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*Free Will Pessimism**

THE IMMEDIATE AIM of this paper is to articulate core features of an alternative compatibilist position, one that is responsive to sources of resistance to the compatibilist program based on considerations of fate and luck. The approach taken relies on distinguishing carefully between issues of skepticism and pessimism as they arise in this context. A compatibilism that is properly responsive to concerns about fate and luck is committed to what I describe as “free will pessimism”, which is to be distinguished from “free will skepticism”. Free will skepticism is the view that our vulnerability to conditions of fate and luck serve to discredit our view of ourselves as free and responsible agents. Free will pessimism rejects free will skepticism, since the basis of its pessimism rests with the assumption that we *are* free and responsible agents who are, nevertheless, subject to fate and luck in this aspect of our lives. According to free will pessimism, all the major parties and positions in the free will debate, including that of skepticism,

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are modes of evasion and distortion regarding our human predicament in respect of agency and moral life.

The argument I will present today falls into two parts. First, it is argued that any plausible form of compatibilism must embrace and endorse free will pessimism. Compatibilism of this kind may be described as “critical compatibilism”, in order to contrast and distinguish it from the more orthodox forms of (optimistic and complacent) compatibilism. Second, I offer an explanation of why it is that compatibilism has been so reluctant to embrace or accept critical compatibilism and the free will pessimism that it involves. The explanation provided turns largely on the role of what Bernard Williams has described as “the morality system”, and its peculiar assumptions and aspirations. I will conclude with a brief discussion outlining the general significance of these reflections and observations about critical compatibilism and free will pessimism and their implications for the free will problem itself.

Skepticism, Pessimism and Critical Compatibilism

Let us begin by asking what sort of “solution” the various parties involved in the free will debate are looking for? On the face of it, the problem seems straightforward enough. We have an image of ourselves as active agents in the world who are, in some measure, in command and control of our own destinies and the trajectory of our lives. What we do and what we become is in some relevant way up to us and depends on our own deliberations and choices. It is on the basis of possessing powers and capacities of these general kinds that we take ourselves to be moral agents who may be held accountable for our conduct and character. Various skeptical challenges may be presented to undermine and discredit this self-image. The sorts of considerations that have been advanced include reflections about God, foreknowledge and pre-destination; science and its implications as they concern deterministic laws of nature; and so on. The solution to the free will problem under this broad canopy would be to *defeat* the skeptical challenge and provide

us with some form of “vindication” or “affirmation” with respect to our self-image as free and responsible agents in the world.

Interpreted this way, the skeptical/non-skeptical divide neatly maps onto what may be described as our “metaphysical attitudes” of optimism and pessimism. Something clearly analogous to this divide goes on with respect to the issues of the existence of God and the immortality of the soul, where the skeptical challenge is also closely associated with pessimistic worries about the human condition.¹ Viewed this way, these metaphysical concerns are not merely theoretical issues, the position that we take on such questions will shape our sense of the value and significance of human life itself. The issue of being disconcerted and disenchanted certainly looms before us under some forms of skeptical challenge. On this account, the relationship between our metaphysical attitudes and the parties involved in the free will dispute seems simple:

Skepticism	→	Pessimism
Refutation of skepticism	→	Optimism

A particularly vivid example of this relationship is provided in the first chapter of Daniel Dennett’s *Elbow Room*, an influential compatibilist work that sets about the task of discrediting the “gloomleaders” of skepticism and to vindicate the “optimistic” conclusion that free will is not an illusion.²

While libertarians and compatibilists, like Dennett, may disagree about how the skeptic can be defeated they are, nevertheless, agreed that this can be done and that this serves to secure a more optimistic view of human life.³ However, as with the parallel cases concerning God and the immortality of the soul, not all philosophers accept that free will skepticism implies any significant or severe form of pessimism. An alternative strategy, therefore, is to defeat pessimism without refuting skepticism.⁴ From this standpoint, an optimistic solution can found without following either the libertarian or compatibilist in their non-skeptical commitments. Finally, the traditional skeptic may be unpersuaded by

all these strategies and insist that not only can skepticism not be refuted, this remains a basis for pessimism about the human predicament, an outlook which is indeed disillusioning and troubling because it discredits our self-image as free and responsible beings.⁵

In general terms, this exhausts the various available views and strategies on free will as they relate to our metaphysical attitudes and their respective grounds. In what follows it will be argued that *all* the above positions and strategies are, in different ways, guilty of *evasion* about the real nature of the human predicament and seek a “solution to the free will problem” that precludes a truthful and accurate account of what our predicament involves. This argument will begin with an argument showing that a plausible compatibilism must take the form of *critical* compatibilism and endorse free will pessimism.

One way to approach this issue is by way of considering the problem of “moral luck”. Thomas Nagel’s account of the problem of moral luck provides us with an especially powerful and pertinent understanding of the skeptical challenge in this sphere. The core problem, as Nagel presents it, concerns the relationship between freedom and responsibility, where this is understood in terms of the relationship between control and moral evaluation. Intuitively, Nagel argues, people can only be reasonably held responsible or subject to moral evaluation for what they have control over. However, reflection on control suggests that “ultimately nothing or almost nothing about what a person does seems to be under his control.”⁶ This observation, Nagel goes on to argue, “threatens to erode most of the moral assessments we find it natural to make.” We can categorize the various ways in which we find that control is eroded into the following important modes of moral luck.

- 1 *Constitutive luck* concerns the kind of person that we are and what our moral character is like.
- 2 *Circumstantial luck* concerns the kinds of situations and choices that we face or encounter and must respond to.

- 3 *Consequential luck* concerns how our actions and choices actually turn out, which includes upshots and results that may be entirely unintended and unforeseen.

When we consider these various dimensions of moral luck and the limits of control we are in danger of arriving at the conclusion that, since nothing is properly and fully under the agent's control, there are no suitable foundations for moral evaluation or moral responsibility.

One feature of Nagel's analysis that deserves particular attention, and is especially relevant for understanding the approach taken by critical compatibilism, is what he takes to be the core requirement for any adequate attempt to preserve free and responsible agency. What is crucial, of this account, is that the free, responsible agent must be *insulated* from the influence of fate and luck. Although Kantians and libertarians understand this general requirement in more specific terms relating to securing some form of sourcehood or ultimate agency this is, nevertheless, a requirement that *all* parties in the free will debate accept under some interpretation. It is, moreover, a key assumption that that does much to shape the entire "free will problem" and the debate that surrounds it. If this general requirement cannot be met, it is agreed by all parties, then our self-image as free, responsible agents will be compromised and will collapse.

The general requirement described above plays a key role in the core incompatibilist argument against all compatibilist strategies and proposals. Let us call this incompatibilist argument the *Basic Exclusion Argument* (BEA):

1. There is a set of conditions φ (under some contested interpretation) such that an agent is free and responsible for an action or set of actions when these conditions are satisfied.
2. There is another set of conditions β (under some contested interpretation) such that an agent's action or set of actions are subject to fate and luck when those conditions are satisfied.

3. Any action (or set of actions) that satisfy φ cannot be such that it also satisfies β . That is to say, if an action X satisfies φ it cannot also be subject to β . “Exclusion Premise” (EP).
4. Any and all compatibilist interpretations of φ are such that they may be satisfied and still be subject to β (i.e. compatibilist conditions φ^* do not support or satisfy EP above).
5. It follows that we must reject any and all compatibilist interpretations φ^* , as they are inadequate as judged by a standard that compatibilists do not and cannot reject EP.

Libertarians believe that their own interpretations of conditions φ can satisfy EP and avoid the skeptical conclusion (although this requires the truth of indeterminism). Skeptics maintain that there is no available set of conditions φ that serve to satisfy EP and, hence, the skeptical conclusion goes through either way. In what follows I want to focus on the compatibilist response to BEA and the stance compatibilists take with respect to EP.

Proponents of BEA are entirely justified in claiming that compatibilists have consistently adhered to EP and aimed to satisfy it. What compatibilists have denied is premise 4, the claim that compatibilism fails to satisfy the standard set by EP (premise 3). Let us consider the classical compatibilist argument that is launched against premise 4, an argument aiming to show that agents who satisfy suitably interpreted compatibilist conditions (φ^*) are not subject to fate and luck (i.e. conditions β). The core feature of this argument is that the incompatibilist claim (premise 4) relies on a basic confusion between fatalism and determinism. More specifically, it is argued that if we properly interpret conditions β (i.e. β^*) then premise 4 is groundless. *Fatalism* is the doctrine that all our deliberations and actions are *causally ineffective* and make no difference to the course of events. Nothing about the thesis of determinism implies that this is the universal condition. Dennett provides a particularly vivid example of this contrast:

“Consider the man who has thrown himself off the Golden Gate Bridge and who thinks to himself as he plummets, ‘I wonder if this is really such a good idea.’ Deliberation has indeed become impotent for this man ...”⁷

While conditions of “local fatalism” of this sort may occur, and deliberation and action may sometimes be futile, circumstances of this kind are “abnormal” in a deterministic world, where deliberation is generally effective. Let us call this “contributory fatalism”, where this is understood to involve the *causal impotence* of the agent with respect to some outcome or upshot.

The critical compatibilism response to this line of argument, which aims at defending compatibilism and defeating BEA, tracks incompatibilist concerns. More specifically, the critical compatibilist agrees with the incompatibilist that appealing to the distinction between determinism and contributory fatalism is a shallow and evasive understanding of incompatibilist concerns. The relevant issue is not about the causal influence *of* the agent but rather the causal influences *on* the agent. On the assumption of determinism, however complex the mechanisms or capacities involved, the ultimate source or origin of conduct and character is external to the agent and not within the agent’s control or influence. Fatalistic concerns of this kind, which we may term “origination fatalism”, cannot simply be set aside or ignored on the basis of considerations relating to contributory fatalism.

What these observations reveal is that, within the structure of compatibilist commitments, whatever specific form they may take, we inevitably encounter *limits* to control and the way it is actually exercised and occasioned. Neither second-order (hierarchical) capacities nor reason-responsive abilities will enable us to evade this implication.⁸ What this reveals is the fact of our finitude and contingencies – these being circumstances under which all human agents inescapably must operate. While libertarians may aspire to escape limitations of this kind (e.g. by postulating “unconditioned conditions”, “contra-causal freedom”, or similarly motivated forms of metaphysical apparatus of this general

kind), compatibilists reject all such aspirations as illusory. Having said this, compatibilists are in no position to refuse to acknowledge the force of fatalistic concern with respect to origination issues. It is at this juncture where critical compatibilists diverge from their complacent (optimistic) compatibilist brethren. At the same time, critical compatibilists also diverge from incompatibilists – libertarians and skeptics alike – in rejecting the view that considerations of this kind, relating to origination and the limits of control, license skepticism about freedom and moral responsibility. The capacities described by compatibilists (i.e. as identified by φ^* – reason-responsiveness, etc.) are, they maintain, robust and substantial enough to serve as a secure foundation for our attitudes and practices associated with moral responsibility.

At this point, the incompatibilist is sure to raise the following objection. While critical compatibilists are correct in acknowledging the force of fatalistic concern relating to origination and the limits of control, as generated on compatibilist models, the attempt to separate issues of fate and responsibility in the manner proposed cannot be acceptable. More specifically, for reasons highlighted in Nagel's discussion, the presence of conditions of origination fate bring with them worries about moral luck; that is, worries relating to agents being subject to moral evaluation in ways that are sensitive to factors that they do not control. This remains the core incompatibilist objection to the compatibilist project and concessions about fate do not address or settle *this* difference. Granted that it is intuitively unjust to hold agents responsible for aspects of their conduct and character that they do not control (as per the exclusion thesis), conditions of freedom and responsibility cannot be sustained in circumstances where an agent is subject to fate and luck along the lines described. From this perspective, fate and luck come together, and where such conditions hold, free and responsible agency is eroded into nothing.

The usual compatibilist reply to this, as found prominently in Dennett's *Elbow Room*, is to try and deflate the luck objection. It is Dennett's

basic contention, consistent with much contemporary compatibilist thinking, that human agents are “not just lucky”, we are “skilled self-controllers” – this being a theme that Dennett devotes much of his book to.⁹ Once again, this general line of reply seems not to engage with the real force or basis of incompatibilist concern. Incompatibilists recognize, of course, that compatibilist accounts of self-control and reason-responsiveness do not leave us “merely lucky” or unskilled, unable to enhance our abilities and talents. The point is, rather, that the specific capacities we may have, the way we actually exercise them, and the occasions we are provided for employing them, all depend, given deterministic assumptions, on external factors and conditions that no agent ultimately has control over. From this perspective, moral life becomes hopelessly vulnerable to luck or the limits of control, which is not permitted by the exclusion thesis and is unacceptable to all those who endorse it.

It should be evident that, whatever the merits of the incompatibilist rejoinder described above, the critical compatibilist reply to BEA is very different to that pursued by orthodox compatibilism. Critical compatibilists accept premise 4 – they *agree* that compatibilist conditions φ^* may be fully satisfied and the agent or actions concerned still subject to relevant forms of fatalism and luck. Critical compatibilists deny, nevertheless, the skeptical conclusion because they deny EP or premise 3 (contrary to their orthodox brethren). It is the burden of the argument, so far, that a sensible, credible compatibilism is constrained by the nature and character of its own commitments to take the form of *critical* compatibilism and thus must deny EP. Failing this, compatibilism is plainly guilty of evasion and superficiality on the matters of fate and luck, just as its incompatibilist critics have suggested. Clearly, then, the point that needs emphasis for our present purposes, is that *any plausible* form of compatibilism must recognize and acknowledge the influence of fate and luck on the manner and context in which our capacities of rational self-control operate. In consequence of this, it must reject the EP

and allow that conditions of free and responsible agency may coincide with the presence of conditions of fate and luck, understood in terms of external factors beyond our control that directly influence how our capacity of self-control is actually exercised.

There is another important feature of critical compatibilism that flows from the rejection of EP that needs further, independent articulation and description. This feature concerns the metaphysical attitudes that this stance naturally licenses or occasions. In circumstances where EP is not satisfied, we have (deep) reasons for being “troubled” or “disconcerted” by our predicament as this relates to human ethical life and moral agency. Even if we are “fortunate” in the particular ethical trajectory our lives may take, there is no basis (as incompatibilists rightly insist) for an easy optimism when fate and luck intrude into our ethical lives and the way we may exercise of our moral agency. These observations and reflections may and should occasion a sense of “disenchantment” about our predicament, and to this extent this will license and occasion a significant sense of pessimism (on analogy with related metaphysical issues and the attitudes that they may occasion). However, the crucial point in relation to critical compatibilism, is that a pessimism of this nature is not rooted or grounded in skepticism about free will and moral responsibility. On the contrary, it presupposes that we *reject* any skepticism of this kind, since the form of pessimism that is occasioned depends on viewing ourselves and others as agents who are free and responsible but, nevertheless, subject to fate and luck in the exercise and operation of our moral capacities. This is the stance or metaphysical attitude of *free will pessimism*. I will return in the next part of this paper to say more about the nature and grounds of free will pessimism. For now, however, suffice it to note that even if we reject compatibilism (e.g. because we retain a commitment to EP, as incompatibilists certainly will do) it is still crucial to recognize the significance of these findings both as they relate to critical compatibilism and the free will pessimism that flows from it.

Compatibilism and “the Morality System”

The question I now want to turn to is why have *compatibilists* been so reluctant to embrace critical compatibilism and free will pessimism? Incompatibilists maintain that compatibilists conditions φ^* are such that they do not exclude conditions β . Whereas orthodox compatibilists attempt to refute this premise (4) critical compatibilists maintain that compatibilists should accept or recognize the truth of premise 4 and should instead reject EP (3). What is it about EP that orthodox compatibilists find so difficult to abandon? There are, I suggest, two considerations that run deep in orthodox compatibilist thinking that account for this resistance to jettisoning EP. The first concerns the relation between the exclusion thesis and “the morality system” and the second, related to the first, concerns the question of optimism.

(1) The exclusion thesis may be understood as an essential feature of what Bernard Williams calls “the morality system”.¹⁰ The morality system, as Williams describes it, places particularly heavy emphasis on the (peculiar) concept of obligation, along with the closely concepts of blame and voluntariness. Moral responsibility”, as “the morality system” understands it, is taken to be primarily a matter of rational agents voluntarily violating their obligations and, thereby, being liable to blame and retribution. A further closely related feature of the morality system is that insists that moral responsibility, interpreted in these (narrow) terms, must somehow be capable of “transcending luck”, providing a purity that only genuine (rational) agency of some kind makes possible. Within this framework, the aspirations of libertarianism and its commitment to EP is entirely intelligible. Although orthodox compatibilists resist the aspirations of libertarians, and its efforts to secure some form of absolute or ultimate agency, they remain committed to the particular conception of responsibility encouraged by the morality system and believe that it can be satisfied within compatibilist constraints.¹¹ In contrast with this, critical compatibilism involves *rejecting* core features

of “the morality system”, including its particular conception of moral responsibility (all this being something, if Williams is right, that we have good reason to do in any case). Although abandoning EP certainly makes it impossible to salvage the particular conception of freedom and responsibility promoted by the morality system, this is not to be confused with skepticism about freedom and responsibility *tout court*. On the contrary, while proponents of the morality system tend to present the situation this way, it is generally recognized, even by the proponents of the morality system themselves, that the narrow conception of moral responsibility constructed around the assumptions of the morality system is one that is both “local” (Western, modern) and is widely contested – including within our own modern, Western ethical community.¹²

(2) There is, as already mentioned, another consideration, closely related to the first, that is also very significant in this context. The aspiration to *optimism*, in particular to tell a comforting story about the human predicament in respect of moral agency, is one that runs deep in the morality system. This deep resistance to a disturbing or troubling view of human ethical life, one where the excise and operation of our moral and rational capacities depends in large measure on factors that are not controlled or governed by those same capacities and powers, is one that is not only shared by libertarians and compatibilists but that also motivates the skeptics. All of these parties, in their various ways, hold on to EP and the form of optimism that it insists on (i.e. that human ethical life does not function or operate in violation of the constraints that EP imposes upon it). Put in other terms, the form of optimism that EP insists on is one that rejects the very *possibility* of free will pessimism, much less accepts it as the *truth* about our human predicament. It is within this philosophical fabric, as encouraged by the forms of theorizing associated with the morality system, that (orthodox) compatibilist resistance to abandoning EP should be understood and appreciated. Clearly if we allow that free and responsible action may nevertheless be infused with conditions of fate and luck, we must also abandon any form

of unqualified optimism – in particular, the hyper-optimism that compatibilists such as Dennett endeavor to project.¹³

Critical compatibilism endorses no form of easy, complacent or un-mixed optimism on this subject. On the contrary, in giving *weight* to the limits of control, and circumstances of finitude and contingency in the sphere of human agency, critical compatibilism suggests a *particular understanding of pessimistic concern* – namely “free will pessimism” (as opposed to skepticism about freedom and responsibility). We might describe this stance as one as that recognizes or acknowledging that conditions of freedom and responsibility do not *elude* those of fate and luck but rather *confront* fate and luck and that these conditions are, indeed, meshed and entangled together. All theories and interpretations that deny this are, from this perspective, guilty of various modes of evasion that involve some effort of one kind or another to satisfy EP and the forms of optimism associated with it. This particular aspiration is something that critical compatibilists maintain we must abandon, not only because it generates insoluble philosophical perplexities but, more importantly, because it misrepresents the (difficult and troubling) *truth* about our circumstances as human agents.

Free Will Pessimism and the Free Will Problem

Whatever qualms optimistic, orthodox compatibilists may have about the above argument and the conclusions drawn from it, we may expect incompatibilists to welcome it. The reason for this is that incompatibilists will argue that the argument advanced for critical compatibilism and free will pessimism is not so much an effective defense of a (modified or refined) compatibilism as it is a *reductio* of the whole compatibilist project. That is, since critical compatibilism concedes that compatibilism implies FWP and necessarily violates EP, the correct conclusion to draw from this is that we should *reject compatibilism*. Let me briefly indicate how critical compatibilism may respond to this incompatibilist rejoinder. We may begin by noting that if we reject compatibilism then incom-

patibilism follows. This must take the form of either libertarianism or skepticism. Both these strategies encounter their own well-known and significant set of difficulties. Libertarian views, although diverse, oscillate from an implausible metaphysical extravagance or retreat back into a more modest form that itself fails the test or standard imposed by EP (i.e. libertarian agents remain subject to modes of fate and luck). Granted that libertarianism is found wanting, this forces a retreat further back to skepticism. The skeptic maintains that EP cannot be satisfied by *any* proposed set of conditions concerning freedom and responsibility. They all fail, in various ways, the standard that EP imposes on them. However, for the skeptic, EP must still be *respected*, even if it cannot be *satisfied*. All proposed conditions for freedom and responsibility that fail this standard must be rejected, which leads on to the final skeptical conclusion. For the critical compatibilist, this is just another mode of evasion, similarly seeking to rule out the very possibility of free will pessimism. Skepticism is, in practice, nothing better than a form of “bad faith”. The key moves made here are to insist on a restricted and narrow conception of (“true”) freedom and responsibility that must satisfy the preferred terms of the morality system and its commitment to EP. While some local (modern, Western) form of freedom and responsibility may need to be abandoned on these grounds, no *global* skepticism follows. The modes of freedom and responsibility grounded in the robust, complex capacities identified and explained by (critical) compatibilism, are more than adequate to the task of grounding and justifying attitudes and practices that are recognizably part of the fabric of moral and ethical life more broadly conceived. Even skeptics concede this point and attempt to mask it by the unconvincing claim that only the narrow view encouraged by the morality system constitutes “true” or “genuine” freedom and responsibility.

We have now arrived back at the situation as Nagel famously diagnosed it.¹⁴ All the familiar strategies framed around the “free will problem”, understood as the effort to derive a set of conditions whereby free

and responsible human agents are insulated or secured against the intrusion of fate and luck in the exercise of their agential capacities, collapse under scrutiny. This includes, as Nagel notes, skepticism itself. The debate terminates, therefore, in an *intractable* problem. According to critical compatibilism this is evidence of the faulty assumptions and aspirations that drive the entire debate. The root source of this impasse rests with the morality system and its commitment to EP, which denies the very possibility of FWP (and thus critical compatibilism). Faced with a choice between EP and FWP we have every reason to opt for FWP, not just because this allows us to set aside the (intractable) free will problem, but, more importantly, because it is FWP that provides *the most plausible, truthful account of the human predicament as we experience it* (as opposed to the way in which “the morality system” aims to falsify it). Considered in these terms critical compatibilism, unlike the familiar alternatives, does not offer itself as a “solution” to the free will problem (which would require respecting, if not satisfying, EP). Critical compatibilism aims to *replace* the free will *problem* with free will *pessimism*, considered as a better, more truthful account of the human predicament. This predicament, along with its distinct pessimistic implications, is not a problem waiting to be solved but a predicament waiting to be recognized and acknowledged. Taking this step involves jettisoning the ambitions and assumptions of “the morality system” and, with it, the intractable difficulties they have generated for their own theorists.

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N O T E S

1. Dennett 1984, Ch. 1.
2. Dennett 1984, p. 169.
3. Kane 1996, p. 80.
4. See, e.g., Pereboom 2001; Pereboom 2007; Honderich 1993; also Waller 2011.
5. Some philosophers have argued that accepting the truth of skepticism about freedom and moral responsibility would be so damaging and depressing that we should encourage the illusion that we are free and responsible agents; see Smilansky 2000. Similarly, philosophical resistance to the skeptical conclusion is often motivated by the thought that this would be a “painful conclusion to accept”; Taylor 1959.
6. Nagel 1976, p. 176.
7. Dennett 1984, pp. 104–105, 129.
8. Russell 2002, pp. 233–242; also Russell 2000.
9. Dennett, 1984, p. 94.
10. Williams 1985, Ch. 10.
11. Wallace 1994, pp. 39–40, 64–66.
12. Wallace 1994, pp. 39–40, 64–65; Strawson 1994, p. 215. Both Wallace and Strawson accept that the ideals and aspirations of the morality system are not only modern and Western but also deeply bound up with the Judeo-Christian tradition. See also Dennett’s remarks at Dennett (1984), pp. 5, 156, 165, 166.
13. Dennett 1984, p. 169.
14. Nagel 1976.

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