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Compatibilism and the ability to do otherwise

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Keith is cooking dinner for his friend, Keisha. He knows Keisha really doesn't like chili very much at all, but Keith *loves* chili. Obviously he's not going to put *loads* of chili in – that would be mean. But maybe if he just puts a tiny bit in, she won't notice. So he does add a bit of chili. Unsurprisingly, Keisha notices. 'I can't believe you put chili in when you know I don't like it!', she says. 'Did you *have* to do that? Couldn't you have resisted, just this once, for my sake?'

Keith feels chastened, contrite, a little guilty even. He was supposed to be doing something nice for Keisha, and he messed up. He was taking a risk in adding the chili; after all, if *he* was going to notice it, chances are Keisha would too. 'I'm sorry', he says. 'I should have resisted. I was being selfish. Please forgive me.'

Next door, by complete coincidence, James is cooking dinner for Jasmine, and the same scenario is playing out, culminating in Jasmine posing the very same question to James. But James is a convinced determinist. He thinks his decision was wholly determined by the prior state of his brain ten minutes ago – indeed, wholly determined by things that happened before he was even born – together with the laws of nature. After all (or so he believes) the laws govern the behaviour of everything whatsoever, and for any given state of the Universe at any given time, the laws specify *exactly* what state it will be in at the next moment. The Universe is (according to James) a big, deterministic machine: at any given time, given the state it's in at that time, there is only one possible state it can be in at the next moment, and so at the moment after that, and so on. And so the laws, plus facts about the distant past, determine what went on in James's brain ten minutes ago and hence they determined, in turn, that he would decide, just now, to add the chili – and then to actually go ahead and add it.

James thinks it follows that the answer to Jasmine's question is no. If determinism is true – and James thinks it is – then he *couldn't*, in fact, have resisted;

that was something he was not *able* to do. And if he *couldn't*, or *wasn't able, to have done otherwise* – and, again, James thinks he wasn't able to do otherwise – then he didn't act freely. Finally, he reasons, if he didn't act freely (which he has established to his own satisfaction) then he really wasn't *morally responsible* for adding the chili: it really *wasn't his fault*. Of course, it's true that he was acting out of self-interest rather than paying more attention to what Jasmine wanted. But hey, that's just the way he is, he thinks. It's not *his* fault he was made that way. (It's not his parents' or anyone else's fault either; after all, everything *they* did was determined by the distant past plus the laws of nature. And we can go back in time, running the same line of argument, until we're back with the dinosaurs and there's *nobody* to blame.)

James says sorry just to keep the peace – he really doesn't want to fall out with Jasmine over a bit of chili – but he doesn't mean it. He doesn't *really* think he is to blame. If Jasmine insists on blaming him – which she apparently does – that's a mistake. But hey, her blaming him is just as much a product of factors outside *her* control as James' decision to add the chili was (he thinks) a product of factors outside *his* control. So, James thinks, he can't really blame her for that.

Who's right? Is it Keith, who accepts that he is blameworthy for adding the chili, or James, who did exactly the same thing as Keith but who thinks he *isn't* blameworthy? Correspondingly, are Keisha and Jasmine right to blame their friends? Well, first of all, we shouldn't take James's word for it that determinism is true; James is (I hereby stipulate) no expert on these matters. In fact, I think none of us knows whether or not determinism is true. That's important because a lot of philosophy students do seem to think it's pretty obvious that determinism is true. (Some professional philosophers seem to think that too, I should add.) I am really not at all sure what they think their evidence for that claim is. To put it more strongly, I don't think they have any. So if your immediate reaction to James was 'yes, that's right! Determinism is true!', you really should reconsider. (A lot of *other* philosophy students seem to think it's obvious that determinism *isn't* true, and, in particular, that when we go around making decisions or forming intentions to do things – shall I add the chili? Shall I go to the party or stay home and write my essay? – the laws of nature plus facts about the past *don't* determine which choice they'll make. Quite a few professional philosophers also seem to think that. Again, I'm not sure what they think the evidence for that claim is.)

Let's just assume for now that James is right about determinism, however. Does that mean he's right that he isn't morally responsible, and therefore that he isn't blameworthy, for adding the chili? In other words, is the argument James gave a good argument? Does the fact (and we're assuming it is a fact) that James was determined by the past plus the laws of nature imply that was unable to do otherwise? And, if so, does *that* imply that he didn't act freely? And does *that* in turn imply that he lacked moral responsibility for what he did?

A lot of philosophers have spent *a lot* of time thinking about that question, and – you probably won't be surprised to learn if you've studied any philosophy – opinion remains resolutely divided on what the right answer to it is. But before I have a go at answering it, let's think about Keith again for a moment. You'll notice that Keith didn't actually answer Keisha's question. Keisha asked Keith whether he could have resisted putting in the chili, and Keith didn't say; he simply accepted that he was blameworthy and apologised. Now, one thing you might think at this point is that, while he didn't *directly* answer Keisha's question, he answered it implicitly. Why? Because he admitted that he *should* have done otherwise: he *should* have resisted. And you might think that this *does* commit him to thinking that he *could* have done otherwise. Why? Because, generally speaking, we don't go around saying that people *should* have done such-and-such when we don't think they *could* have done it.

Imagine Jasmine finds out from a mutual friend that Keisha plans to go round to Keith's tonight and break off their friendship. She is absolutely furious about the whole chili incident and hasn't forgiven Keith for it at all. Jasmine (rightly, let's assume) thinks this would be a terrible mistake. Keisha is seriously overreacting to what was really a fairly trivial incident. (After all, Jasmine has forgiven James, despite the fact that his apology seemed, frankly, a little half-hearted.) What's more, Keisha and Keith get on really well and she would really regret not seeing him any more. Jasmine thinks to herself that she should talk to Keisha and dissuade her from going round to Keith's. But she can't. She's out of town, Keisha's phone is turned off, and there's no other way for Jasmine to contact her. She's completely stuck: there's no way she *can* talk to Keisha. So Jasmine concludes that it's not true, as it turns out, that she *should* talk to Keisha – and that's because it's just not something she *can* do. If you're persuaded by Jasmine's line of thought, you might (admittedly generalising from a single example) think that we should subscribe to what's sometimes called the 'ought implies can' principle: if you *ought to*, or *should*, do something, then it must

be the case that you *can* (or you are *able to*) do it. Hence if you *can't* do something (e.g. Jasmine can't talk to Keisha), then it's not the case that you *should* do it: it's not true that Jasmine *should* talk to Keisha. (Note: this doesn't imply that she *shouldn't* do it. It's not true that I *should* scratch my nose right now. That doesn't imply that I *shouldn't* scratch it. Morality has nothing to say one way or another on the nose-scratching issue.)

Let's get back to my point about Keith. Keith told Keisha that he *should* have resisted. If you subscribe to the 'ought implies can' principle, then, you'll think that it's true that Keith *should* have resisted only if he *could* have resisted – in which case, even though Keith doesn't directly answer Keisha's question ('couldn't you have resisted?'), Keith ought to think that the answer is yes: after all, he thinks that he *should* have resisted, so if ought implies can, he ought also to think that he *could* have. But in that case, Keith is committed to thinking that he *could have done* (or again, *was able to do*) *otherwise* than adding the chili. And in *that* case – assuming determinism, which we are currently doing, and also assuming that James's argument works – Keith really shouldn't think that he is blameworthy for adding the chili. Keith is mistaken: he has no more reason to feel guilty than James has.

The moral seems to be that we really do need to think about whether or not James's argument is a good argument. Look again at the argument. It has four key premises. First, James is assuming that determinism is true. As I've said, I don't think James is entitled to that assumption, but let's assume it for now and see where it takes us. Second, *if* determinism true, *then* – by the little argument James gives in the third paragraph – James was unable to do otherwise than add the chili. (So, since James thinks determinism *is* true, he infers that he was not, in fact, able to do otherwise.) Third, if James was unable to do otherwise, then he didn't act freely. (So, since James thinks he was, in fact, unable to do otherwise, he infers that he didn't act freely.) And, finally, if James didn't act freely, then he wasn't morally responsible for adding the chili. So, since James thinks he didn't act freely, he infers that he wasn't morally responsible for adding the chili.

Just to help us keep track, let's lay the argument out a little more formally, where (P1)-(P4) are the *premises* of James's argument and (C) is the *conclusion*:

(P1) Determinism is true: everything that happens, including James's adding the chili, is implied (or guaranteed, or necessitated) by facts about the distant past together with facts about the laws of nature.

(P2) If determinism is true, then James wasn't able to do otherwise than add the chili (since his doing so was guaranteed by facts about the distant past and the laws of nature).

Interim conclusion: James wasn't able to do otherwise than add the chili.

(P3) If James wasn't able to do otherwise than add the chili, then he didn't add it freely.

Interim conclusion: James didn't add the chili freely.

(P4) If James didn't add the chili freely, then he wasn't morally responsible for adding the chili.

Therefore

(C) James wasn't morally responsible for adding the chili.

Now, James (we may assume) is a perfectly normal agent. He is not suffering from any odd psychological compulsion that somehow makes him add chili to the dinner no matter how much he knows his dinner companion hates it. (There's a difference between someone who decides on a whim to steal from a shop and a kleptomaniac.) Also, nobody else is forcing him to add the chili; nobody's standing with a gun to his head, saying 'add the chili, or else!'. This being so, if determinism really is true, then – if James's argument is correct – what goes for James goes for all of us, all of the time. When you keep a promise, or buy your sister a nice present, or break a promise, or forget your sister's birthday, or scratch your nose or buy a coffee, you are no more able to do otherwise than James was; so you no more act freely than he did, and (in those cases where moral responsibility is in play) you are no more

morally responsible than he was. And the same goes for me, and Keith, Keisha, Jasmine, and everyone else, all of the time.

That's a worrying thought. If you don't think it's worrying, reflect on this: in a 2009 study, social psychologists found that people who had been 'primed' not to believe in free will were more likely to behave in antisocial ways. In particular, when asked to prepare tortilla chips and hot salsa for fellow participants, having been told that the other participants did not like spicy food, they put more salsa on the chips compared to the subjects who *hadn't* been primed not to believe in free will. If only Jasmine had known about that, maybe she would have hidden the chili.

Even more worrying, however, is this: if we have no free will, and hence (given (P4)) we aren't morally responsible for anything, then nobody is blameworthy for anything, ever. Not perpetrators of genocide, not serial killers, not that guy on the bus who refused to give up his seat for the pregnant woman – not even James. Nor is anyone ever praiseworthy for anything: not people who make huge personal sacrifices to devote themselves to unquestionably worthy causes, not the person who found the wallet you'd dropped in the street and went to great lengths to track you down and return it, and not Jasmine for at least *trying* to stop her friend doing something she'd come to regret. Not only would praising and blaming people be wholly inappropriate; it would also be inappropriate to engage in a whole host of commonplace human emotions and attitudes: guilt, resentment, gratitude and respect, to name just a few (see Strawson 1962; Strawson calls such attitudes 'reactive attitudes'). Reactive attitudes legitimately apply only to moral agents: agents capable of acting freely and responsibly. It's inappropriate to feel grateful to a newborn baby, or to genuinely respect a rock. (You might be glad that the baby has stopped crying. But that's different from being grateful. I'm glad I just narrowly avoided hitting my head on a cupboard door. I'm not grateful to the cupboard. That would be inappropriate.)

At this point, you might be thinking: OK, not having free will would be really bad. But all of this is premised on determinism – premise (P1) – and didn't you say earlier that we just don't know whether determinism is true? So, if we don't have any good reasons to believe in determinism, James's argument doesn't give us any good reasons to abandon our belief in free will. So what's the problem? The answer to that question is: *we just don't know*. Maybe determinism *is* true. And even if it *isn't* true, maybe at least *some* of the time when we act, our action was determined by facts about the past plus the laws of nature. (Just because not *everything* is determined by

the past plus the laws, it doesn't follow that *nothing* is.) *Not knowing*, on any given occasion, whether or not someone is blameworthy or praiseworthy, or whether or not it would be appropriate to be grateful to them or whatever, would, itself, be a pretty bad result. (You want to blame that guy who didn't give up his seat, or be grateful to the person who returned your wallet? Well, go ahead – if you have *some* reason to think that their doing so wasn't determined by the past plus the laws of nature. But of course you don't have any particular reason to think that. So, now, how should you behave? How should you even *feel*? You just don't know.)

Here's a second thing to notice about James's argument. If we remove the first assumption – the assumption that determinism is true – we still end up with an argument for an interesting conclusion, namely that acting freely, and hence morally responsibly, is *incompatible with* determinism. That is to say, *if* determinism is true, then (generalising from the case of James) nobody ever acts freely or morally responsibly. Again, putting it a little more formally, we end up with the following argument:

- (P2) If determinism is true, then James wasn't able to do otherwise than add the chili.
- (P3) If James wasn't able to do otherwise than add the chili, then he didn't add it freely.

Therefore

- (C1) If determinism is true, then James didn't add the chili freely.

Let's just stop there for a moment. The above is a version of what's known as the *Consequence Argument* (see van Inwagen 1975). If the reasoning is sound (which it certainly seems to be) and if the premises (P2) and (P3) are true, then determinism is *incompatible with* acting freely. People who do indeed believe that acting freely is incompatible with determinism are known, you will be astonished to learn, as *incompatibilists*. The Consequence Argument, then, is an argument for incompatibilism. Equally astonishingly, people who reject incompatibilism and claim instead that acting freely is compatible with determinism are known as *compatibilists*.

Notice, however, that the above argument doesn't, just by itself, imply anything about moral responsibility. We get to a conclusion concerning moral responsibility by adding back in the fourth premise of James's argument:

(P4) If James didn't add the chili freely, then he wasn't morally responsible for adding the chili.

Putting (P4) together with (C1), we get to:

(C2) If determinism is true, then James wasn't morally responsible for adding the chili.

I think (P4) is true. Or, to put the point more generally, I think acting freely is a requirement for moral responsibility: if you don't act freely, then you aren't morally responsible for what you do. (Some philosophers disagree with me about this.) I also think moral responsibility is really important. Reactive attitudes aren't merely incidental add-ons to our lives; they are absolutely central to the meaningfulness of our relationships with other people and to our conception of our lives as genuinely worth living. So, given what I said earlier about not knowing whether or not determinism is true, I think it would be a *really good idea* to be a compatibilist. But *wanting* compatibilism to be true isn't good enough, unfortunately. We need to find a way to wriggle out of the Consequence Argument, since – given that I'm accepting (P4) – that's the only way to avoid the conclusion that we never really have any good reasons to think that someone is morally responsible for what they have done.

Compatibilists have thought of loads of different possible ways of wriggle out of the Consequence Argument, but I'll focus on just one kind of response, which appeals to what we might mean when we say that someone *was able to do otherwise*. According to (P2) of the Consequence Argument, if determinism is true then nobody is ever able to do otherwise than what they actually do – because what they do is determined by the past plus the laws of nature, and (whether or not determinism is true) we can't do anything about *those*. You can't now make it the case that your parents bought you that puppy you really wanted when you were eight, or that the American War of Independence never happened; nor can you make it the case that $e=mc^2$ isn't true. And, by (P3) (and assuming that James and his adding the chili are

representative of normal people and their actions more generally), if you aren't able to do otherwise, then you don't act freely. But here's a question. Should we *really* think that determinism is incompatible with the ability to do otherwise? That is, should we *really* think that (P2) is true? I'm going to try and argue that we shouldn't.

So, let's have a go. (Warning: this is going to take up the rest of this article.) Let's start by thinking about abilities more generally. Here are some abilities I have: the ability to play the violin, the ability to make lasagne, the ability to write philosophy papers. Many people are able to verify that I am able to do these things because they've heard me play the violin, eaten one of my delicious lasagnes, or read one of my philosophy papers. Similarly, we may suppose, both Keith and James are perfectly capable of resisting temptation. They have managed to resist temptation on many occasions in the past. (If they didn't have this ability, it would have been rather unwise of Keisha and Jasmine to let their friends cook their dinner, given how much they dislike chili and how much they know their friends like it.) The fact that people have abilities like these is in no way undermined by determinism. If determinism is true, that doesn't at all undermine the claim that I am able to play the violin or make a lasagne. (Imagine that someone proves conclusively that determinism is true. We'd still perfectly well be able to divide people up into those who are able to play the violin and those who aren't.)

Note that, as we ordinarily talk about abilities – that is, *given what we mean* when we say that someone is or is not able to do something – abilities generally don't come and go from one time to another, or at least not unless some radical change happens in the person we're talking about. Here's a task for you. What abilities do you currently have? Check the ones that apply: play the violin, make a lasagne, drive a car, fly a plane, speak Urdu. That was easy, right? (Well, you might conceivably be unsure. Maybe you had violin lessons for a short while when you were a kid, but that was ages ago and you're really not sure whether you can still do it. But in most cases, it was easy.) And – unless anything has changed, like you've been taking driving lessons recently – you would have ticked off the same items ten minutes ago, or last week, or a year ago. Right now, I am able to play the violin. I've been able to play it since I was a kid. Trust me.

So it looks as though the truth of determinism makes no difference to whether or not someone has a given ability *at a given time*. Remember the ability list. You filled that in really easily, right? Did it occur to you, even for a moment, to think:

‘hang on, maybe I’m *not* able, *right now*, to play the violin or drive a car or make a lasagne, because if determinism is true, then I was determined *not* to do any of those things’? I’m guessing not. And rightly so: nobody thinks we’re only able to drive a car when we are actually driving one. That’s just not what we mean when we say that someone is able to drive a car. (I don’t even own a car, but I am still very confident that, right now, I have the ability to drive. After all, I drove one a few weeks ago, and I know from experience that I don’t lose the ability to drive over a period of a few weeks.) Similarly, then, the fact that Keith did not resist temptation on this particular occasion does not at all undermine the claim that he had the *ability* to do so. He *did* have that ability, just as I, right now, am able to play the violin and drive a car (though not at the same time). So: even if determinism is true, Keith was able to do otherwise. He was able to resist temptation and refrain from adding the chili. (P2) is false.

But – you might object – it’s not just that Keith *merely happened not to* resist temptation; circumstances before Keith was born, together with the laws of nature, *guaranteed* that he didn’t resist temptation. And he has, and never has had, the ability to do anything about *those*. So how *could* he have had the ability to do otherwise than add the chili? My reply is that one can retain the ability to do something even when circumstances make it impossible to *exercise* that ability. Imagine that my friend Amy just locked me in my bedroom – perhaps because she wanted to make sure that I don’t play the violin in the next ten minutes. (I said I could play. I didn’t say I was any good.) That’s something, we may imagine, I had no control over: I had no *idea* Amy so badly wanted me not to play, or that she would go to such lengths to stop me. So I really wasn’t in a position to do anything about *that*. So circumstances beyond my control have conspired to guarantee that I will not, in fact, play the violin in the next ten minutes. Nonetheless, it’s still true that, right now – locked, as I am, in my bedroom – I have the ability to play the violin.

My point, then – and I admit that this is *way* too quick and really needs *a lot* more defence – is this. Just because you can’t do anything about various circumstances that prevent you from doing something, it just doesn’t follow that you lack the ability to do that thing. Just as I, currently, am able to play the violin despite being locked in my bedroom (not something I had any control over), Keith was able, when making the dinner, to resist temptation – even though he had no control over the

circumstances – that is, facts about the past and the laws of nature – that prevented him from doing just that.

Are we done? Can we now conclude that since, even assuming determinism, Keith had the ability to otherwise, (P2) is false and hence the Consequence Argument fails? If only things were that simple! Unfortunately, there's a big problem with the above argument. As it happens, I *really want* to play the violin right now, and Amy, who, as I say, has locked me in my bedroom, has prevented me from doing that. Grant that I am nonetheless able to play the violin. However, it seems obvious that I am not, now, *freely* refraining from playing the violin. So if my and Keith's cases are analogous, we should conclude that Keith didn't freely add the chili. Oops!

Things are getting a bit complicated here. As philosophers tend to do, let's start clearing things up by making a distinction. Locked in my bedroom, as I am, I *really want* to play the violin. As I said, I am still, right now, *able* to play the violin. But actually, that was a bit too quick, for there is surely *a* sense – again, a perfectly ordinary, commonsense sense – in which I am *not* able, right now, to play the violin. Imagine two things happen when I'm locked in my bedroom. First, someone calls me. 'Are you able to play the violin? We need someone for our concert next week.' 'Oh yes', I reply. 'I am certainly able to play'. (And I don't mean I *will* be able to play next week, having temporarily lost that ability while locked in my bedroom. I mean I really am, right now, able to play.) Second, Amy shouts at me somewhat sarcastically from outside my bedroom door: 'Go on, give us a tune!'. 'I'm afraid I'm unable to do that, Amy', I reply, 'because the door is locked and my violin is downstairs'.

I think both of my responses were correct. But they appear to contradict each other. How is that possible? Answer: there are *two* senses of 'ability' in play here. So when in response to Amy I said that I am *not* able to play, I was not contradicting my earlier response to the caller, when I said I *am* able to play. In *one* sense of 'ability' – the sense at work in my response to the phone call – my ability to play the violin does not come and go; it does not vary from circumstance to circumstance. It's an ability I retain when I am asleep and when I am making lasagne, and while locked in my bedroom. Following Kadri Vihvelin (2013) – whose work I am heavily drawing on in this article – let's call this kind of ability a 'narrow ability'.

What *does* vary from one circumstance to another, when it comes to my ability to play the violin, is whether I have the *opportunity to exercise* that narrow ability. Locked in my bedroom, for example, there are no violins at my disposal. So

the *other* sense of ‘ability’, the sense at work in my reply to Amy, is one that requires not just a narrow ability, but, in addition, the opportunity to exercise it. Let’s call this kind of ability a ‘wide ability’: wide ability = narrow ability + opportunity. So: I retain the *narrow* ability to play the violin even when Amy has locked me in my bedroom. But I lose the *wide* ability, since I do not have the opportunity to exercise that narrow ability.

Now we’re in a position to return to the problem with my attempt to undermine premise (P2): locked in the bedroom, with no violin in sight, I am surely not refraining-from-playing-the-violin *freely* (supposing that I really want to play it and am being prevented from doing so by circumstances beyond my control). So, if this case and Keith’s case are analogous, we should conclude that Keith isn’t acting freely either. And that’s the conclusion I want to avoid.

With the distinction between narrow and wide abilities in play, we can put the worry a little differently. Locked in my bedroom but wanting to play the violin, I have the narrow ability to play but I lack the wide ability: I lack the opportunity to exercise my narrow ability. Given we’ve agreed that I am not *freely* refraining from playing the violin, then, it looks as though it is not the *narrow* ability to do otherwise that is required for acting freely, but the *wide* ability. Right now, I lack the wide ability to play the violin, because I lack the opportunity to exercise my narrow ability to play. And, *for that very reason* (assuming I really want to play, which I do) I do not freely refrain from playing. And now the worry is this: it looks as though acting freely requires having the *wide* ability to do otherwise – and that’s an ability that Keith lacks.

Keith, we have in effect agreed, had the narrow ability to resist adding the chili. But surely, like me, he lacks the *wide* ability to do this. After all, facts about the distant past and facts about the laws of nature – facts he can’t do anything about – together conspired to ensure that he would not, at the relevant time, have the opportunity to exercise his ability to resist adding the chili, just as facts *I* can’t do anything about, namely, Amy’s locking me in the room, have conspired to ensure that I lack the opportunity to exercise *my* ability to play the violin. But if Keith lacked the wide ability to do otherwise, and having the *wide* ability to do otherwise is what’s required for acting freely, then what goes for me in the bedroom goes for him too: he did not *freely* add the chili. Hence the Consequence Argument stands: if we understand ‘Keith wasn’t able to do otherwise’ to mean ‘Keith lacked the wide ability to do otherwise’, then (P2) and (P3) both come out true. And hence, given (P4) – the

claim that if Keith didn't act freely then he wasn't morally responsible for adding the chili – it turns out that Keith wasn't morally responsible for doing so after all. Keisha was wrong to blame him for spoiling her dinner.

I'm going to argue that this objection fails, and I'm going to do that by *denying* that Keith lacked the wide ability to do otherwise. Unlike me, locked in my bedroom, he *did* have the wide ability to do otherwise, and hence freely added the chili. Let's get back to me and Amy. I lack the wide ability to play the violin because Amy has locked me in my bedroom. My being locked in is an *external* impediment to my exercising my narrow ability to play the violin – external, that is, to me. But now consider a case where the 'impediment' is *internal* to me; for example, suppose I'm in the vicinity of a violin, but I really, really don't want to play it. (It's a Stradivarius, worth an absolute fortune – or so I believe – and it would be *terrible* if I damaged it. It's just not worth the risk.) In this case, do I lack the opportunity to exercise my narrow ability? I say not. The opportunity is right there, in front of me – I just don't want to take it up. I have not only the narrow but the wide ability to play. Similarly, there is no *external* impediment to Keith's resisting temptation. So Keith, similarly, has the wide, and not just the narrow, ability to resist. Hence we have every reason to think that he acts freely in adding the chili.

Well, that was rather quick. Here's a slower story. First of all, notice that abilities look a lot like *dispositions*: saying that someone is *able* to do something is a lot like saying that someone or something is *disposed* to do something. In fact, I'll go further than that: I think abilities *are* dispositions. Dispositions are features like *being fragile* (roughly, something is fragile just if it's disposed to break when dropped), *being a carcinogen* (something is a carcinogen just if it's disposed to cause cancer in certain circumstances), and *being boring* (something – a film or a book, say – is boring just if it's disposed to bore people in certain circumstances).

To put things a bit formally, when some object O has disposition D, it will M in circumstances C. So for example when an object (O) is fragile (D), it will break (M) when dropped (C). We can think of circumstances C as the 'triggering' conditions for the disposition, and M as the 'manifestation' of the disposition. Notice that we *shouldn't* say the following about dispositions: O has disposition D *only when it is in circumstances C*. My wineglasses are fragile – even though they are currently sitting in a cupboard and, thankfully, not being dropped. (That's why they're in the

cupboard, after all – to ensure that they’re not in circumstances under which they would manifest their disposition to break.)

What about abilities? Well, as I said, I think abilities are just dispositions. When we say that someone is *able* to do something (and here I mean *narrowly* able), we mean that they are *disposed* to do that thing in certain kinds of (perhaps rather loosely specified) circumstances. For example, when I say that I am (narrowly) able to play the violin, I mean that I am disposed to play the violin in certain circumstances C. Those circumstances are things like: I want to play the violin, there’s a violin lying around for me to play, and I don’t have any good reasons *not* to play it, e.g. I don’t believe that the violin is *hideously* expensive. Some of those circumstances, you’ll notice, are external to me – in this case, the availability of a violin – and others are internal, e.g. I *want* to play.

Now, consider the wide/narrow ability distinction again. Clearly I retain the *narrow* ability to play the violin even if I’m not, in fact, in circumstances C. For example, I retain the narrow ability to play even though Amy has locked me in the bedroom (and even if I really don’t want to play right now). Do I also have the *wide* ability to play the violin when circumstances C don’t obtain? That, I think, depends on *which* of the circumstances don’t obtain. In particular, I *lack* the wide ability when the *external* circumstances don’t obtain, e.g. when I’m locked in the bedroom. Remember, wide ability = narrow ability + opportunity. The lack of appropriate external circumstances is what deprives me of the opportunity to exercise my narrow ability. On the other hand, if the external circumstances required for me to have the opportunity *do* obtain, then it looks as though I *do* have the wide ability – *even if* not all of the *internal* circumstances obtain. For example, I retain the wide ability to play even though I am currently occupied making a lasagne (and my violin is just in the next room), or even though I believe that the violin I’m being asked to play is hideously expensive and hence don’t want to play. (Actually this is all a little too crude, but it will have to do. If you can find fault with the above, good for you – you’re doing some serious philosophical thinking.)

It follows that my having the *wide* ability to play the violin does *not* depend on *all* the required circumstances obtaining. Having the wide ability is more demanding than having the narrow ability – the external circumstances must be right, so that I have the opportunity to exercise my narrow ability – but it is not *so* demanding that *all* the circumstances, internal *and* external, must be right. After all, if having a wide

ability required *that*, then I would only *ever* have the wide ability to play the violin on those occasions when I'm actually playing it. And that is clearly not the case.

(Remember, I can have that wide ability even when I'm making a lasagne.)

So having the *wide ability* to do something does *not* amount to being in the very circumstances, C, that are the 'triggering' conditions for the ability, any more than having the disposition to do something amounts to being in the very circumstances that are the triggering conditions of a disposition: remember, it's clearly *not* the case that a glass is fragile only when it's actually dropped.

Now we can get back to Keith. The question we're interested in is this: does Keith have the *wide* ability to resist adding the chili? The answer to that question is important because, while Keith has the *narrow* ability to resist, acting freely seems to require having the *wide* ability to do otherwise. That's why I don't freely refrain from playing the violin when Amy has locked me in my bedroom (assuming that I want to play it). Even though in such a case I have the narrow ability to play, I lack the wide ability to do so.

Keith's having the *narrow* ability to *not* put any chili in Keisha's dinner is, like other abilities, a disposition – a disposition not to add any chili (M) in certain circumstances, C. (Things are getting a little convoluted here because in this case the ability to 'do' otherwise is the ability to *refrain* from doing something.) It's a bit hard to specify what those conditions might be, but, again, some of them will be internal (perhaps: he really wants to cook a nice dinner for someone, he knows they don't like chili, he knows full well they'll notice if he adds some) and some will be external (perhaps: there aren't a lot of other dinner guests who all threaten to go home if Keith doesn't add chili to their dishes).

But does Keith also have the *wide* ability to resist? Well, we know that Keith is not, in fact, in circumstances C: the circumstances that would trigger his disposition to resist. Assuming determinism (as we still are), he is in circumstances that guarantee that he *will* add the chili. (What are those circumstances? Well, they include the fact that, by an amazing feat of self-deception, Keith has managed to convince himself that Keisha won't notice. Had Keith not been in *that* situation – had he really thought about it and realised that Keisha would *obviously* notice – then he would have resisted.) But that, as we've seen, *just doesn't entail* that he lacks the wide ability to do otherwise, any more than my thinking that the violin is really expensive, or my being occupied in making a lasagne, robs me of the wide ability to play the violin. I

claimed above that what's required for having a wide ability is that the *external* circumstances (such as the availability of a violin) are right. But, in Keith's case, the *external* circumstances *are* right. Keith's problem is not, for example, that of there being dinner guests demanding chili; it's that he's managed to convince himself that Keisha won't notice the chili. And that's an *internal* feature of Keith – just like my desire to get the lasagne in the oven or not to damage the expensive violin. Thus Keith *does* have the wide ability to resist: he has the narrow ability, and he has the opportunity. So we have no reason to say that he doesn't act freely, and hence no reason to say that he isn't blameworthy for spoiling Keisha's dinner.

So, let's sum up where we've got to. What I've tried to argue is that James's argument fails: he has no grounds for thinking that *if* determinism is true, he didn't act freely and responsibly when he added the chili. He made that claim because he thought that if determinism is true, then we are unable to do anything other than what we in fact do. We freely do something only if we are able to do something else. I've argued instead that what's required for acting freely is the *wide* ability to do otherwise, and both Keith and James *had* that ability.

Now, you might, possibly, have become increasingly exasperated while reading this article. In particular, you might think that in focussing on what we ordinarily mean when we say that someone is or is not able to do something, I have missed the basic point of James's argument. If you're nodding at this point, you might be thinking something like this. Look, it was *completely guaranteed* by factors way outside of Keith's control that he would add the chili. He didn't have any control over the laws of nature (nobody has control over them), and he didn't have control over the facts about the distant past (nobody has control over them, either). And those two things together make it *impossible* for Keith to do anything other than add the chili. So *surely* he didn't have any control over that either.

Or you might be thinking this: the laws of nature aren't *up to Keith*. The facts about the distant past aren't up to Keith either. So – since those two things imply that he will add the chili – it wasn't up to Keith whether or not he added the chili. Or ...

Spotted a pattern? It's this. In each case, my imagined objector (maybe it's you) has said: Keith fails to bear some really important relation to the laws of nature (call them L). The possible relations might include: being in control of them, their being up to him, etc. And he fails to bear the same relation to facts about the distant past (call those facts P): they aren't under his control, they aren't up to him, etc. And,

since L and P together entail that Keith will add the chili (call this K), he fails to bear that same relation to K as well.

In effect, we can think of the argument of this article as addressing another instance of this general pattern: Keith was unable to do anything about L, and he was unable to do anything about P. But, since L and P together entail that Keith will add the chili, he was unable to do anything about that, too; in other words, he was unable to do otherwise. And my response to that argument, in effect, is just to deny that the inference holds: just because Keith lacked (as he surely did) the wide ability to do anything about L, and he lacked (again, as he surely did) the wide ability to do anything about P, it just doesn't follow that he lacked the wide ability to add or to not add chili. He *did* have the wide ability to do something about *that*.

So, you might want to respond to the argument of this article like this: "OK, suppose we run the Consequence Argument by using the phrase 'Keith lacked the (wide) ability to do otherwise', roughly as per (P2) and (P3). Then the argument doesn't work. But if, instead, we used some other phrase in our premises, such as 'it wasn't up to Keith whether or not he added the chili', or 'it wasn't under Keith's control', then the argument *would* work – because determinism is *not* compatible with its being *up to Keith* what he does, or with what Keith does being *under his control*. So the revised version of (P2) is true. Moreover, an action's being up to an agent, or its being under their control, is required for them to act freely. So (P3) is true too. So, suitably amended, the Consequence Argument works just fine."

Well, that's a move that might work; and nothing I've said undermines that possibility, since I've been focussing on the 'able to do otherwise' version of the Consequence Argument. But you'd have to have a convincing reason to think that the relevant phrase ('it isn't up to Keith whether or not he adds the chili', or whatever) really does mean something different to 'Keith is unable to do otherwise'. And I'm inclined to think that your prospects aren't good. (You flunk your job interview. I wanted to give you the job, but I wasn't on the selection committee. You blame me. 'It's not my fault', I say. 'It wasn't up to me'. Or 'it wasn't under my control', or 'I couldn't do anything about it'. They all sound a quite lot like 'I wasn't able to give you the job'.)

Of course, the above isn't a knock-down objection to the strategy for saving the Consequence Argument that I've been considering – just an expression of scepticism about its prospects. I'm not saying that it can't be done; that would be rash.

It would also be highly rash of me to claim that the overall argument of this article is entirely compelling and watertight in all other respects too. I'm certain that it's not, in fact – I already know that there are various gaps in the argument and problems that I've glossed over. I only had so many words at my disposal.

Even if I haven't managed to persuade you that the Consequence Argument – and hence James's argument – is flawed, I hope I've persuaded you of *something*. Here's the next episode in the story I started with. The next day, James comes clean about what he *really* thinks about the whole chili incident: he explains to Jasmine his philosophical reasons for thinking that he wasn't to blame, and admits that his 'apology' wasn't really sincere. In response, Jasmine – who has studied philosophy, as it turns out – runs the line of argument of this paper to James. Here are two ways to end the story. One: James thumps the table. He's annoyed. Has Jasmine not been listening? '*But I wasn't able to do otherwise!*', he insists. 'So I didn't act freely, and I wasn't responsible, and so it was a mistake to blame me'. Two: James goes away and thinks *really hard* about where, exactly, Jasmine has gone wrong. If you, like James, are not inclined to accept the conclusion of my and Jasmine's argument, I hope you are at least persuaded that the second reaction is the reasonable one.

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