In defense of flip-flopping

Andrew M. Bailey[1] · **Amy Seymour**[2]

Abstract
Some incompatibilists about free will or moral responsibility and determinism would abandon their incompatibilism were they to learn that determinism is true. But is it reasonable to flip-flop in this way? In this article, we contend that it is and show what follows. The result is both a defense of a particular incompatibilist strategy and a general framework for assessing other cases of flip-flopping.

Keywords Incompatibilism · Libertarianism · Free will · Moral responsibility · Determinism

1 Introduction

It is easy to malign fickle politicians who chase the favor of crowds and vacillate on matters of real importance. This propensity to flip-flop on previously bedrock positions appears irresponsible and intellectually bankrupt. But could there be situations in which flip-flopping is epistemically apt? This is a central question of our article. A deciding factor, we maintain, is whether said flip-flopping is appropriately reasons-responsive. We will argue the point by defending one kind of flip-flopping regarding the metaphysics of agency.

Order of authors is alphabetical. For the record, exactly one of us accepts semi-compatibilism.

✉ Andrew M. Bailey
andrew.bailey@yale-nus.edu.sg

Amy Seymour
aseymour3@fordham.edu

1 Yale-NUS College, Singapore, Singapore

2 Fordham University, New York City, USA

🙋 Springer

John Martin Fischer has developed an impressive package of views in the metaphysics of agency. According to Fischer, though determinism may rule out the ability to do otherwise, moral responsibility and determinism are compatible. We do not propose to assess all of Fischer's views here. But we will identify and evaluate one unifying thread.

The thread we'll focus on is Fischer's observation that incompatibilism about moral responsibility and determinism has the distasteful consequence of holding our free and morally responsible agency hostage to an empirical hypothesis.[1] Our agency would depend on the physicists not discovering that determinism is true; it would hang on a thread. The incompatibilist pays some price in insisting that our agency precludes a discovery by physicists that determinism is true.[2]

Incompatibilists could reply that this is just as one would expect. *Of course* our agency makes demands of the world. And if those demands aren't met, we'd give up something of value. This is no more a problem for incompatibilism than the hypothesis that your getting to work on time makes demands of the world (the trains must run on schedule) and that if those demands aren't met, something of value is lost. All this shows is that debates about incompatibilism matter; something of real worth hangs in the balance.

Some incompatibilists have replied in a rather different way. They say that were we to find out determinism is true, we need not give up on morally responsible agency; we could reasonably give up on incompatibilism instead. Should you wake up one day to news from physicists that determinism is certainly true, you'd be wise to suppose that there is some flaw in incompatibilism after all, but that our moral responsibility remains intact. Our agency hangs by no thread.[3]

This sort of incompatibilist is a flip-flopper. They'd abandon a key position—incompatibilism—to retain freedom or moral responsibility: not unlike a politician who reneges on a central issue upon seeing that they might lose power. And like other flip-flopping, this propensity has a price. It appears unmotivated or even counter-productive, especially given the central role incompatibilism plays in the incompatibilist's preferred metaphysics of freedom.

Fischer has recently argued that the incompatibilist flip-flop makes for "bad epistemology".[4] Says Fischer: reflection on what one would reasonably do were one to learn that determinism is true uncovers *counterfactual evidence* against

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[1] In what follows and for brevity, we'll sometimes suppress the qualifier in "free and morally responsible agency" and opt for just "agency".

[2] Fischer (1999, p. 129, 2000a, p. 323, 2000b, p. 413, 2001, p. 444, 2006, p. 183, 2007, pp. 44–45, 81, 2008, p. 169). Nelson (2011) provides a useful overview of the dialectical context. Vargas (2007, pp. 142–145) presses a line of argument similar to Fischer's. For helpful and critical discussion of the "hostage crisis", see Timpe (2008, pp. 93–96 and Mele (2006, pp. 202–203). Sehon (2013) argues, in effect, that Fischer's own views have similarly distasteful consequences.

[3] van Inwagen (1983, pp. 206–20, p. 219). Steward (2012, p. 124) endorses a similar strategy.

[4] Fischer (2016). Previous developments of Fischer's anti-flip-flopping stance appear in Fischer and Ravizza (1998, pp. 253–254) and Fischer (1999, p. 129). For critical discussion see Cain (2019), Furlong (2019), and O'Connor (2019). Cain emphasizes that the resilience of compatibilism isn't evidence of its truth, and O'Connor focuses on the kind of evidence we might have that we're free. Our critique will, by contrast, emphasise the structural role of the view that we're free and on a certain *comparative* claim about the relevant evidence. We say more below about where our analysis diverges from O'Connor's.

incompatibilism. And the thing to do in the light of known counterfactual evidence is to bring it home—to integrate that evidence into one's actual stock of reasons and actually reject incompatibilism. The incompatibilist who would flip-flop about determinism ruling out free will, says Fischer, has *actual* reasons to abandon her incompatibilism.

This is an intriguing and helpful line of argument. Intriguing: it promises to turn a dialectical strength into weakness. Helpful: it gives shape to the inchoate charge of flip-flopping. It is especially interesting coming from Fischer. For a dominant theme in Fischer's corpus—in contrast to the argument identified above—is a resolute focus on the actual over the counterfactual. Across dozens of articles and books, Fischer has argued that what matters most for moral responsibility is not what would or could have been, but what is. If the target argument is correct, though, what would or could have been can play a surprising evidential role.

In what follows, we'll critically evaluate Fischer's objection. We'll show that it is mistaken. But before saying more, note what's at stake. This isn't just about whether Fischer or Vargas or other critics of flip-flopping are correct, or even whether particular incompatibilists have adopted an ineffective defensive strategy. Rather, the overall attractiveness and coherence of a certain incompatibilist approach is on the line. So too are questions about philosophical methodology and the aptness of flip-flopping in general. How should we update in the light of new evidence? Can counterfactual scenarios, even those we regard as impossible, provide us with actual evidence? Can flip-flopping be a reasonable and useful dialectical strategy to be used in other contexts? If so, when? These are tricky questions. Working through a case study will illuminate both the questions and their answers.

2 Flip-flopping

Consider[5]:

You are curious about free will, moral responsibility and determinism. You consider whether we are free and morally responsible.[6] It seems so. We certainly *act* as if this were the case: praising and blaming each other, deliberating between apparently open possibilities, punishing and rewarding, and so on. And these practices all seem to be correct, good, and right. You conclude that things are as they seem. We're free and morally responsible.

You don't stop there. You eventually come across the Consequence Argument.[7] You find that argument quite convincing, and accordingly adopt the view that, necessarily,

[5] Fischer understandably uses van Inwagen, the original flip-flopper, as his interlocutor throughout. But we'll put this story, and many of our points, in the second person. We do this for clarity, for vividness, and to emphasize that the real lessons here aren't about whether one particular philosopher got things wrong. They concern us all.

[6] One important matter we'll not address is the relationship between free will and moral responsibility. Throughout, we'll envision an incompatibilist who thinks that *both* are ruled out by determinism. For helpful discussion of related matters, see Mele (2007, pp. 206–208, 2015).

[7] The *locus classicus* here is van Inwagen (1983, p. 16): "If determinism is true, then our acts are the consequences of the laws of nature and events in the remote past. But it is not up to us what went on before we were born, and neither is it up to us what the laws of nature are. Therefore, the consequences of these things (including our present acts) are not up to us.".

if determinism is true then we're *not*, after all, free and morally responsible. You add this hypothesis—incompatibilism—to your stock of beliefs and derive an important insight: determinism is false.

A skeptical friend interjects:

> You say we're free and morally responsible and that incompatibilism is true. But suppose that the infallible goddess Minerva herself whispers to you that determinism is true (suppose that this testimony is rock-solid; what Minerva says you must believe). What would you do then?

You think about it, and answer that, prompted by whispers from Minerva, you'd ditch incompatibilism. You couldn't reasonably hold on to *all* of determinism, incompatibilism *and* the view that we're free and morally responsible, after all. And though the Consequence Argument certainly *seems* sound, you'd have to conclude in that case that there is some hidden flaw in it.

Your skeptical friend is quick to reply:

> For shame! You're a metaphysical flip-flopper. You *say* you're an incompatibilist. You *say* you find the Consequence Argument quite convincing. But when the truth of determinism flips, you flop and drop incompatibilism. This flip-flopping disposition isn't just odd; it's bad epistemology. Would you, after hearing Minerva's whisper, be rejecting the Consequence Argument for *good* reasons, or bad? In a spirit of charity, suppose the former. But it's not as though those reasons would hold only in this counterfactual scenario. Minerva and her revelations are silent about the Consequence Argument. Whatever reasons there are to reject the Consequence Argument are present in actuality, then. The thing to do upon learning *that* counterfactual evidence is to *bring it home*. Those good reasons for rejecting the Consequence Argument are in effect here and now, in actuality. Update in their light and reject the Consequence Argument.

It is good to have skeptical friends. They keep us honest and help us see our own commitments more clearly. The skeptical challenge here in view—it echoes the arguments of John Martin Fischer—is no exception. Before exploring details, though, we'll outline our fundamental reply.

3 An analogous case

Here is an analogous case.

You are quite sure you know you have hands. That seems as obvious as anything. You have also come to the view that, if you know you have hands, you also know you're not a handless brain in a vat (BIV). In particular, you've identified the principle that, necessarily, knowledge is closed under known entailment.[8] Though some of the issues are tricky, you've worked through a number of them and have thus found that

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[8] "Known" in "known entailment" is a detail we'll suppress in what follows, since we'll take it as given that the relevant entailment is indeed known, and easily so (*you have hands* plainly entails *you're not handless BIV*). See also footnote 19.

principle persuasive. You derive an instance of the principle and deduce, accordingly, that you know you're not a BIV. So far all seems right.

But you begin to wonder what your scholarly hero, Dr. Epistemology, thinks. You correctly regard her as a sage with unusually reliable epistemic judgment. It occurs to you that she might not agree with your conclusion that you know you're not a BIV.[9] Were she to say as much—in a final deathbed note, say—your position would become unstable.[10] You'd still be quite sure you know you have hands—that seems as obvious to you as any other epistemic judgment. So you'd conclude, contrary to initial appearances, that there must be some flaw in your case for the thesis that if you know you have hands, you also know you're not a handless BIV. These thoughts are troubling. But since you haven't yet learned what Dr. Epistemology actually thinks, you aren't ready to reject the closure principle or its instances; nor will you abandon your position that you know you're not a BIV.

Consider that scenario in which you'd change your mind after hearing from Dr. Epistemology. One could describe the shift as a flip-flop. But it seems to us to be perfectly above board, or at least not automatically suspect. So perhaps a better description is *responding to new evidence*. You'd learn something new and change your views accordingly.

Despite acknowledging all this, though, you would not be reasonable in flip-flopping just yet. You don't know what Dr. Epistemology thinks of your conclusion; you're not able to bring any such counterfactual evidence home. Your mind remains—quite reasonably—unchanged.[11]

4 The case applied

To make the analogy explicit, note these key elements:

Knowledge:	You know you have hands.
Link:	Necessarily, if you know you have hands, then you know you're not a handless BIV.
Don't Know:	You don't know you're not a handless BIV.

You reasonably accept Knowledge and Link but are also disposed to drop Link on learning Don't Know. You *would* flip-flop—and in doing so would have to say that *something* went wrong with your initial reasoning on behalf of Link, even if you

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[9] We do not raise this view to praise it. Indeed, Jackson (2015) and Magidor (2018) independently offer persuasive reasons to think we can know we're not BIVs. What matters for our purposes is that it's *possible* that someone could reasonably find themselves convinced that we can't know we're not envatted and that these reasons don't necessitate global skepticism.

[10] There are delicate questions here about disagreement and epistemic superiors that we can't take up; see King (2012) for helpful discussion and citations. What our case requires is that the testimony of an expert (Dr. Epistemology) *can* be strong indeed, even if it isn't as strong as the whispers of an infallible goddess, and even if it doesn't include extensive supporting arguments. The unconvinced reader can substitute in Minerva or her equivalent here as well.

[11] Here and in what follows we will, following Fischer, talk about what is *reasonable*. This locution hides some details about which we'll remain neutral. We will not take a stand about, for example, whether reasonability amounts to having an *excuse* to believe, *permission* to believe, or full *justification*, and our arguments will remain neutral between internalist or externalist theories of reasonability.

couldn't say what it was. But that reasonable disposition gives you no reason at all to *actually* revise your conviction in both Knowledge and Link. Think of how you'd react to these words from a skeptical friend:

> We know that if Dr. Epistemology were to tell you that Don't Know was true, you'd be quite sure of Don't Know and would be convinced that you'd made some mistake about Link. So why not *bring that evidence home*? Why not in fact conclude that your reasoning went wrong and Link is in error? To fail to do this is just bad epistemology.

You'd be sensible in standing your ground and holding both Knowledge and Link. You didn't *actually* hear from Dr. Epistemology that Don't Know. And you don't know that, were you to get in touch with Dr. Epistemology, she'd affirm Don't Know. What you know is that, were she to inform you that Don't Know, you'd see that somehow your earlier reasoning was in error and would reject Link.

We think you're reasonable to stand your ground here while remaining disposed to concede should new evidence come to light. Before saying more on that point, note a key feature of the case. The thesis you're disposed to flip-flop about is, by your own lights, a non-contingent truth. Link is necessarily true if true at all. To envision a scenario in which Link turns out to be false is thus to engage (by your own lights) the *impossible*. There is something strange about engaging what one takes to be impossible. But not *that* strange. For reasonable agents update their sense of what is possible in the light of new evidence. That is what you'd be doing, should you reverse course on Link.

There is a certain kind of philosopher who will adopt Link (or a principle that entails it) as a kind of inviolable side-constraint—never to be revised, utterly impervious to new evidence. In the analogous case as we've described it, you are not such a philosopher. You are, rather, disposed to respond to reasons even about things you're quite convinced of—like Link. We do not say that this stance is mandatory. But we do say this: it is a reasonable stance, and when in place contributes to a convincing case of reasonable flip-flopping.[12] To further see the reasonability of this stance, note that it is an instance of a more general disposition to stick with what is more evident. We do not insist that Link could never be more evident than Knowledge. But we think that when it is (more on which shortly), that relative difference in evidential support contributes to apt flip-flopping.

You accept Knowledge and Link. But were you to learn Don't Know, you'd give up Link. Are you, in exhibiting this package of views and dispositions, guilty of high epistemic crimes and misdemeanors? We think not.[13] Three conditions deserve attention. Working through these will vindicate our core judgement about the case

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[12] The view we take here is weaker than the Quinean thesis that *everything must* be up for grabs. We say, rather, that in some cases it is reasonable for a principle like Link (and those that entail it) to be up for grabs, even for those who endorse it with real enthusiasm.

[13] Our claim is not, to be clear, that just anyone would be reasonable in flip-flopping. We say, rather, that a philosopher caught in the situation we describe—coming to accept Link for the reasons given, coming to accept Don't Know in the way described, and so on—could reasonably flip-flop.

and illuminate its structure, paving the way for a more general diagnosis of when flip-flopping is apt.

First, note where Knowledge stands in your noetic structure. It's not just that hand knowledge is especially important. Rather, it's that if hand knowledge goes, so too does any other empirical knowledge. Because Knowledge is a kind of epistemic linchpin, a subject who's learned Don't Know could be quite reasonable in rejecting something else instead—Link, for example.[14] We don't claim that Knowledge is impervious to revision.[15] It is certainly difficult to defend against skeptical threats, much less to decisively demonstrate. But even for all that, we think it reasonable to be very slow indeed to give up Knowledge when put to the test. Put a little differently: sensible regulative epistemology—figuring out what to believe—is a game of Jenga. And one of its guiding principles is that if you must remove a block, let your first pick be one that won't topple the whole structure. Take the whole thing down only when you really must.

The skeptical reader may wonder about the relevance of this structural condition. Just because a belief plays an important structural role doesn't imply that it is warranted, after all. We can be wrong about linchpins.[16] Luckily, we have two other conditions to highlight.

Second, your evidence for Knowledge is stronger than your evidence for Link. Why? On the face of it, Link is a simple conditional. It says that if you know one thing, you know another. But consider *why* you accept that conditional. In the case as described, it is on the basis of a more general closure principle. You accept *If you know you have hands, then you know you're not a handless BIV* because you accept a principle like *Necessarily, if you know x, and x entails y, then you know y*.[17] We

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[14] Some foundationalists may take Knowledge to be structurally important because, though it rests on no other beliefs, other beliefs rest on it. Coherentists will give a different gloss on the same basic idea—perhaps Knowledge is central to your web and stands in many asymmetric support relations with other beliefs. We here remain neutral between these and other views in epistemology. Knowledge is a linchpin in another sense as well. For if the thing to do on learning Don't Know is to reject hand knowledge, then surely the same would be true of foot knowledge, desk knowledge, other people knowledge, and so on. They are all under threat.

[15] O'Connor wonders whether flip-flopping of the sort we defend has it that Freedom is somehow *controlling*—to be held come what may, utterly insensitive to empirical refutation (2019: 93). That's not how we're thinking of things here; we suggest, rather, that it is reasonable to not drop Freedom provided that there is another thesis that may be dropped in its stead—Incompatibilism, in this case.

[16] The skeptical concern cuts both ways: we can also be wrong about seemingly bedrock convictions about what is possible or what something entails. Those inclined to keep Link and Incompatibilism are presumably treating those principles as a linchpin instead. But we think that, when confronted with truths one previously thought impossible, subjects may reasonably disagree about what must go.

[17] We are again suppressing a detail. The principle in the body is the closure of knowledge under entailment, put in the second person. The closure of knowledge under *known* entailment, put in the second person, adds this: if you know x, *and you know x entails y*, then you know y. For that more compelling principle to apply here, we'd need to add one additional ingredient to our case, namely: you know *you have hands* entails *you're not a handless BIV*. Stated fully, then, the case involves these four elements:

Knowledge:	You know *you have hands.*
More Knowledge:	You know *you have hands* entails *you're not a handless BIV.*
Known Link:	Necessarily, if you know *you have hands*, and you know *you have hands* entails *you're not a handless BIV*, then you know *you're not a handless BIV.*
Don't Know:	You don't know *you're not a handless BIV*.

needn't delve into all of the details about that more general principle here—but in this case, let us suppose, articulating and building a case for that principle involves all sorts of judgements—about various conditions under which a subject is entitled to believe—and indeed, knows—the plain entailments of her known beliefs, for example. You got there, we're supposing, by thinking about counterfactuals, fake barns, painted mules, and related matters. It's not that you're unusually bad at this kind of reasoning; it's rather that you're *better* at making more straightforward and ordinary judgements about knowledge.

We do not, to be clear, claim that in every possible case and for every possible subject the evidence for Knowledge is stronger than the evidence for Link. Nor do we say that the case for Link is, in absolute terms, weak; it is strong enough to warrant firm belief, in fact. We say, more modestly, that there is at least one case where the evidence for Link is weaker than the evidence for Knowledge, and that the subject of that case is reasonably disposed to flip-flop on Link upon being exposed to the right kind of new evidence. It is rational to change one's mind about closure principles when faced with, say, new arguments about pragmatic encroachment or contextualism; so also in this case.

But note too that our case is not contrived. It may well be a scenario into which some contemporary epistemologists fall. For principles affirming the closure of knowledge under known entailment and other claims in that vicinity are subject to significant and lively controversy.[18] There are arguments for and against. Many involve recherché thought experiments, theories about the role of knowledge ascriptions and possibilities of error, theories about which possible scenarios count as closer to actuality, and more. None of this is surprising—this is philosophy, after all. And the controversy, we note, does not by itself suggest that Link (itself a simplified instance of one of these more general closure principles) must be false. Or true, for that matter. But it does suggest that a case for Link that is rooted in a more general closure principle is—for many reasoners—a bit more tenuous and less certain than whatever recommends a knowledge ascription like Knowledge.

Third, your evidence for Knowledge doesn't obviously rely on Link. It is independent, in at least this sense: you have not reasoned from Link to Knowledge, and Link does not figure into your positive case for or defense of Knowledge. As above, we do not say that this condition *always* holds; but it holds in this case. Coming to deny Link doesn't in itself rationally require you to deny Knowledge.

Call these three conditions Structure, Strength and Independence. All three are in place in our analogous case. They together help explain why flip-flopping in our analogy is acceptable. And where they are absent, flip-flopping is not acceptable.

Footnote 17 continued

The added detail is plausible enough, and does not interfere with the analogy we identify. On learning Don't Know, we think abandoning Known Link (rather than Knowledge or More Knowledge) would plainly be reasonable. Despite the added detail now in view, our case is still one of reasonable flip-flopping.

[18] See, *inter alia*, Avnur (2012), Backes (2019), Coliva (2015, Chapter 3), Dretske (2005), Hawthorne (2005), Lawlor (2005), Smith (forthcoming), and Wright (2004). The Dretske/Hawthorne exchange includes helpful references to older literature. Some disputes directly concern the closure of knowledge under known entailment. Others concern the closure of some other positive epistemic status, such as justification or warrant. For helpful guidance on the relationship between these disputes, see Tucker (2010: 497–499) and Warfield (2004). For impressive empirical argument that closure is not an indisputable piece of common sense or implicated in common practice, see Turri (2015).

Consider, for example, a subject who accepts Knowledge on extremely weak evidence (suppose it appeared to her in a hazy dream and she has otherwise never considered the matter) but has very strong evidence for Link (expert testimony combined with detailed and convincing arguments, say). Strength would not obtain in such a case, and so this hapless dreamer would not be reasonable in rejecting Link on learning of Don't Know. She'd do better to reject Knowledge—and to revisit her willingness to accept doctrines revealed in hazy dreams.

Our three conditions are also in place for the flip-flopping incompatibilist. Let's make the parallel explicit. The elements of our analogy correspond to these claims:

Freedom:	We are free and morally responsible.
Incompatibilism:	Necessarily, if we are free and morally responsible, then determinism is false.
Determinism:	Determinism is true.

Dr. Epistemology's testimony corresponds to the whisper of Minerva—it is decisive evidence. Your best work on issues relevant to Link corresponds to the evidence for incompatibilism (the Consequence Argument, say). And your own good judgement about hand knowledge corresponds to whatever evidence we have that we're free and morally responsible.

Are the Structure, Strength, and Independence conditions realized with respect to Freedom, Incompatibilism, and Determinism?

Let's start with Structure. There's good reason to think it obtains here. If we are not free and morally responsible, then a whole range of common beliefs would require revision—beliefs about the aptness of praise or blame or about the usefulness of deliberating about apparent alternatives, for example. Freedom is a linchpin.

Strength obtains, too. More importantly, Fischer hasn't made a convincing case in the negative (which case he'd need to make if his overall argument is to succeed). We'll not argue that the evidence we have for Freedom is absolutely strong; it's the comparative claim that matters—that the evidence for Freedom is *stronger than* the evidence for Incompatibilism.

Note at the outset that the primary evidence for Incompatibilism is *philosophical*: the Consequence Argument, its background metaphysical assumptions, and arguments similar in kind. Assumptions there include the thought that we have no agency over the distant past or the laws, and that if so, we're not free or morally responsible with respect to their entailments. Here's the thing: metaphysics is heady business. There is persistent disagreement, even among the experts. Theories here often rest on modal intuition. There is some reason to think, then, that the case for Incompatibilism is, even if metaphysically excellent, less than decisive.[19]

What of Freedom? Here things are different. There's a route to Freedom that can feel almost Moorean in flavor and vivacity.[20] You can test this hypothesis by doing

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[19] We do not here endorse modal skepticism; but a moderate version of that stance—as exemplified and defended in van Inwagen (1998)—could augment the argument of this paragraph. It is also worth noting in this connection that recondite philosophical arguments of *any* kind are rarely, if ever, decisive. See Ballantyne (2014b), Hanna (2015), Lycan (2020) and van Inwagen (2004).

[20] We call the case "Moorean" to emphasize that it feels easy and ordinary rather than to suggest that it is impregnable or immune to revision in light of other strong evidence. We are agnostic about whether

something morally significant or creating or destroying value in the world. Give it a try: make someone's day with an unusually kind gesture. Or ruin it with a cruel insult (on second thought, don't do that). We suspect you'll find it very hard to believe that you didn't freely exercise agency in a morally responsible way, conducive to praise or blame. Judgements along these lines don't require obscure knowledge of what is possible or of the arguments for or against some metaphysical theory. You very quickly see that your kind gesture was to your credit, or that the cruel remark was not.[21]

Here's why all this matters. Some of the most obvious paths to Freedom and Incompatibilism are quite different. And it is plausible that the case for Freedom is stronger than for Incompatibilism. The latter is removed from ordinary experience in ways that the former is not. The latter is significantly more controversial among experts than the former; and it seems to rest on modal judgements in a way that is not obviously to its credit.[22] This is some evidence, we think, that the Strength condition is satisfied.[23]

Turn finally to Independence.[24]

Is the evidence for Freedom independent of the evidence for Incompatibilism? We have no decisive argument in the affirmative. But two points incline us in that direction. First, the most obvious cases for Freedom and Incompatibilism are, as we've already observed, quite different in their basic feel and approach. The former needn't be metaphysical or modal. The latter typically is. Second, note that many endorse Freedom without having any view at all about Incompatibilism—non-philosophers, for example.[25] This is some indication that the evidence for Freedom needn't crucially rely on Incompatibilism.[26]

Footnote 20 continued

the case here must be construed as *introspective*. For helpful discussion, see all of O'Connor (2019). The metaphysical content of such "Moorean" judgments can be difficult to assess—see Seymour (2016) for discussion of the relationship between Moorean claims, freedom, and logical entailment, and Seymour (manuscript) for cases in which many are inclined to revise metaphysical claims in light of new, salient evidence. The difficulty of identifying, in various contexts, what is entailed by our Moorean assertions only helps our arguments.

[21] For a fascinating argument that "all rational deliberators, in virtue of their very nature as rational deliberators, must represent themselves as free", see Nelkin (2011): Chapter 7. See also Nelkin (2004). Importantly, Nelkin's argument does not depend on compatibilism (or its denial) and would, if sound, imply that such representation—of which belief in Freedom would be an instance—is reasonable.

[22] For more on this comparative claim—explicit argument that the evidence for Freedom is stronger than the evidence for Incompatibilism—see Lycan (2003).

[23] If strength of evidential support is a matter of conditional probabilities on one's evidence E, then our suggestion can be modeled as: $0.5 < P(\text{Incompatibilism}/E) < P(\text{Freedom}/E)$. The "$0.5 <$" bit is important; our target subject accepts incompatibilism, after all.

[24] Independence must obtain if flip-flopping is to be reasonable. Why? If your evidence for Freedom relied on Incompatibilism or on the evidence for Incompatibilism (i.e., if Independence didn't obtain), then learning Incompatibilism could provide you with a rebutting or undercutting defeater to Freedom. In that sort of case, learning that at least one of Freedom or Incompatibilism is false would be an occasion for removing *both* beliefs, not for picking one for retention, as the flip-flopper does.

[25] And some philosophers—think of Alfred Mele's *agnostic autonomism* as in Mele (1995), which says that we're free and responsible but is agnostic about whether that freedom and responsibility requires indeterminism.

[26] We are here concerned with the epistemic situation of the incompatibilist. The question at hand, after all, is what the incompatibilist should do on learning that determinism is true, and what that tells her about the reasons for and against her view. So what we say here is compatible with the observation that, for some compatibilists, the case for freedom and responsibility is *not* independent of the case for compatibilism.

These two points about Independence are not decisive. But they don't have to be, for our purposes. Remember the dialectical situation. Fischer has proposed an argument that flip-flopping is unreasonable. For that argument to succeed, the incompatibilist's situation must, in some important respects, be unlike our analogy. We've proposed Structure, Strength, and Independence as three important conditions and have argued that they *do* obtain in the incompatibilist's case. And even if we haven't shown that decisively, our points suggest that Fischer's case isn't successful.

We have already observed parallels between our epistemology case and that of the flip-flopping incompatibilist. Here is one more. Recall that Link was, by your own lights, a necessary truth. But you would change your mind about whether it was a necessary truth, should new evidence require as much. The same is true of Incompatibilism.[27] That thesis is necessarily true if true at all. To consider a scenario in which it is false is, by the incompatibilist's own lights, to consider the impossible. It is, again, somewhat odd to engage the impossible in this way. But despite any resulting metaphysical vertigo, it is reasonable to revise one's views about what is possible when new evidence demands it. We needn't insulate our sense of modal space from the evidence. This follows from a more general principle: to be reasonable is to respond to reasons.

Here is another way to see the point. To learn Don't Know or Determinism is to introduce a new and destabilising element into one's epistemic economy. One won't find equilibrium without serious adjustments. When the new element is as radical as Don't Know or Determinism, it should come as no surprise when the required adjustments involve revision to even treasured convictions about what must be or what is possible—such as Link or Incompatibilism.

5 The defense extended

Flip-flopping is fine, provided that the case we're free and morally responsible is *stronger* than the case for incompatibilism and that the cases are suitably independent. When those conditions are met, it is reasonable to be disposed to flip-flop on learning that determinism is true without bringing that disposition home. And it is reasonable to, despite that disposition to flip-flop, hold onto the view that we're free and morally responsible and that, if we are, determinism is false.

Our defense has taken the form of an analogy, some lessons derived, and an application to the flip-flopping incompatibilist. Let's now explicitly connect our defense to specific remarks from Fischer.

One important element of Fischer's objection is that there is no evidential connection between determinism and the premises of the Consequence Argument. *How*, exactly, can learning that determinism is true—as when Minerva whispers—show us the flaws

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Footnote 26 continued

One might reason from the latter to the former, for example, or deploy the latter to deflect objections to the former. Independence might well be false of the average compatibilist. But it is, we've argued, true of the flip-flopping incompatibilist. The strategy we suggest is inspired by and coheres well with van Inwagen's claim that he is more confident in freedom than incompatibilism, and the grounds he gives for that difference in confidence (1983, pp. 206–220).

[27] For a small sample of the literature on incompatibilism's modal status, see Bailey (2012).

in that argument?[28] We answer: Minerva's whisper does not say *how* the Consequence Argument is flawed. But for those who have stronger evidence for Freedom than for Incompatibilism, it can tell us *that* the argument is flawed. And that is grounds enough to, upon hearing from Minerva, reject the argument. The logic here isn't fancy: "Determinism is true (so says Minerva). And I'm *more* sure, given the evidence, that I'm free and responsible than that the Consequence Argument's premises are all true. So I will reject the conjunction of those premises."

Fischer anticipates our fundamental move—appealing to the relative strength of evidence for Freedom and Incompatibilism:

> If [van Inwagen] learns that determinism is true, he realizes that there must be a hitherto hidden defect with his position. Where is the defect? When surveying his evidence for his position, it seems clear to him that his evidence for the Principle is *weaker than* his evidence for any other ingredient in his position. So, given the varying degrees of strength of his evidence for the other ingredients, it seems clear to him that the hidden defect is *more likely* to be found in [the Consequence Argument] than in his commitment to our freedom and responsibility…[29]

So far, so good. But Fischer is not impressed:

> This account… assumes that learning that determinism is true only *reveals* an up-until-now hidden defect with the… [Consequence Argument]. What van Inwagen learns doesn't *create* the defect—it merely makes it known. But note well: the account thus implies that the… [Consequence Argument] is problematic even before van Inwagen learns that determinism is true. So, by adopting this account of the evidential connection between learning that determinism is true and the… [Consequence Argument], van Inwagen must accept that the… [Consequence Argument] is dubious. Therefore, in his actual situation, there is already reason to give up the… [Consequence Argument].[30]

We take issue with Fischer's reasoning here. We agree that *were* Minerva to whisper that determinism is true, there *would* (already) be some flaw in the Consequence Argument. But this counterfactual simply does not imply that there *is* (already) some flaw in the Consequence Argument. The transition from subjunctive to indicative is dubious, especially when dealing with claims about necessity.

Think of our earlier analogy. Were Dr. Epistemology to tell you that Don't Know is true, you'd have reason to doubt your reasoning about Link. But until and unless you actually hear as much from Dr. Epistemology, you shouldn't conclude that your reasoning is (already) wrong. Were Dr. Epistemology to testify to Don't Know, there'd be some flaw in the case for Link. But you don't have reason to think that Dr. Epistemology actually would so testify; nor do you have reason to think that there is in fact (already) some flaw in the case for Link. The disposition to flip-flop doesn't tell you what to do just yet about Knowledge and Link. In fact, when you're in the dark about

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[28] Fischer (2016): 54.

[29] Fischer (2016, p. 55) (emphasis original).

[30] Fischer (2016, p. 55) (emphasis original).

what Dr. Epistemology would say—as you are in the analogy—believing Knowledge and Link remains perfectly reasonable.

The application we draw is, we hope, clear. *Were* Minerva to whisper that determinism is true, you *would* have reason to think that the Consequence Argument is (already) flawed. This doesn't imply that it *is* flawed. The transition from subjunctive to indicative is unconvincing, especially with regards to what one takes to be counterpossible.[31]

But we do not say that counterfactual evidence is never to be brought home.

Indeed, Nathan Ballantyne has recently identified cases that show certain counterfactual evidence *must* be brought home.[32] For knowledge of some counterfactuals (*were I to ask David Lewis what he thought of my argument, he would give a devastating objection*, say) furnishes one with evidence of evidence. To learn that counterfactual, as one does when reflecting on the intellectual powers of David Lewis, is to learn that there *are* devastating objections. But in the cases at hand, we don't learn counterfactuals like that. We don't know, for example, that *were you to call up Dr. Epistemology, she'd insist on Don't Know* or that *if asked, Minerva would testify to Determinism*. What we learn is, rather, that *were Dr. Epistemology or Minerva to so testify, there would have been flaws in the cases for Link or Incompatibilism all along*. The general form of Ballantyne-style counterfactuals is, then, more like "if you were to look, you'd find evidence that *q*". The counterfactuals relevant to our cases are more like "were you to find evidence that *q*, you'd also have evidence that you were mistaken in holding to both *p* and *if p then not-q*". In learning the former kind of counterfactual, one learns indirectly of evidence that *q*. Not so for the latter case.

There's more. Fischer wonders:

> … given that van Inwagen has learned that determinism is true, why is it plausible that the belief in free will and moral responsibility would be assigned a higher probability than the Principle (or other ingredients in the Consequence Argument, such as the Principle of the Fixity of the Past or the Principle of the Fixity of the Laws)? This would seem to suggest excessive confidence in our freedom and responsibility and perhaps an unattractive complacency…. it is completely unclear that these Principles are (or would be) less plausible than our status as free and morally responsible agents, or on what basis van Inwagen could reject them in order to maintain his belief in our freedom and moral responsibility.[33]

We reply: the grounds for thinking we're free and morally responsible are different in kind than those that support incompatibilism. The Consequence Argument rests on more obscure metaphysical judgements about the past, laws of nature, transfer principles, and so on. Not so our grounds for thinking we're free and morally responsible. Those grounds are rather more ordinary. These observations give some initial support to our claim that the case for Freedom is indeed stronger than the case for Incompatibilism. Anyone who defers to ordinary judgement but keeps a vigilant and skeptical

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[31] In the language of Ballantyne (2014a, b, p. 372), our point is that the conditionals uncovered here are *non-defeating* epistemic counterfactuals—or rather, counterpossibles.

[32] Ballantyne (2014a). See also Ballantyne (2015).

[33] Fischer (2016, pp. 56–58). The Principle is a key inference rule deployed by the Consequence Argument and the Principles of the Fixity of the Past and the Principle of the Fixity of the Laws are its central premises.

eye on the metaphysician's modal hunches can agree with us here. And even if that isn't correct, the dialectical point we made earlier stands. Fischer hopes to make a case that the flip-flopper is unreasonable. So it would behoove Fischer to show that the cases for Freedom and Incompatibilism are *not* asymmetric in the way we've argued.[34]

6 The case defended

Timothy O'Connor considers a case not far from the epistemology analogy we've given and says that in it flip-flopping "would not be a mystifying stance."[35] Despite that initially generous appraisal, though, O'Connor remains somewhat doubtful of the aptness of flip-flopping. There is, however, an important difference between O'Connor's case and the one we deploy here. O'Connor's case has elements along these lines:

> Hands: You have hands.
> Conditional: If you have hands, you're not a handless BIV.
> Handless: You're a handless BIV.[36]

Note well: Conditional is not Link. Link is a simplified instance of a controversial transfer principle—the closure of knowledge under entailment.[37] It is not true by definition, and there are arguments for and against. Conditional, by contrast, may very plausibly be thought of as true by definition—indeed, supposing "you're not a handless BIV" just means not-(you're handless and you're a BIV), then Conditional is a tautology of propositional logic.[38] This asymmetry between Conditional and Link is dispositive, we think. On learning Don't Know, rejecting Link is a viable course—to reject Link is to reject a principle some epistemologists treasure, but doesn't require anything so radical as denying a logical theorem. Rejecting Conditional after learning Handless, by contrast, is totally unpromising and involves sacrificing a logical truth.

Here is one more kind of case:

> Freedom: You are free and morally responsible.
> Martian Conditional: If you're free and morally responsible, then you're not directly manipulated by Martians in all that you do.

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[34] One way to develop Fischer's case would be to argue that the evidence for Freedom is more recondite than it might appear. Perhaps the view that we're free or morally responsible—via the concept of moral responsibility itself—somehow smuggles in metaphysical assumptions, for example. We do not insist that this strategy must fail, but we do think it requires development that goes significantly beyond what Fischer has said in print. And it does no damage to our more fundamental point here, which is that one must *weigh* the evidence here.

[35] O'Connor (2019, p. 91).

[36] We've added "handless" to make it clear that, on this interpretation of O'Connor's case, its second element is true by definition. If this is not what O'Connor has in mind and his second element is not true by definition, then we think that flip-flopping and rejecting that element is all the more reasonable.

[37] Or, in its more detailed and explicit formulation as given in footnote 19, the closure of knowledge under known entailment.

[38] The logical form of Conditional would be "$H \rightarrow \neg(\neg(H)\hat{}(B))$", itself a tautology of propositional logic—satisfied by every truth-assignment for its sentence symbols.

| Manipulation: | You are directly manipulated by Martians in all that you do. |

O'Connor thinks that it is more reasonable, on learning Manipulation, to reject Freedom than to reject Martian Conditional. We're not so sure. A lot hangs on the details. What does direct manipulation amount to, for example? How does it work? If the manipulation in view plainly precludes freedom or moral responsibility, then denying Martian Conditional will be clearly implausible. Martian Conditional will begin to seem rather more like Conditional than Link. And in such a scenario, the thing to do would be to drop Freedom. If not—if it is not so obvious that manipulation precludes freedom or moral responsibility—then rejecting Martian Conditional remains a viable and perhaps even commendable route.

Turn now to the incompatibilist. Which case does hers resemble more closely? We say the flip-flopping incompatibilist is in a situation rather more like Knowledge, Link, and Don't Know than O'Connor's Hands, Conditional, and Handless.

The theses that animate the Consequence Argument are not true by definition. Propositional logic does not teach that we are powerless with respect to the laws of nature, for example, and you'll not learn in Intermediate Metalogic that no one is even partly responsible for the distant past. As fate would have it, another contested principle behind the Consequence Argument is a closure principle. In the free will case, it's the closure of powerlessness under entailment; in the moral responsibility case, it's the closure of non-responsibility under entailment.[39]

7 Consequences

It is, as we've said, good to have skeptical friends. It is also good that Fischer has subjected the flip-flopping incompatibilist to such sharp scrutiny. The incompatibilist can survive that scrutiny. And her position is all the stronger for surviving. One might even say it displays here a pleasing kind of dialectical resilience.

We began by highlighting Fischer's concern that incompatibilism about moral responsibility and determinism has the distasteful consequence of holding our free and morally responsible agency hostage to an empirical hypothesis. The concern is real. It deserves reply. A disposition to flip-flop—something we've defended—is one way to mitigate that concern. If what we've said is correct, there is no hostage crisis. We need not wait with bated breath for the physicists or gods to disclose whether determinism is true, wondering all the while whether something precious—our status as free and morally responsible agents—hangs in the balance. It doesn't. For should we learn that determinism is true, we could reasonably flip-flop.

Flip-flopping can certainly *feel* inappropriate, even feckless. In politics, it is often both. The kind of flip-flopping we've defended is, by contrast, apt and principled. It is not mere wishy-washiness or responsiveness to the affections of a crowd. It is, instead, *responsiveness to reasons*. And anyone who's benefited from Fischer's work knows how important *that* is. To adjust one's views about Link after chatting with Dr.

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[39] Fischer (1994), interestingly, exploits several times over this structural parallel between these closure principles in epistemology and in the metaphysics of free will. For further discussion see Slote (1982).

Epistemology is acceptable. So also, one *should* adjust one's views about metaphysics after hearing from Minerva herself. The only problem here is that Dr. Epistemology and Minerva are a little harder to contact than we might like and, if contacted, provide less revelation than we would prefer.

We close with a thought about what our arguments show more broadly.

We have argued, effectively, for a conditional: if flip-flopping is apt in our epistemology case, then it is apt for certain incompatibilists. Not all readers will endorse the antecedent of this conditional. But even these readers can learn from our arguments. For in establishing our conditional we have uncovered heretofore unnoticed connections between a certain incompatibilist strategy and more general epistemic questions.

And these questions matter. For it is not only the incompatibilist who'd flip-flop.

It is easy to identify actual cases with a similar structure. Consider the atheist who maintains that (i) there is evil, and (ii), if there is evil, there is no God. On learning that there is indeed a God, it'd be perfectly reasonable for the (former) atheist to drop (ii) but hold on to (i). And yet despite this reasonable disposition to flip-flop should there turn out to be a God, the atheist is not bound to retract her allegiance to (ii) or to deny the reasons she has found that support it. It should come as no surprise, then, that this is a case in which our three conditions hold. Structure: (i) is of structural importance; so revising it should come only as a last resort. Strength: the evidence for (i) is better than the evidence for (ii), in part because it doesn't turn on recondite questions about what situations an absolutely perfect being would permit. Independence: and the cases for (i) and (ii) are independent; someone can observe evil in the world without having any views at all about what God would do about it.

Consider, also, the logician who maintains that (a) a certain quantum mechanical theory is true and (b) if that theory is true, then there are true contradictions. On converting to classical logic and rejecting the possibility of true contradictions, we don't think this logician is bound to reject (a). She might still favor that quantum mechanical theory. What she might reasonably do, instead of dropping the theory altogether, is to reject (b) and to reinterpret the target theory as not requiring true contradictions. And yet despite this reasonable disposition to flip-flop should classical logic turn out to be correct, the logician here in view is not required to, in fact, retract her actual allegiance to (b). As before, the three conditions we've identified can help diagnose when this stance is reasonable: when (a) plays a critical role in a subject's noetic structure, when the lines of evidence for (a) are stronger than those for (b), and when those lines of evidence are independent.[40]

The point is not just to identify yet another case in which flip-flopping is apt.[41] It is, rather, to show that the aptness of flip-flopping commands interest beyond our focal case study and its particulars. More is at stake here than the Consequence Argument, Fischer, van Inwagen, and so on. Flip-flopping is a dialectically useful tool. That's why politicians use it. The atheist we envision above faces a retort: "Oh, so what would

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[40] The case is not contrived. For useful discussion of flip-flopping on classical logic for empirical reasons, see Putnam (1969) and Bell & Hallett (1982).

[41] Though the cases do serve that purpose. Notice, too, that like our epistemology and incompatibilist cases, the atheist and logician cases involve scenarios their subjects regard as impossible (theism and the principle of non-contradiction, respectively).

you do if you found out there's a God? You'd probably deny (ii); but then you should probably just deny (ii) in actuality as well. There goes the argument from evil!" The atheist has a ready reply. She can flip-flop on (ii) if convinced of God's existence. But she isn't thereby required to abandon the argument from evil. The non-classical logician, for similar reasons, isn't required to abandon her empirical argument that there are true contradictions.

That's not mere politicking—it's good epistemology.

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