

ABILITY AND COGNITION: A DEFENSE OF COMPATIBILISM

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1. Introduction

The use of predicate and sentential operators to express the practical modalities -- ability, control, openness, etc. -- has given new life to a fatalistic argument against determinist theories of responsible agency. A familiar version employs the following principle: the consequences of what is unavoidable (beyond one's control) are themselves unavoidable. Accordingly, if determinism is true, whatever happens is the consequence of events in the remote past, or, of such events together with the laws of nature. But laws and the remote past are not under our control and, by the principle, neither are their consequences. Therefore, none of our choices and actions, nor anything that results from them, is under our control.¹

Whether refinements of the closure principle underlying this unavoidability argument are acceptable depends upon the precise sense of 'consequence' and 'unavoidable' involved. Roughly, a proposition P is a consequence of a set of propositions M iff it is impossible that P be false when each member of M is true, or, conversely, when M necessitates P. Since P is unavoidable for S when P is true and S is (was) unable to prevent P from being true, it might seem that if P is unavoidable the same should hold of what is necessitated by P. There is, in fact,

an easy defense of the principle which utilizes the incompatibilist condition that S is able to do action K only if it is as yet undetermined whether or not S will K. With it, there is no question but that one is unable to accomplish what is already determined by what one was unable to prevent. Of course, this reasoning is unlikely to impress the compatibilist who rejects the condition outright and, expectedly, it is not the procedure of the proponents of the unavoidability argument.

The latter might rest content with appeals to intuition, but more significant are defenses of the closure principle and independent derivations of the unavoidability argument that rely upon distinct principles concerning the logic of the practical modalities, for example, closure of ability under entailment (Cross 1986, Brown 1988) or, claims about the "fixity of the past" and the "inescapability of laws" (Ginet 1990). These are powerful strategies. However, it is here argued that because certain cognitive requirements must be met in order for one to be able to accomplish anything (to do, bring about, refrain from, prevent, etc., anything), the mentioned principles are false and the strategies fail. Compatibilism is, thereby, defended.

2. Ability as a Propositional Operator

For convenience, allow that S brings about P insofar as P is a consequence of S's performing some action-type, that S brings about his own K-ing whenever S performs action K, and that "bringing about P" is itself an action-type.² With temporal parameters implicit, ability will be taken as the basic practical modality expressible by a propositional operator as follows: 'A_sP' reads 'S is able to bring about P'. Other practical modalities are readily definable in its

terms.

What principles govern this operator? No adequate logic of ability would countenance, for example,

$$(1) \langle \rangle P \rightarrow \underline{A}_s P.$$

where ' \rightarrow ' expresses (logical) entailment, even though its converse holds for logical and nomological possibility. Similarly, the practical analogue to $P \rightarrow \langle \rangle P$, namely,

$$(2) P \rightarrow \underline{A}_s P.$$

fails (Kenny 1975, Brown 1988, Ginet 1990). Also doubtful is, (3) (S brings about P) $\rightarrow \underline{A}_s P$.

The dart's hitting the bullseye might be a consequence of Susan's throwing the dart, but if this is a matter of pure luck, viz., a chance accomplishment which Susan cannot readily reproduce no matter what she tries, we are reluctant to describe her hitting the bullseye as the manifestation of an ability to do so, or, to claim that she was able to hit the bullseye. At the minimum, we expect P to result in a reliable manner from what S can do intentionally, where 'reliable' is meant to contrast with 'chance' or 'luck' (Brown 1988). Provided that this notion of reliability can be satisfactorily explicated, the minimal reading suggests the following equivalence:

$$(4) \underline{A}_s P \text{ iff there is an action-type } K \text{ which } S \text{ is able to} \\ \text{perform such that } P \text{ would be a reliable consequence of} \\ S\text{'s intentionally } K\text{-ing.}$$

This is no definition of ability since an unexplicated 'able' is applied to performance of an action-type, but it does set the stage for subsequent discussion. Its full import and assessment must

await the further development given below.

When explicated, (4) will be seen to pose difficulties for the familiar closure principles thought to be more acceptable than any of (1)-(3), e.g.,

(5) If $\underline{A}_s P$ and Q is a consequence of P , then $\underline{A}_s Q$.

There is some reason to want such a principle, at least under certain restrictions. Specifically, if obligation is closed under a consequence relation among actions, e.g., entailment, as in most deontic systems, and "ought" implies a suitable sense of "can," then a correlated closure principle seems integral to agency.³ Taking ' $\sim \underline{A}_s \sim P$ ' to read 'S is unable to prevent P', and assuming that 'consequence' expresses a relation governed by transposition, (5) is equivalent to,

(6) If $\sim \underline{A}_s \sim P$ and Q is a consequence of P , then $\sim \underline{A}_s \sim Q$.

Where ' $\underline{N}_s P$ ' reads ' $P \ \& \ \sim \underline{A}_s \sim P$ ', (6), in turn, entails,

(7) If $\underline{N}_s P$ and Q is a consequence of P , then $\underline{N}_s Q$.

If consequence relations are beyond anyone's ability to prevent, then (7) follows from the seemingly more powerful,

(8) If $\underline{N}_s P$ and $\underline{N}_s(P \ \& \ Q)$ then $\underline{N}_s Q$

Slote 1982 has pointed out that (8), in turn, can be derived from (7) -- where consequence is the converse of entailment -- together with a principle of agglomerativity,

(9) If $\underline{N}_s P$ and $\underline{N}_s Q$ then $\underline{N}_s(P \ \& \ Q)$

Both (7) and (8) have been used to generate standard forms of the unavoidability argument.⁴

Each of (5)-(7) can be read differently depending on the type of consequence (impossibility) is at stake. At least three candidates stand out: (a) Logical Consequence; (b)

Nomological Consequence; (c) Conditional Dependency. The second of these holds whenever laws of nature are allowed to validate inferences or inference rules, while (c) concerns a relation of restricted necessitation, expressible by subjunctive conditionals, of which causal consequence is a species. Tentatively, P is conditionally dependent upon Q just in case P necessitates Q in prevailing circumstances, specifically, in a maximal set of obtaining conditions no subset of which has either P or \sim P as a nomological consequence, in sum, a P-neutral context. This brief construal will not work for all counterfactuals (e.g., counterlegals), but it does seem promising for those relevant to an explication of real world abilities (c.f., Honderich 1988, p. 27).

Whichever of (a)-(c) we choose, the relevant instance of (5) is likely to need qualification since our actions necessitate the obtaining of conditions beyond our control. The theorems of arithmetic, instances of the excluded middle principle, or the fact that oxygen exists, will hold no matter what actions we perform, and thus, with our broad construal of consequence, are consequences of those actions. To avoid saying that we have an "ability" to bring them about, the values of Q in (5) can be restricted, e.g., to contingent propositions whose truth might be said to "result" from that of P's, or, to propositions equivalent to P, or again, to propositions which are not implied by \underline{A}_s P alone (see Hasker 1989, pp. 108-112). Here, Q is restricted to propositions which are nomologically contingent in an appropriate P-neutral context, e.g., the prevailing circumstances in which Susan threw the dart that hit the bullseye.

3. Cognitive Requirements of Ability

The ambiguity of the modal locutions 'can' and 'is able' is no secret. In some senses,

Henry can sue the local mayor, inasmuch as it is possible for him to do so, logically, nomologically, legally, etc., or, given the circumstances, because he would do so if he tried. In other respects, Henry might be unable to perform this act. Perhaps he does not know that there is a local mayor or who that person is. Or, knowing that his neighbor Alice is the local mayor, he might be ignorant of how to raise a lawsuit, to the extent of not understanding what a lawsuit is. Lacking the requisite information, the bare opportunity to sue is not a real opportunity, one about which the agent is sufficiently informed (Dennett 1984, pp. 116-118). Alternatively, though a veteran of litigation and fully aware that he would sue the mayor were he to try, Henry might believe that he is unable to bring himself to sue the mayor. He might feel that he cannot but refrain from intentionally so doing, that, because of his psychological makeup, he is "practically necessitated" to refrain (Williams 1980, pp. 124-131).

Insofar as one is responsible only for what one is (was) able to accomplish, each of these cases of inability suggest different cognitive requirements of responsible agency. Recalling our general use of 'accomplish', the first two cases are accounted for by the following principle:

- (10) If agent S is able to accomplish X, then (i) S has a concept of X, and (ii) S has some understanding of how to go about accomplishing X (i.e., of which actions are needed to accomplish X).

To accommodate the third case, one can include a third condition: (iii) S presumes that he/she is able to accomplish X.⁵ Yet, quite apart from it, a clash between (10) and (5) is already apparent: given that epistemic and doxastic modalities are not closed under familiar relations of

consequence or dependency, (10) would seem to imply that ability itself is not closed under these relations. How, then, can any of (5)-(7) be acceptable?

The following defense of (5) will not work: if S is able to bring about P and Q is a consequence of P, then there is an act S is able to intentionally perform which would result in Q -- at the minimum, the very act which resulted in P -- in which case, S is able to bring about Q.⁶ The problem here is that there is no assurance that Q is a reliable consequence of S's action and, hence, by principle (4), no guarantee that A_sQ.

The problem is more serious than might appear; given (4), no matter which of the qualifications we adopt concerning Q, the requirements imposed by (10) force a construal of reliability which ultimately undermines (5)-(7). Consider; in our general sense of "bring about," I bring about certain physiological conditions C in my nervous system upon intentionally drinking coffee from this cup. Ignorant as I am of physiology, I have no idea what these states might be, or that they are brought about by my drinking coffee. Am I able to bring them about? In one sense, yes, for they resulted from my intentionally drinking coffee. But, lacking the requisite concepts, I cannot bring them about intentionally, nor even anticipate that they would result from my intentional efforts. Again, if I have difficulty understanding conditionals, I fail to meet the cognitive requirements with respect to bringing about the conditional state of affairs "I bring about conditions C I drink coffee," despite being entailed by "I drink coffee." Hence, I fail to satisfy clause (i) of (10) as regards accomplishing the bringing about of these states, and so, I am not able to them bring about.

Not only does exercise of an ability require the agent to understand what is being

accomplished, but also, how to accomplish it. A controlling device is placed in my hands which puts me in a position to direct a model car moving about on the floor. Not knowing how to use the device, I lack control over the car's motions, e.g., I am unable to make it go backwards, even though pushing the buttons in a given sequence, procedures that would in fact make it go backwards, are actions I am "able" to perform intentionally. Being able to secure a certain result includes more than imagining it and having at our command the basic actions whereby it can be secured; it involves an understanding of which acts lead to which results, i.e., an envisioning of a chain of dependencies or route connecting action to result. I am not able to make the car go backwards since I don't understand which intentional acts it might result from, in which case I violate (ii) of (10). Consequently, (5) cannot be retained for any of the indicated types of consequence.

S is able to bring about P only if S is in a position to anticipate which of his acts would likely result in P. The expert dart player knows what to do in order to hit the bullseye; the amateur does not, and to that extent, the expert correctly envisions a route leading from what he does intentionally to the likely result. Here, then, is the key to building the cognitive conditions of (10) into a more precise rendition of (4). We must include the presence of an envisioned route linking act to result in the analysis of reliable consequence, despite its ungainly mix of necessitation and the agent's belief that the result would hold were he to perform that act. That is,

(11) P is a reliable consequence of S's K-ing iff P results

from (is a consequence of) S's intentionally K-ing by

way of a route envisioned by S.¹

To accommodate the subjunctive construction in (4) we require a further step. Given that an ability claim has a double temporal index, then for \underline{A}_sP to hold at time t , S must anticipate at t that P would result from intentionally K -ing, otherwise we would not satisfy clause (ii) of (10). Hence,

- (12) At t , P would be a reliable consequence of S 's
intentionally K -ing at t' iff at t , there is a route R
such that S correctly believes that P would result
from his/her intentionally K -ing at t' by way of R .

Envisioned routes can admit of varying degrees of detail, and, minimally, all that (12) requires is that a route connecting the possible intentional action to the result be envisioned. The real world will undoubtedly involve many others, each with a variety of unforeseen intermediate steps. The payoff, of course, is that when the consequent of (12) is satisfied, S will also satisfy clauses (i) and (ii) in (10). Thus, by accommodating these cognitive requirements, (12) places principle (4) on a more secure footing.⁸

4. The Collapse of the Unavoidability Arguments

When \underline{A}_sP is explicated in terms of (4) and (12), each of (5)-(7) can be seen to fail for any of the consequence relations we have so far considered, since the examples of the coffee, the controller, and the elevator button, reveal that not every consequence of one's intentional acts is a reliable consequence. Let us make this clearer by considering the variant of (7) for logical

consequence, a principle we have indicated above is central to some versions of the unavailability argument:

(13) If $\underline{N}_s P$ and Q is a logical consequence of P , then $\underline{N}_s Q$.

Let H be a complete description of some remotely past state of the world, L a conjunction of the laws of nature, and P the proposition that a bottle filled with ink atop S 's desk at time t will remain filled with ink atop S 's desk during the 20 second interval $t-t'$. Suppose further that the conjunction of H and L entails P . Now consider the following instance of (7):

(14) If $\underline{N}_s(H \& L)$ and P is a logical consequence of $H \& L$,
then $\underline{N}_s P$.

If S lacks any concept of the conjunction $H \& L$ then, by (12) and (4), $\sim \underline{A}_s \sim(H \& L)$ is true, in which case, so is $\underline{N}_s(H \& L)$. So the antecedent of (14) is satisfied. Is the consequent assured? Not obviously, for it may well be that $\underline{A}_s \sim P$ holds if S is able to do something which he foresees would result in the bottle's being emptied of ink during $t-t'$. And why not? At the appropriate time, S might know that all he has to do is pour the contents of the bottle on the floor, a course of action regarding which he meets each of the cognitive requirements (i)-(iii), and, further, would perform were he to try. Thus, the consequent is not guaranteed in which case both (14) and (13) are false. The example can be readily adjusted to undermine variants of (7) for nomological consequence and conditional dependency as well.

If the sole basis of (8) is one of these variants of (7) together with (9), we have, thereby, undermined (8). In any case, our example threatens (8) directly. Both $\underline{N}_s((H \& L) \supset P)$ and $\underline{N}_s(H \supset P)$ hold for the very reason that $\underline{N}_s(H \& L)$ does, namely, lacking the requisite concepts, S fails

to satisfy the cognitive conditions needed for the ability to prevent the conditionals (H & L) P and H P. Consequently, (8) fails.⁹

Carl Ginet's more recent variant of the unavoidability argument (Ginet 1990, p. 106) fares no better. Instead of 'able' he talks about what is open to an agent at a time, where 'O_{st}P' reads 'it was open to S at t to make it the case that P'. His argument utilizes a principle of the inescapability of laws,

(15) It is never open to anyone to make false what is

entailed by the laws.

(specifically, no one can falsify a relation of nomological consequence), and a principle of the fixity of the past,

(16) If O_{st}a_t then O_{st}(b_t & a_t) -- where b_t is any truth

about what happened before t, and a_t is any

proposition about what happens at or after t.

Ginet's argument is this: since determinism entails that any a_t is a nomological consequence of some b_t then, by (15), ~O_{st}(b_t & ~a_t). Since (16) yields "if O_{st}~a_t then O_{st}(b_t & ~a_t)," then, by modus tollens, ~O_{st}~a_t.

But (16) also violates the cognitive requirements imposed by (10); if S has no concept of the state described by b_t, then the antecedent can be true while the consequence fails. Again, S might have a concept of b_t, but mistakenly think it incompatible with a_t. Consequently, (16) has little to recommend it, and Ginet's argument is invalid.

5. Acceptable Closure Principles for the Practical Modalities?

Is any form of closure for the practical modalities acceptable? Yes. Consider the following:

(17) If $\underline{A}_s P$ and Q would be a reliable consequence of S 's bringing about P , then $\underline{A}_s Q$.

This follows directly from (4) and (12) assuming that envisioned routes are additive within the same context, i.e., that other things being equal, if S envisions a route from P to Q , and a route from Q to R , then S envisions a route from P to R . By similar reasoning, one can defend the narrower,

(18) If S is able to F , and S 's G -ing is a reliable consequence of S 's F -ing, then S is able to G .

Given (12), can (17) or (18) be used to generate a variant of the unavoidability argument?

No. Grant that (17) implies,

(19) If $\sim \underline{A}_s \sim P$ and Q would be a reliable consequence of S 's bringing about P , then $\sim \underline{A}_s \sim Q$.

as well as,

(20) If $\underline{N}_s P$ and Q would be a reliable consequence of S 's bringing about P , then $\underline{N}_s Q$.

In such a case, there is no longer a problem with the inferential mechanisms of the unavoidability argument, but one of the premises is threatened. Suppose that the consequence relation is logical consequence, that $\underline{N}_s(L \ \& \ H)$ is true, and that Q is a logical consequence of $(L \ \& \ H)$. We cannot infer the conclusion $\underline{N}_s Q$ unless Q is a reliable consequence of S 's bringing

about (sustaining) (L & H). How could this be? By (12), Q would be a reliable consequence of S's bringing about (L & H) only if S already envisions a route whereby Q would result from his/her intentionally bringing about (L & H). But S cannot envision such a route without having a conception of how to bring about (L & H) and, therefore, a conception of (L & H) itself. For finite agents like ourselves, obviously, this is an impossible demand to meet, in which case, the reliability condition must remain unsatisfied. A similar conclusion holds if we shift attention to nomological consequence and H alone.

However, an agent whose doxastic capacities far exceed our own, perhaps an omniscient agent, might very well satisfy the condition that Q would be a reliable consequence of (L & H). The third cognitive condition (iii) makes its presence felt here. Suppose S believes that some proposition Q is already determined by L & H; then S will not take itself as able to bring about \sim Q since the future concerning Q and \sim Q can no longer be taken to have the requisite openness. Hence, by (iii), a being with a grasp of some complete state of the past, the laws, and of what they necessitate, will realize that it is unable to prevent anything already determined. In other words, given acceptable closure principles, the unavoidability arguments pose a difficulty only for those who would merge agency and omniscience (see Kapitan 1990, 1991). But for those compatibilists resigned to finitude—if not to fate—there is no occasion for alarm.

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NOTES

¹See, for example, Lamb 1977, Ginet 1980, 1983, and Van Inwagen 1975, 1983. For the most part, I consider the latter's presentation of the unavoidability argument (which he calls the "Consequence Argument"). Formalizations of the argument also occur in Horgan 1985, Fischer 1983, 1988, and Flint 1987.

²With 'consequence' undefined, this construal of 'bring about' is broad. The locution is intended to include an agent's sustaining a state of affairs, but must not be confined to a causal reading. Broad construals are also discussed in Lewis 1981, p. 120; Van Inwagen 1983, p. 68; Horgan 1985, p. 347; Hasker 1989, pp. 100-105; and Ginet 1990, pp. 98-99.

³Where logical consequence is involved, this principle is sanctioned in Cross 1986, p. 59 and Brown 1988, p. 8, though a broader principle is denied in Tichy and Oddie 1983, p. 146, for reasons similar to those discussed in section 3. Relations of extra-logical consequence are discussed in Kapitan 1982.

⁴Ginet 1980 and Van Inwagen 1983 use (8) in their versions of the argument, and van Inwagen has also utilized the principle, "If $\underline{A}_s \sim R$ and $Q \rightarrow R$ then $\underline{A}_s \sim Q$ " (p. 72). Both Widerker 1987 and Vihvelin 1988 have opposed the unrestricted validity of (8), the former giving a version with the rule " $\underline{NP}, [](P \rightarrow Q)$ therefore, \underline{NQ} " which, in classical modal logic, is tantamount to (7).

⁵Several writers have supported a cognitive condition similar to (iii), including Dennett 1984, pp. 116-118; Strawson 1986, p. 196; Zimmerman 1988, pp. 21-22; Vihvelin 1988, p. 238.

⁶This reasoning assumes transitivity of consequence, a strategy which is defensible when

the relevant contexts are held constant, as argued by Lycan 1984, p. 449; Honderich 1988, p. 33; and Lowe 1990, pp. 84-5.

⁷Similarly, an agent must foresee what would result from possible intentional actions in order to be responsible for it. If I intentionally push an elevator button that causes a bomb to explode on the 22nd floor due to some fiendish wiring of which I know nothing, not only did I not exercise any control over the bomb's exploding, I am not responsible for its exploding. Except for strict liability, we do not blame people for unforeseeable results of their intentional activity; criminal law standardly requires that the results be "reasonably foreseeable" if not foreseen (Duff 1990, pp. 109-110).

⁸Neither (11) or (12) implies that an envisioned result is intended or brought about intentionally. The distinction between intended and merely foreseen results is treated extensively by Harman 1986, chapter 9; Bratman 1987, chapter 10; and Duff 1990, chapters 4 and 5.

⁹A defense of (8) and variants of (7) can appeal directly to an indeterminist condition on ability claims, viz., that one is able at t to perform K at t' only if one is not at t determined to refrain from K -ing at t' . Thus, since P is determined in our example, we would have $\sim \underline{A}_s \sim P$, hence $\underline{N}_s P$. But, as indicated in section I, this links the unavoidability argument to the fate of that condition, considerably weakening its initial appeal.

¹⁰Principles (11) and (12) do not imply that an envisioned result is also an intended result, or a result brought about intentionally. The distinction between intended and merely foreseen results is treated extensively in literature on responsibility, recently, by Harman 1986, chapter 9, and Bratman 1987, chapter 10.

¹¹I have already mentioned that a defense of closure can appeal to an indeterminist condition on ability claims, viz., that one is able at t to perform K at t' only if one is not at t determined to refrain from K-ing at t' (see also, Flint 1987). Thus, if $\underline{N}_s H$ were true, then P would be determined, and, by the indeterministic condition, we would have $\sim \underline{A}_s \sim P$, hence $\underline{N}_s P$. This would secure (7) and, perhaps, (8), but it is doubtful whether the indeterminist condition is either plausible (Dennett 1984, pp. 135-6 and chapter 7) or necessary (----- 1989). In an interesting twist, Vihvelin 1988 argues that because (8) fails to hold in indeterministic worlds it is not a logically valid principle of reasoning. It is questionable whether this is a viable defense of compatibilism, however, for if the determinist principle is necessarily true if true at all, then the incompatibilist could press the case by insisting that only the nomologically possible worlds -- those determined by all and only necessary principles (laws) -- be considered in determining valid inference rules. My point here is that (7) cannot be shown by means of the initially more innocent (5) or (6). The cited examples can also be used against the more restricted principle mentioned in note 4 above.

¹²This argument depends upon the type of consequence relation used to characterize the notion of a "route" within attitudinal scope, for it would seem that the transitivity of the relevant sort of consequence is needed, hence, sameness of a presupposed context in going from P to Q and from Q to R. One might also consider a more liberal closure principle which requires only that the results of one's intentional acts be "reasonably foreseen." But this principle is also too weak to generate the unavoidability argument -- it being beyond the demands of "reasonableness" that P be a reliable consequence of H or of L & H.

¹³The reasoning needed to generate (18) and (19) from (16) supposes that the notion of reliable consequence is contrapositive. This is a reasonable expectation provided that the agent in question is sufficiently rational and that the involved consequence relation is itself contrapositive. The latter is problematic only when we are talking of conditional dependency or restricted necessitation, and though I suspect a case can be made for contraposition, it is beyond the capacities of this paper to do so.

⁵He need not believe that he could bring about P intentionally. P must be a foreseen or, at least, a foreseeable, result, though not necessarily intended. I might wish to maintain my cool the next time my ethnic background is insulted, but it might be that if I keep this end before my mind and consciously try to keep cool I will fail miserably. Suppose I evolve a strategy for keeping cool which takes my mind off the desired goal and, as a result, I am able to secure the desired result. If I implement this strategy, or, train myself to habitually implement it upon given perceptual cues, am I keeping cool intentionally? This is debateable, but given that I am able to implement this strategy at will, then I am able to keep cool.

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Abstract

By using predicate and sentential operators to express the practical modalities -- ability, control, openness, etc. -- Peter van Inwagen, Carl Ginet, and others have given new life to a fatalistic argument against compatibilism. But the standard versions of the argument employ principles concerning the closure of the modalities under relations of consequence which are open to doubt. In particular, since an agent is not able to accomplish something without having a conception of how to do so, hence, a conception of what is to be accomplished, then the usual forms of closure cannot be sustained. Those closure principles that can be sanctioned, moreover, are too weak to generate the anti-compatibilist argument.

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