. Thus, to be told that my movements come at their behest is tantamount to being informed that *I* really have no accomplishments- am not an agent at all. (I am a bystander to my own putative accomplishments.) If there is anything here that is praiseworthy/blameworthy, it is "my" states, not me. Since SHA is supposed to buttress our reactive attitudes, Perry, then, owes us an explanation of how one can be responsible for the doings of one's desires/beliefs, which, in addition to not being one, are the effects of events in the distant past and often times arise unbidden.

¹⁰ *A Treatise of Human Nature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) Book I, Section VI: Of Personal Identity.

¹¹ 'The Problem of Personal Identity', in John Perry, *Personal Identity*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1975), pp. 1-30.

¹² Perry, 'Wretched Subterfuge,' pp. 97-8.

As advertised, we shall see shortly how Saint Anselm's 2WT may be marshaled against PC, but another aspect of his philosophy of free will applies here, viz., the notion that the will is its own 'efficient cause.'

Alvin Goldman briefly addresses this concern in *A Theory of Human Action*. He writes, paraphrasing R.E. Hobart:

(T)he past finished its business when it produced the agent as he is, with his wants and beliefs; it does not stretch out a ghostly hand to compete with these wants and beliefs in causing the agent's acts. Nor does it compete with the agent himself, as if he were some other agent, trying to overpower him in an attempt to achieve its own goals and objectives.¹³

Putting aside the distinctness and involuntariness issues, what you have, then, is partial control over your behavior, according to this model: what you do can never be entirely up to you. Thus, it is something for which you are only partially responsible. Such an assessment is as good as it gets with PC and, indeed, any form of Compatibilism. Even should one find desirable certain desires, thus forming high-order volitions, this criticism would remain valid. According to Harry Frankfurt, the "embracing" of one's desires creates freedom in the will, that is, the choices that are the effects of those embraced desires are free for one's embracing of their causes.¹⁴ But the embracing here- a choice- is also going to be the effect of a desire (all choices are, according to the Compatibilist) so that it is being made *for* one instead of by one. If I am in control of myself (my mind) as I deliberate, then I am able by myself to make a choice appear before me: I am able to cause of myself a change in myself- willing to do one thing rather than another, having been undecided. Since the Compatibilist refuses to acknowledge the

¹³ Alvin I Goldman, *A Theory of Human Action* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1970), pp. 84-5.

¹⁴ Harry Frankfurt, 'Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person', *Journal of Philosophy* 68 (January 1971), pp. 5-20.

existence of such an (unnatural) power, there is simply no getting around the fact that his view entails an excuse for not owning up to one's bad conduct: 'Don't blame it on me, but the desires with which I have been saddled'.

Initiative

Consider the following cases (and others like them): A performer who cancels a series of shows because of personal problems; A bright pupil suddenly bored by his studies; A world class athlete who has lost interest in his sport; A romance out of which the 'spark' has gone. In each one, there is an agent suffering from a motivational deficiency: due to lack of initiative, he cannot bring himself to perform hitherto routine tasks. 'I can't go on this evening', 'I can't do any better in school', 'I can't compete like I used to', 'We can't see each other anymore' - all of these seem to be legitimate claims of inability. But being hamstrung conatively entails neither a loss of skill nor opportunity. Thus, the above agents were able to act differently according to SHA.

Yet we do say things such as, 'She could have gone on tonight' or 'He should be doing much better at his studies' or 'He appears to be in great shape' or 'They needn't have split up'. The problem is, it's not clear that the individuals at whom these remarks are directed *are*, all things considered, 'up to' engaging in their former activities. Such remarks may only be our way of alluding to the fact that there is more to being able to accomplish something than having the required skills and opportunity, or attempts to instill initiative, so that the unavailing skills *can* be exercised. (Indeed, they could be regarded as drawing attention to the fact that, though the person in question is free according to SHA, ultimately they are limiting themselves because of their choices, their failure to utilize the very freedom whose analysis Perry eschews, discussed below).

Would we blame any of them for failing to meet our expectations? Is there not a loss of self-control attendant upon conative failure? Aren't they all bound to fail, despite their skills and the opportunities presented them, until they are once again driven to succeed? If so, then FM appears true; we should not prescind from an agent's motives in determining whether or not he can act otherwise. Sans the proper motivation, an individual may be mired in failure, extant skills and beckoning opportunities notwithstanding.

It is open to Perry to sustain his denial of FM by treating the above agents as impaired. I have been assuming that their problems are purely psychological, to be distinguished from (say) laryngitis, a concussion, or arthritis. Perhaps, though, their motivational deficiencies cause a temporary loss of the cognitive/motor skills that make up their competencies, or at least render their exercise physically impossible? The problem then becomes the existence of motivational deficiencies in regards to others actions that are shunned, such as my refusal to disappoint my wife. For, there appears to be no principled way to distinguish between those mental states entailing impairments and those that leave our skills intact and available. All motives place limits on what we can do. An agent's strongest desire interferes with his ability to do things contrary to securing its object, making him no less incapable of other accomplishments than those now lacking an interest in or averse to former pursuits. My desire to please my wife makes the 'won't' in 'I won't buy the plain towels' akin to 'would never', making the whole sentence an expression of inability: to wit, 'I would never do such a thing; I am simply incapable of it'.

It seems, then, that our motives are not only relevant to what we will do, but what we can do as well. There is an all things considered sense of ‘can’ according to which lack of initiative entails an inability. One may appeal to it to justify one’s unwillingness to blame another agent for his failure to do something or accept responsibility for one’s own failures. If lacking competence or an opportunity constitutes a valid excuse for inaction, then inadequate motivation should as well.

Free Agency as Involving Free Choice and Inconceivable Without It

Let us suppose that the above objections to PC could be met. Should we then automatically embrace Revisionism? Suggesting that we abandon our belief in the significance of freedom of the will is a controversial claim if ever there was one. Could we simply sever our conception of free agency from (what seem to be) the more basic notion of free will? Is it even possible to act freely sans a free will? Isn’t free agency dependent upon freedom of choice, given that intentions are taken to cause as well as guide behavior? Perry maintains that the belief in free will is an artifact of discredited religious dogmas. Does it not belong to common sense as well? Were the definitions of St. Augustine, St. Anselm, Duns Scotus, *et al.* mere stipulations, formulated whole cloth for religious purposes? Or were they not based upon a widely shared intuition, viz., that control of our minds in choice formation is the *sine qua non* of our being free and responsible agents?

Suppose I came to believe that my choices were being caused by someone else, content to otherwise leave me alone (risking the occasional case of *akrasia*). Should I then conclude that, since he has left my skills intact and deprives me of no opportunities I would otherwise have, that my agency is yet free? Or should I believe that my bodily

movements, well-timed and skillful though they may be, share in my will's loss of freedom? Competence and opportunity are surely goods. But would they alone make for true freedom, if our choices were beyond our control? In positing SHA in lieu of a defense of free will, Revisionism only appears to point up, rather than rebut, Kant's charge that Compatibilism is a "wretched subterfuge."

Returning to Perry's discussion of FM we can discern, in fact, a belief in precisely the sort of control the Revisionist is supposed to abjure. To wit:

It seems that I would think of things as follows. If I choose the skim rather than the lite, it will annoy my wife. I don't want to annoy my wife. If I wanted to annoy my wife, that's what I would do. Since I don't want to annoy my wife that's not what I'm going to do. It would be crazy to pick the skim rather than the lite, unless I wanted to annoy my wife.¹⁵

On whose authority was this resolution made- just who is the 'I' engaging in this act of self-examination? Whence the confidence that precisely those desires and preferences will become directives? (As a Humean, it cannot be the belief that the two are necessarily connected.) Why would anyone think that they are conatively related unless he has reason to believe that it's wholly up to *him* what becomes salient, decisive? Further, whence the preference for comity and reasonableness? Here too we must employ the language of free choice, lest we invite Kant's charge. For if he had not freely chosen these values over competing inclinations, if he's just 'always been that way', then he hardly deserves credit for his cooperation. If something as basic to practical reasoning as value formation is taken to be beyond one's control, then philosophical rigor enjoins Hard Determinism, instead of an attempt to persuade us to refashion our own self-image. At the end of the day, should I become convinced that I am not in charge of my decision-

¹⁵ Perry, 'Wretched Subterfuge', p. 109.

making, that my choices can be attributed to something besides exercises of self-control, I can no longer regard myself as a free agent, no matter my skills and opportunities.

Conclusion

PC turns out to beg the same questions regarding free choice and self-control as other forms of Compatibilism. Further, it fails to recognize the importance of initiative in free agency. But even a remedy of these flaws should not persuade us abandon our belief in the significance of free choice of the will. Free agents must exercise that power.