Intuition, Orthodoxy, and Moral Responsibility

John Ross Churchill

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Many Christian philosophers hold that moral responsibility is incompatible with causal determinism, a thesis known as *incompatibilism*. But there are good reasons for resisting this trend. To illustrate this, I first examine an innovative recent case for incompatibilism by a Christian philosopher, one that depends crucially on the claim that intuitions favor incompatibilism. I argue that the case is flawed in ways that should keep us from accepting its conclusions. I then argue for a shift in the way that this issue is often approached, namely, that Christian philosophers should deemphasize the role of intuitions in illuminating this topic, and take pragmatic considerations concerning orthodoxy and potential empirical discoveries to favor a kind of *agnosticism* about the compatibility of determinism and responsibility.

1. Introduction

Philosophical temperaments vary. And these variations matter, as we see in episodes like the disagreement between James and Clifford on the ethics of belief. A less famous case, but one more relevant to present purposes, is the contrast between Sonja and Boris in the 1975 film *Love and Death*, as captured in the following exchange:

Boris: Sonja, what if there is no God?

Sonja: Boris Dimitrovitch, are you joking?

Boris: What if we're just a bunch of absurd people who are running around with no rhyme or reason?

Sonja: But, if there is no God, then life has no meaning. Why go on living? Why not just commit suicide?

Boris: Well, let's not get hysterical. I could be wrong. I'd hate to blow my brains out and then read in the paper that they found something.

Boris, unlike Sonja, is clearly a hedger by temperament. He has philosophical and theological leanings, to be sure, but he lets weighty pragmatic considerations temper his related commitments and actions, thereby shielding him from undue risk.

I've introduced Boris because I believe that for many Christian philosophers considering the question of the compatibility of determinism and moral responsibility, his strategy of withholding commitment—a kind of *agnosticism*—is a wise one.

In what follows, I'll first spend some time looking at a recent case for the incompatibility of determinism and moral responsibility by a Christian philosopher. The case is an innovative, theistic variation on the manipulation argument, which is commonly advanced in favor of incompatibilism. Careful consideration of this argument and its weaknesses will serve to highlight some of the ways in which incompatibilist arguments can go wrong, and it will present an opportunity to review some recent empirical evidence that intuitions do not weigh heavily in favor of incompatibilism. I'll then argue for the wisdom of an alternative approach in adjudicating this issue. The recommended alternative relies less on intuition and favors a commitment to moral responsibility, coupled with a kind of agnosticism about its compatibility with determinism, in light of pragmatic considerations concerning orthodoxy and potential empirical discoveries.

2. The Divine Controller Argument for Incompatibilism

Katherin Rogers has recently presented an argument for the incompatibility of moral responsibility and causal determinism, one that she calls "the divine controller argument."[1] Her case is a version of the manipulation argument for incompatibilism, all versions of which attempt to show that causal determinism would undermine moral responsibility, because certain kinds of manipulation would undermine responsibility and causal determinism is sufficiently similar to such manipulation.[2]

For present purposes, causal determinism may be understood as the thesis that all the mental and physical events in the created order, including human thoughts and actions, are causally necessitated: a complete description of all the mental and physical events occurring at any one time, together with a description of the laws of nature and the causal capacities of the various things that populate the world, entail a complete description of mental and physical goings-on at all later times.[3] Crucially, human thoughts and actions, like all other events, are understood to be the effects of causal processes, and so all the causes in the series that brought them about are included in the entailed descriptions as well. Manipulation arguments, then, seek to show that there would be no moral responsibility if this thesis were true, because moral responsibility is undermined if it is manipulated in certain ways, and causally determined behavior is sufficiently similar to behavior that is so manipulated. And note that the sense of moral responsibility at issue here is that which concerns *desert*; to say

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[1]Rogers, "The Divine Controller Argument for Incompatibilism."

[2]Derk Pereboom's Four-Case Argument is the best-known version of this challenge to compatibilism. See for example his *Free Will, Agency, and Meaning in Life*, ch. 4.

[3]Here I borrow significantly from Nahmias, "Scientific Challenges to Free Will," 346.

of a wrongdoer that she is responsible in this sense is to say that she is worthy of or deserves blame, regardless of any consequences that might be effected by the blame.[4]

Rogers's innovation on the manipulation argument has many virtues, but the two that are most relevant for present purposes are these. First, in the crucial scenario she uses a manipulator that in certain respects more closely resembles causal determinism than the human manipulators that are more frequently employed. In her argument, Rogers uses God instead of brilliant neurosurgeons, thorough brainwashers, and the like, which means that her manipulator need not be an *intervener* in the way that creaturely manipulators would have to be. God, as the uniquely powerful and knowledgeable creator and sustainer of the agent under consideration, could control the agent's behavior without "tinkering" with the agent's preexisting neural structure or mental inventory. Given the divine attributes, God could guarantee specific behavior by operating through unbroken and unexceptional chains of psychological and physical causes. Perceptions, memories, beliefs, desires, hopes, fears, resolutions, etc., would lead to intentions, which in turn would lead to complex behavior—all in accord with ordinary psychological processes, and yet all proceeding according to divine decree. The manipulation need not involve any adjustment, midstream as it were, in what the agent wants, believes, values, remembers, etc. Because such a scenario more closely resembles agents' normal behavior in a causally deterministic world—absent any manipulation whatsoever—than scenarios involving neuroscientists and the like, Rogers is in a stronger position to argue that if the manipulation she has described undermines responsibility, then so also does determinism of the natural variety.

Second, she has by her lights used a more familiar and realistic manipulator, so that there is less danger that the intuitions elicited by the scenario are responding to the strangeness of the case or are irrelevant to real-world concerns. This may strike many people as a bizarre claim, given that Rogers has chosen to use a deity instead of a human actor as her manipulator of choice. But many *theists* will be apt to agree that her case is more realistic in this sense, because they will grant the reality of a God that has the power and knowledge to manipulate in this way (even if they deny that God would or could, all things considered, act in such a way).

The upshot is that Rogers presents what many will take to be a more realistic case of a manipulator, whose control is exercised in such a way that the controlled agent is very similar to an unmanipulated but causally determined agent—much more similar in many respects than the manipulated agents often sketched in such arguments. With this background in place, she argues that intuitions favor the position that agents under

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[4]See for example Sommers, *Relative Justice*, 10. See also Rogers, "The Divine Controller Argument for Incompatibilism," 275, 278.

divine control of the sort she sketches would not be morally responsible, and thus—given the similarity of the two cases—neither would determined agents who are not under divine control.

Given the above, Rogers's case that intuition privileges incompatibilism in this context is important, and so it is worth examining in a little more detail. What she takes specifically to have strong intuitive support is the claim that if an agent makes her choice because God causally necessitates her to make that choice—if God caused her to choose as she did rather than choosing differently—then the agent is not morally responsible for that choice. And thus it would not be fair for God or anyone else to blame or punish the agent for the choice in such a circumstance. This claim is defended as one that accords much more strongly with our intuitions than does a competing compatibilist claim (used in a *modus tollens* response to her case), namely, that an agent can be morally responsible for her choice even if that choice was causally determined; the two claims are not, per Rogers, on a par intuitively. ("Intuition" is left undefined, but we can plausibly and charitably assume a common usage like the following: a judgment about the truth or falsity of some claim, where the judgment is spontaneous and the person making it may not be able to offer much by way of further justification for it.[5]) Here is Rogers on this crucial point:

> The premise in the divine controller argument says that if God causes your choice you are not morally responsible. So, for example, it just isn't *fair* for God, or anyone, to punish you for a murder that God caused you to choose and commit. I take this to be an intuitive claim which is immediate (you see it as soon as you understand the terms), powerful, and widely accepted. This intuitive strength is taken to provide strong *prima facie* reason to accept the claim. The premise in the *tollens* argument—although you are determined you can be morally responsible—certainly cannot lay claim to that sort of intuitive support. To be plausible at all, it must assume a fairly sophisticated form of compatibilism. . . . That means that when we arrive at the intuitively difficult conclusion that we are morally responsible—*we deserve to be punished or rewarded*—even if our choices are caused by God, our reason to accept the conclusion, rather than rejecting the premise, is comparatively weak.[6]

> If the original intuition that you are not free and responsible when God directly causes your choices is as wide-spread and as powerful as I take it to be, then the divine controller argument is more persuasive than the *tollens* argument and provides good reason to adopt incompatibilism.[7]

It is a further virtue of the paper that Rogers makes her methodology so clear: the claim that divinely controlled agents aren't responsible has strong intuitive support, while the claim that causally determined agents can be morally responsible does not; this, in conjunction with the fact

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[5]Sommers, *Relative Justice*, 11.

[6]Rogers, "The Divine Controller Argument for Incompatibilism," 286.

[7]Ibid., 294.

that divine control is similar in relevant respects to causal determination, should lead us to conclude that causal determinism is incompatible with moral responsibility.

Rogers's clarity enables respondents to pinpoint exactly what would be required for a cogent response: one must show either that the difference in intuitive support is not as Rogers has claimed—i.e., that the claim about divine control does not enjoy the clear intuitive advantage over the claim about causally determined but morally responsible agents—or one must show that the divine control described in Rogers's argument differs in relevant respects from causal determinism. In the following sections, I attempt both.

3. Divine Control Versus Causal Determinism

Let's start with some key differences between divine control and causal determinism, or more carefully, between the divine controller scenario as described in Rogers's argument and the causally determined agency that it is supposed to mirror.

Recall a virtue of Rogers's argument discussed earlier, namely, the use of a familiar and (for many) realistic manipulator—God—in contrast to the manipulators often used in similar arguments. It is to Rogers's credit that she casts her manipulator in this way, that she refuses to use a manipulator that is a "thin" and "evanescent" philosophers' contrivance.[8] However, it is no less important that this same approach be used when describing *the agent whose responsibility is in question*. Otherwise we invite dangers parallel to those that Rogers noted could plague our thinking with respect to the manipulator. She worried that the use of an unrealistic and unfamiliar controller—the neuroscientists and brainwashers that are typically employed—might mean that, in the end, "weirdness is doing much of the heavy lifting in eliciting the looked-for intuition."[9] But it should be equally worrying if the agent in our scenario is significantly underdescribed. For in that case, the judgment that the agent is not morally responsible could very well be responding primarily to the fact that she lacks features that *compatibilists* defend as crucial to responsibility.

And, I submit, Rogers's presentation of the manipulated agent is underdescribed in just this way. Insufficient care has been taken to signal that the agent in question is normal in all relevant respects, e.g., cognitively, epistemically, motivationally, affectively, and so forth. Instead, what is most salient about the agent in the test case is that she is controlled with striking precision. And this means that there is a real danger that intuitive judgments of non-responsibility may be driven at least in part by a perception that we have not been presented with a genuine agent—not because something similar to causal determinism has undermined agency,

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[8]Ibid., 277.

[9]Ibid.

but because the person in the scenario appears to be so *simple*, and in a way that is foreign to our ordinary experience of ourselves and others.[10]

Daniel Dennett gave us a memorable version of this worry for incompatibilism years ago by introducing the wasp *Sphex*, an insect that appears at first glance to be manifesting stunning behavioral complexity, but that in the end is driven (in the relevant case anyway) by a fairly simple causal mechanism. We may all judge that were we like Sphex in certain respects, we would not be responsible for our behavior. But which are the "certain respects" is of the utmost importance as we reflect:

> Might it not be that what makes the wasp's fate so dreadful is not that her actions and "decisions" are *caused* but precisely that they are so *simply* caused? If so, then the acknowledged difference between the object of our intuition pump [the wasp, i.e.] and ourselves—our complexity—may block our inheritance of the awfulness we see in the simple case.[11]

The lesson for present purposes is that there is a relevant difference between the causally determined agents that compatibilists defend as morally responsible, on the one hand, and the agent that has been described in the divine controller argument, on the other. Because the latter is significantly underdescribed, it just isn't clear whether intuitions elicited by reflection on the scenario are responding to features of the case that incompatibilists uniquely claim are inconsistent with moral responsibility (i.e., deterministic causes or something sufficiently similar) or if instead they are responding to the absence of features (i.e., sufficient complexity of the relevant sorts) that compatibilists and incompatibilists alike take to be essential to agency.[12]

The second way in which the controller scenario differs from deterministic agency is more subtle but no less significant. As discussed above, Rogers is careful not to cast her divine controller as an intervener, so as to avoid such differences:

> [W]hile God may be a complete divine controller, He need not be a manipulator or intervener. In the divine controller argument your lack of responsibility

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[10]See Michael McKenna's discussion of this point in 470–471 and 477–478 of his "Resisting the Manipulation Argument." Perhaps another way of appreciating this point is to consider the difference in your emotional responses to the Siri of your iPhone, on the one hand, and the Samantha operating system of Spike Jonze's *Her*, on the other.

[11]Dennett, *Elbow Room*, 12.

[12]It's true that late in "The Divine Controller Argument for Incompatibilism" (288–294), in her discussion of Lynne Rudder Baker's and Al Mele's compatibilist accounts, Rogers adds some agential complexity to her descriptions that renders the controlled agents so described more realistic. But note, crucially, that even here she takes her original intuitive judgment regarding the initial (simple) description to be the key bit of evidence—the proposed responses based on richer descriptions are judged not to succeed dialectically because they do not overturn that original intuition. Moreover, and as discussed in the next section in the main text, recent empirical evidence suggests that when people judge that controlled agents lack moral responsibility, they are responding to the fact that *compatibilist* conditions on moral responsibility have not been satisfied.

for the choice to murder cannot be ascribed to your having been mistreated, used, or even simply manipulated, by the controller.[13]

This is a major strength of Rogers's argument, as it means that the manipulated agent better approximates ordinary, causally determined agents. For the latter do not have other persons "tinkering" with them like the frightening characters in other manipulation arguments. Nor is it true of determined agents that deterministic causes are somehow steering them away from an independence or autonomy that they otherwise would have had. The divine controller scenario—unlike cases where the manipulators are human—avoids this result as well:

> Intervention and manipulation, I take it, imply that the controlled agent exists independently of the controller such that the controller must "step in" and tinker with the agent. Someone who intervenes or manipulates introduces changes which turn the agent from the path he likely would have followed. If we take our divine controller to be the God of classical theism—of Thomas Aquinas, as the prime example—then complete divine control does not entail any intervening *per se*.[14]

Rogers's test case, then, is carefully constructed to ensure fidelity to the deterministic scenario in the two ways I have just presented. However, there is nevertheless a key difference between the unmanipulated agent in a deterministic world, on the one hand, and Rogers's divinely controlled agent on the other. The compatibilist can and should insist that it is much clearer that the determined agent is responsible than it is that the controlled agent is responsible, because it is much clearer that the determined agent is a cause of the right sort—i.e., that her actions are appropriately related causally and explanatorily to other of her mental states. And the reason behind this difference is Rogers's statement concerning God's intimate, general action in the world, everywhere and all of the time:

> Classical theism holds that God's creation consists in sustaining everything in being from moment to moment. Absolutely every created thing that has any ontological status is immediately caused by God simultaneously with its existence. Thus nothing which is not God—no object, no positive property, no action—exists independently of God's directly causing it.[15]

My aim in raising this issue is not to contest Rogers's theology on this point. Rather, I want first to highlight the fact that this aspect of the divine controller scenario has no analogue in the cases of causally determined actions that compatibilists take to be paradigms of morally responsible agency. It is important on compatibilist accounts that actions for which agents are responsible have the right kinds of mental and physical natural causes (and explanations in terms of these), but such accounts do not

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[13]Rogers, "The Divine Controller Argument for Incompatibilism," 283.

[14]Ibid., 282.

[15]Ibid.

require commitment to anything analogous to the divine cause in Rogers's scenario—i.e., a direct, non-natural cause of the action that is distinct from that action's natural causal history. This is a crucial point, given the kind of argument she has developed. And second, this distinctive feature of the divine controller case—that God causes, immediately and directly, the existence and properties of the controlled agent and her action—brings with it a risk of generating the judgments that the incompatibilist wants, but *for the wrong reasons.* For such judgments may be due to the impression that the agent's mental states aren't causing her actions after all, because God's immediate and direct causation is thought to be the only causation at work in the scenario. It is true that Rogers clearly stipulates that natural causes are still operative in her divine controller scenario. And it is true that this stipulation—and the primary cause/secondary cause distinctions used to justify it—may be enough to vindicate the scenario as a possible one.[16] Nevertheless, we have been given no reason for confidence that judgments about the agent's responsibility in the divine controller scenario are tracking features that are present in the deterministic scenario, rather than tracking other features—such as the direct and immediate causation of the agent's action by something *other* than the agent or her mental states—that are unique to the case of divine control.

I ended the previous section by listing the ways in which someone could respond to Rogers's argument. In this section I have explored one of these options, by listing some crucial and relevant differences between her divine controller scenario and the causally deterministic scenario that it is supposed to resemble. This weakens her argument considerably, because its cogency requires these two scenarios to be similar in relevant respects. In light of the differences discussed above, we have good reason to doubt something that is essential to Rogers's case—namely, that our judgment about the moral responsibility of causally determined agents ought to match our judgment about the moral responsibility of agents in her divine controller scenario.

In the next section, I explore a second line of response to further buttress the compatibilist's defense, a response that challenges more directly Rogers's claims about intuitive evidence.

4. *Are We Intuitive Incompatibilists?*

Suppose that we were able to shore up the deficiencies in the divine controller argument. This would require that its key scenario is not underdescribed, and that it presents the agent's actions as causally and explanatorily related to her mental states in appropriate ways. Suppose this is accomplished. Is there reason to think that proponents of this argument would then be in a position to claim far more intuitive support for their preferred conclusion—that divine control undermines responsibility—

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[16]Ibid., 282–283.

than for the compatibilist's claim that an agent can be morally responsible for her choice even if that choice was causally determined?

Recent empirical evidence suggests a negative answer. Consider first some studies by Eddy Nahmias and colleagues that sought explicitly to test claims about what people take to be necessary for free will and responsible action. They found that causal determinism is not typically understood to be a threat to moral responsibility unless it is conflated with threats to the efficacy of agents' relevant mental states.[17] In other words, people tend to take determinism to threaten moral responsibility only when they believe that determinism somehow precludes actions from being related causally and explanatorily to their beliefs, desires, etc. When it is clear that mental states play these roles, people tend to judge that causally determined agents can be morally responsible. This result has been bolstered by a more recent study,[18] in which Nahmias and colleagues gave people fictional vignettes about neuroscientists who were able to predict a person's everyday decisions and actions with perfect accuracy, even before she made the decisions or performed the actions, using knowledge of her past brain activity (as detected by a lightweight cap). Similar to the results above, the tendency was to judge that the person in the vignettes was responsible for her behavior. Judgments shifted only to the extent that people were led to believe that she could have or had been *manipulated* by the neuroscientists; otherwise people tended to judge her to be responsible, despite the fact that her thought and behavior had proceeded deterministically.[19]

These results argue strongly *against* claims, by Rogers and others, that compatibilist sentiments lack intuitive strength and consensus and require sophisticated theory to be at all plausible. Indeed, the findings by Nahmias et al. suggest the opposite, i.e., that much of the folk incline toward compatibilism, so long as they believe that appropriate mental states are efficacious and do not take the possibility of manipulation to be salient.

One might object that folk worries about manipulation create difficulties for the present line of argument. Here is one way the objection might go: given that people tend to judge that an agent is not responsible when they believe that she was or could have been manipulated, they should share Rogers's strong intuition that divine control (perhaps a kind of manipulation) undermines responsibility; but (we have agreed to assume in

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[17]See Murray and Nahmias, "Explaining Away Incompatibilist Intuitions."

[18]See Nahmias, Shepard, and Reuter, "It's OK if 'My Brain Made Me Do It.'"

[19]One caveat here is that while the thought and behavior was said to be fully predictable, as above, the vignette did not include any content about *laws*, let alone deterministic laws. However, the results still support the conclusion that folk intuitions are not on the side of the incompatibilist, absent any worries about actual or possible manipulation. For the neuroscientists in the story are able to predict the agent's behavior with perfect accuracy, based on her brain activity prior to the action. And this is clearly a scenario that incompatibilists in general will take to be hostile to responsible action, as it plausibly includes the idea that certain laws in conjunction with facts about the agent's brain states at specific times jointly imply truths about the agent's actions at later times.

this section) divine control of this sort is similar in relevant respects to causal determinism; therefore, people should conclude that causal determinism undermines responsibility.

But there are two difficulties for this response. First, compatibilists who marshal Nahmias's studies as support are entitled to claim that while it certainly *might* be the case that there is a common intuition that divine control of the relevant sort undermines responsibility, the evidence we *actually* have suggests that there is a common intuition that causally determined agents can be responsible, at least under certain descriptions.

Moreover, given the context, it's worth asking *why* people take manipulation to undermine responsibility: is it because they take manipulation *per se* to be a threat to responsibility, or are there some factors that are common but not essential to cases of manipulation that are generating the discomfort? This leads to the second difficulty for the response above. A separate set of studies by Chandra Sripada[20] suggests that the threat to moral responsibility isn't manipulation *per se*, but rather, manipulation that results in the manipulated agent having certain psychological impairments. Judgments concerning two kinds of impairments, in particular, accounted for his subjects' responses to manipulation cases. The first kind of impairment was one in which the agent in the studies' vignettes suffered from "corrupted information"—in other words, the agent was a victim of a systematic and extensive program of deception and biasing designed to eventuate in the manipulator's desired outcome. The second kind of impairment involved the manipulator giving the agent a set of mental states that conflicted with other, deeply held beliefs, desires, values, etc. that were constitutive of who that agent really was. (An example of such a case would be a woman who has shown lifelong love and devotion to her grandfather, and is free from ambivalence toward him, but who kills him one night because a manipulator introduces a single, strong desire to do so.) Sripada found that his subjects' judgments about whether a manipulated agent lacked free will were strongly predicted by their judgments about whether the agent was impaired in one of these two ways. Furthermore, the variation in their judgments concerning such impairment fully explained the variation in judgments concerning the manipulated agent's freedom. His subjects, in other words, tended to take manipulation to threaten free will only insofar as it was judged to have impaired the agent in one of these ways; to the extent that the agent was judged not to have suffered from corrupted information or discordance among core commitments and the mental states the manipulator introduced, manipulation was not taken as a threat to free will.[21] Sripada notes the irony of these findings, given the history of philosophical discussion on this topic:

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[20]Sripada, "What Makes a Manipulated Agent Unfree?"

[21]Ibid., 573–583.

> Incompatibilists claim that compatibilists cannot accommodate our intu-
> itions that a manipulated agent is unfree. The results of this study suggest
> that this charge against compatibilism is incorrect. These results instead
> suggest that the intuition that a manipulated agent is unfree is driven pri-
> marily by judgments that the manipulated agent is compromised with
> respect to precisely the kinds of psychological capacities compatibilists
> regard as the basis for free will. Indeed, the results of the present study sug-
> gest, somewhat ironically, that far from being a *problem* for compatibilism,
> manipulation cases might even be seen as a kind of *justification* for compati-
> bilist views. Insofar as what drives folk intuitions in manipulation cases is
> subtle tracking of just the kind of freedom-conferring conditions that com-
> patibilists have long defended, then it seems that manipulation cases pro-
> vide *evidence* for compatibilist principles by showing these principles are
> indeed deeply enshrined in the folk conception of freedom.[22]

The relevance of these results to our discussion is clear. Given common conceptual associations between free will and moral responsibility, the evidence suggests that for many, manipulation by a divine controller will not be taken intuitively to undermine responsibility unless the manipulation is understood to have resulted in one of the impairments above.[23] But there is no reason to assume that a divine controller must exercise control over agents' behavior by introducing psychic discord of the relevant sort, or by making agents suffer from corrupted information in the way described above. (Moreover, control of either kind would fail to resemble causally determined agency, at least in a great many cases, and so it would not behoove the incompatibilist to propose manipulation of this sort.) Divine control, of the sort at issue here, appears not to be the threat to moral responsibility that it is alleged to be in Rogers's argument.[24]

It's worth pausing to note that the issue at hand, here and throughout, is whether the agents in question are morally responsible, in the sense

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[22]Ibid., 583.

[23]With respect to the free will/moral responsibility distinction, it's worth noting that Sripada's survey included a question about the agent's moral responsibility as well. While his paper does not include an analysis of the relation between subjects' responsibility judgments and their judgments about the relevant psychological impairments, Sripada does report the mean scores for this item across various conditions. These were as follows, where 1 indicated strong agreement that the agent was responsible and 7 strong disagreement: 1.49 (standard deviation = 1.2) in response to a vignette in which there was no manipulation; 2.38 (standard deviation = 1.5) in response to a vignette that was intended to convey that the agent was manipulated but did not suffer from one of the relevant impairments; and 3.16 (standard deviation = 1.8) in response to a vignette that included manipulation but no attempt to convey that there was no relevant impairment.

[24]One reviewer suggested the following lesson for theological determinists who affirm moral responsibility, and who take Sripada's study to heart: humans who suffer from corrupted information, deep psychological discord, or a condition similar to these are not morally responsible, even if the condition is not due to a human manipulator. I think this is a reasonable conclusion to draw for those with these sensibilities, in part because it seems to me to align with our ordinary practices with respect to moral responsibility. For my sense is that we tend ordinarily to exempt agents from responsibility if they suffer from an impairment like this—or perhaps better, we take responsibility to be mitigated to the extent that they appear to suffer from such impairment—regardless of whether we can attribute the condition to a human manipulator.

of being worthy or deserving of blame. The issue is not about the *appropriateness* of *blaming* the agents, or the *appropriateness* of *punishing* the agents. Blameworthiness is, of course, a key factor in the determination of whether blame or punishment is appropriate. But it does not seem to be the only factor. For example, considerations of "moral standing" appear to be crucial in blaming practices: you may be blameworthy for your theft, but my hypocrisy or complicity may make it inappropriate for me to blame you for it. Similarly, blame of one kind may be appropriate even if blame of another kind is not.[25] Similar comments apply to questions about punishment. The point is not that questions about the appropriateness of blame and punishment are out of place in discussions of determined or manipulated agency; rather, the point is that these are complex questions that are related to, but distinct from, the question of moral responsibility. This means, moreover, that we should take care not to conflate our intuitions about the appropriateness of blaming or punishing the agents in the relevant scenarios with our intuitions about the responsibility of those agents.

We see, then, that even a strengthened divine controller version of the manipulation argument for the incompatibility of determinism and responsibility does not succeed. For its success depends heavily on claims about intuitions that have not borne out. Note, importantly, that the case for this conclusion is *not* that evidence like that presented above establishes compatibilism as having stronger intuitive support than incompatibilism. (This is fitting, as the question of how exactly to understand our intuitions on this matter is still a live one.[26]) Rather, such evidence calls into question another key element of Rogers's argument for incompatibilism—namely, the twofold assumption that (i) the prospect of morally responsible, causally determined agency boasts little intuitive support, while (ii) the claim that divine control undermines moral responsibility is a strong and widely-shared intuition. We have seen above that there is good reason to doubt both.

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[25]On the appropriateness of blame—including the relevance of blameworthiness, moral standing, hypocrisy, complicity, and more—see Tognazzini and Coates, "Blame"; Coates and Tognazzini, "The Contours of Blame"; and Coates and Tognazzini, "The Nature and Ethics of Blame."

[26]Recent challenges to the account proposed by Nahmias and colleagues can be found in Rose and Nichols, "The Lesson of Bypassing," and Knobe, "Free Will and the Scientific Vision." Nahmias and Morgan Thompson respond to the latter in "A Naturalistic Vision of Free Will." A recent study by Azim Shariff and colleagues might be presented as strongly suggesting widespread incompatibilist intuitions, as these authors report that subjects who read mechanistic descriptions of human action from popular science sources subsequently rated wrongdoers as less blameworthy than subjects who read about a different topic. (See Shariff et al., "Free Will and Punishment.") However, it's noteworthy that one of the mechanistic descriptions in the study included discussion of *manipulation* by the scientists, and the other included a claim by a scientist that all our preconceptions about our minds and selves are "no longer safe." In light of this, it is an open question whether the effects were due to reading about mechanistic agency, or were due instead to reading about manipulation or about a scientist's explicit claim that empirical advances are threatening much of what we believe to be true of ourselves as persons.

5. An Alternative Approach

Rather than ending the discussion here, however, I want to suggest an alternative approach to this issue, one that does not prioritize claims about intuitions. I do so not out of a general distrust of intuitions, but because I believe there are good reasons for many Christian philosophers to downgrade their value and to weight other evidential considerations more heavily in this context.[27]

I want to begin by asking those readers who are both Christians and incompatibilists[28] to pause to consider how, as best they can tell, they would respond were they to become convinced that causal determinism is true. Would they abandon belief in or commitment to moral responsibility? Perhaps some would. But I suspect that the majority would simply shift, quickly or gradually, to a compatibilist position.[29] And for many in this latter group, problems that may previously have been viewed as crippling for compatibilism—the problem of evil, say—would come to be accepted as puzzles to be solved under the new approach rather than paradigm-busting anomalies.[30]

These are speculative claims, of course. But there are good reasons to believe that people of many stripes—Christian or no—would respond in this way, rather than abandoning commitment to moral responsibility. The first reason is that work by people like Nahmias and Sripada challenges the claim that incompatibilism is the strong and widespread intuitive view that it is sometimes claimed to be. An additional reply, more specific to the case at hand, takes its cue from work in this area by Adina Roskies and Shaun Nichols.[31] These authors found that people presented with a hypothetical deterministic world described abstractly—in contrast to the concrete descriptions used in the studies by Nahmias and Sripada— tended to judge that moral responsibility is impossible in such a world. However, when people were given instead a script that presented the *actual* world as deterministic, in the very same abstract way, they were

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[27]This is not to deny that there are considerable *prima facie* challenges to the evidential value of intuitions concerning moral responsibility. See for example Tamler Sommers's case that such intuitions differ radically across cultures in *Relative Justice*, Part I, a conclusion that, if correct, would at least problematize the practice of counting the intuitions typical of one's culture as normative. But see Fiery Cushman's response to one of these proposed differences (belief in individual moral responsibility versus belief in collective moral responsibility) in his "Revenge without Responsibility?"

[28]This will constitute a large majority of Christian philosophers, according to Jerry Walls in his "Why No Classical Theist, Let Alone Orthodox Christian, Should Ever Be a Compatibilist," 78.

[29]See van Inwagen, *An Essay on Free Will*, 219–221, for an example of an incompatibilist who is especially frank on this matter.

[30]Moreover, some problems in Christian philosophy would become easier to solve, such as the problem of reconciling human free will and divine foreknowledge (assuming that morally responsible agency requires free will). Lynne Rudder Baker makes this point, and gives other considerations in favor of compatibilism within a Christian framework, in her "Why Christians Shouldn't Be Libertarians."

[31]Roskies and Nichols, "Bringing Moral Responsibility Down to Earth."

inclined to judge that agents *were* morally responsible (despite being causally determined). This, too, suggests that people would not abandon commitment to moral responsibility *en masse* were they to become convinced that the world—*their* world—was deterministic, even if they report incompatibilist intuitions under certain conditions.

However, for present purposes I'm less interested in how people in general *would* respond in these circumstances, and more interested in how *Christian philosophers*, in particular, *should be prepared* to respond. For I think that reflection on this issue ultimately reveals a kind of *agnosticism* about the compatibility of determinism and moral responsibility to be a wiser strategy than commitment to incompatibilism, for many Christian philosophers.

To see this, consider first that while there are philosophical positions that would plausibly put one outside the bounds of Christian orthodoxy broadly defined, compatibilism is *definitely not* one of these positions. (Quite the contrary in fact, as several eminent figures in the history of the church have defended positions that allow for causally determined, morally responsible agency, or positions that are sufficiently similar in relevant respects.[32]) The same, however, cannot be said of positions that *reject* moral responsibility, as such responsibility is much more central to orthodoxy. This is explicit in the confessional statements of multiple traditions, and it is plausibly included in many (even if not all) others.[33] Moreover, determinism, like certain other theses about causal structure that many incompatibilists see as threats to responsibility, admits of empirical confirmation or disconfirmation;[34] it remains a live possibility that the sciences find compelling evidence for the truth of determinism (or

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[32]Augustine, John Calvin, and Jonathan Edwards, for example, all defended views of moral responsibility that make it difficult to oppose compatibilism of the sort at issue here. For each of their accounts rejects some central plank of incompatibilism, whether that plank is the condition that one was able to act otherwise than one acted in fact (the "leeway" condition) or that one was the ultimate source of one's action (the "sourcehood" condition). On the leeway/sourcehood distinction, see Levy, *Hard Luck*, ch. 3. For evidence that Augustine held a view that was friendly to compatibilism in the way I have suggested, see Couenhoven, *Stricken by Sin, Cured by Christ*, Part One. For evidence that Calvin held such a view, see Helm, *John Calvin's Ideas*, ch. 6, and *Calvin at the Centre*, ch. 8. Edwards's commitments in this respect can be seen in his *Freedom of the Will*.

[33]See for example Article 9 of *The Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion* (in Packer and Beckwith, *The Thirty-Nine Articles*, 8–9); ch. XV, sec. 4 of *The Westminster Confession of Faith* (in Hodge, *The Westminster Confession*, 213); and sec. 1732 in *The* Catechism *of the Catholic Church*, 481. Please note that I am not claiming that those who reject moral responsibility are beyond the pale theologically. (I cannot emphasize this enough.) Rather, I am only making the point—an uncontroversial one, in my opinion—that the rejection of moral responsibility is difficult to square with Christian orthodoxy, broadly construed, while commitment to compatibilism is not. On this point, see Crisp, *Deviant Calvinism*, ch. 3, especially 77.

[34]It's worth a mention in this context that there are weighty arguments against determinism that do not turn primarily on an appeal to quantum mechanics. For examples, see Dupré, *The Disorder of Things*, ch. 8 and ch. 9, and *Human Nature and the Limits of Science*, ch. 1 and ch. 7, as well as Cartwright, *The Dappled World*, Part I.

these other theses, for that matter).[35] But these considerations, taken together, show us that the stakes are high for Christian incompatibilists—at least for those Christian incompatibilists who are prepared to maintain their incompatibilism upon learning that determinism is true. For such persons have made their commitment to such responsibility hostage to empirical discoveries. And thus they are betting a secure place within the bounds of orthodoxy on the proposition that determinism is false, despite the fact that there is wide consensus that the truth of this thesis is not precluded by orthodoxy.

But for many—perhaps most—Christian philosophers, such a bet will be *extremely* unattractive, as security within orthodoxy will be valued much more highly than maintaining commitment to incompatiblism. For someone in this camp, the wiser strategy will be to take the wager off the table by withholding commitment on whether determinism rules out morally responsible agency,[36] and then issuing strong reservations if they apply in one's case—e.g., qualifications that such agency seems counterintuitive, that such a scenario appears to exacerbate the problems of evil or hell, and so forth, as one sees fit.[37] The result would be a robust commitment to moral responsibility relative to potential scientific discoveries that implicate human agency, a position that would mark a virtuous contrast to episodes within church history in which empirical theses were invested with undue doctrinal significance.

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[35]Many incompatibilists, for example, would contest the claim that an agent who is merely overwhelmingly likely (95%, e.g.) to perform every action she in fact performs would be morally responsible for those actions. Similarly, it is not uncommon for some incompatibilists to argue that if agency has a *probabilistic event-causal* structure, then no one is morally responsible for their behavior. (For presentation and response to the latter kind of argument, see Franklin, "Farewell to the Luck [and *Mind*] Argument.") In principle, empirical tests should be able to reveal whether probabilities can be assigned to our choices, and if so, the degree to which each of our actions was likely to be performed. As for whether or not agency is event-causal, empirical evidence for or against will be less straightforward. However, I take the following to be plausible but not uncontroversial: the more that agency lends itself to *mechanistic* explanations in the psychological and brain sciences, the more difficult it is to square with agent-causal or non-causal accounts as opposed to event-causal accounts. For event-causal accounts are not hostile to mechanistic agency in the way that these other two approaches appear to be. If this is right, advances in mechanistic explanations of agency would count in favor of the event-causal approach, and thus—for those who have advanced the luck argument—against moral responsibility. On mechanism as a perceived threat to moral responsibility, see Nahmias, "Scientific Challenges to Free Will," 346–348, and Vargas, "If Free Will Doesn't Exist, Neither Does Water," 193.

[36]Readers may recognize the similarity of this sentiment to one of John Martin Fischer's stated motivations for compatibilism in his "Problems with Actual-Sequence Incompatibilism," 323. Fischer himself counts these motivations as Strawsonian, in light of P. F. Strawson, *Freedom and Resentment*, 1–28. The difference is that I am proposing that Christian incompatibilists do not only hold their commitment to moral responsibility hostage to scientific discovery, but—in virtue of this—their security within the bounds of orthodoxy as well.

[37]These qualifications reflect the chief difficulties for compatibilism in Walls's "Why No Classical Theist, Let Alone Orthodox Christian, Should *Ever* Be a Compatibilist."

I refer to this position as *agnosticism* in part because of its similarity to a view defended by Alfred R. Mele, a position he calls *agnostic autonomism*.[38] Mele's approach is characterized by a firm commitment to moral responsibility and a noncommittal attitude on the compatibility question. He takes both compatibilism and incompatibilism to be live options without accepting either, and he is more confident that *either* compatibilist conditions or incompatibilist conditions on responsibility are met than he is that humans are never morally responsible.

My argument takes a different route to a similar view: for many (perhaps most) Christian philosophers, there is good reason to favor commitment to moral responsibility and agnosticism on the compatibility question. For this position enables one to avoid staking one's security within the bounds of orthodoxy on the proposition that determinism (or related empirical theses) is false—an especially wise strategy given that the truth of determinism appears to be safely within these bounds. And this strategy, note, is intended even for Christians with strong incompatibilist intuitions. For the bet on incompatibilism will, for many, be bad enough that such intuitions should be given relatively little weight, as should the costs of having to revise key incompatibilist concepts in significant ways.[39] Moreover, for those who have incompatibilist intuitions but nevertheless suspect that decisive evidence for determinism would not (or should not) shake their commitment to moral responsibility, such agnosticism would provide an alternative to simply accepting incompatibilism with the knowledge that they would likely reject it upon learning that determinism is true.

Two qualifications are in order before we proceed. First, the argument above is targeted at philosophers who identify with a Christian tradition within which moral responsibility approaches something of a *sine qua non*, and within which compatibilism concerning determinism and moral responsibility is treated as within the bounds of orthodoxy. Where this is not the case, the argument has little force. Since I expect that a great many Christian philosophers will count themselves as within the target class, I do not view this as a substantial weakness.

Second, there may be Christian philosophers whose commitment to incompatibilism is so strong that they wish to be stricter than tradition on this issue. That is, while they believe that orthodoxy countenances determined, morally responsible agency, they simply cannot bring *themselves* to do so, and thus they knowingly and willingly stake their security within the bounds of orthodoxy on the falsity of determinism. Obviously

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[38]See Mele, *Free Will and Luck*, 4–5. Note that Mele explicitly casts his view as one that concerns both moral responsibility and free will, while I have limited my brief discussion of his approach to issues about moral responsibility.

[39]For defense of revisionism as a viable strategy in this and related inquiry, see Vargas, "If Free Will Doesn't Exist, Neither Does Water." Note, however, that Vargas is not concerned with theological issues in his paper.

such people will not be moved by my case that incompatibilism is a bad bet. And I don't have an argument that demonstrates their evaluation of the bet to be mistaken or irrational. (It's probably fair to say that the natural bent of the Christian philosopher is to take orthodoxy as Austin took ordinary language—i.e., as the first word, on the subject, but not the last.[40]) Regardless, here again I expect that this class of people will be small enough—especially in light of the findings by Roskies and Nichols, Sripada, and Nahmias et al. discussed earlier—that the argument above should still have sufficiently wide application.

Given the role that intuition is often afforded in philosophy, there may be some dissatisfaction that I have given no account as to how in general we ought to think of intuitions as evidence in the philosophical domain. I'll just note that while it might be preferable to have some such account, none is needed to make the case above. It's probably also worth noting that Christian philosophers are already in the business of reprioritizing or reinterpreting intuitions and revising concepts accordingly, in virtue of accepting doctrines like the Trinity and the hypostatic union, and thus there is a kind of precedent for doing so in the present case.[41]

Finally, note that I've presented agnosticism as an alternative to incompatibilism. This is in keeping with my primary aim in the present paper. However, clearly considerations similar to those I've presented above weigh just as strongly against commitment to the kind of *compatibilist* position that *requires* causal determinism for moral responsibility, as one finds in (e.g.) the work of Jonathan Edwards.[42] For that kind of position makes moral responsibility hostage to the *truth* of determinism. The case above does not weigh as strongly against compatibilism in the strict (and weaker) sense—i.e., the thesis that responsibility is compatible with, but does not require, causal determinism—because this weaker thesis doesn't stake as much on the truth or on the falsity of such determinism. But neither does the case recommend, let alone require, commitment to this weaker kind of compatibilism. So it is, in the end, properly understood as an argument for agnosticism.

6. Conclusion

As *Love and Death* draws to a close, we get this exchange between Boris and his father:

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[40]Austin, "A Plea for Excuses," 11.

[41]Interestingly, there is evidence that garden-variety theistic commitments (e.g., divine omnipresence) and more intuitive, anthropomorphic conceptions of God (e.g., as spatially constrained) are held simultaneously in the minds of adult theists—the former explicitly, the latter implicitly—manifesting themselves respectively in different kinds of situations. This suggests that even these apparently tamer theological concepts, while explicitly affirmed, are competing daily with more intuitive alternatives. See Barrett and Keil, "Conceptualizing a Nonnatural Entity," and McCauley, *Why Religion is Natural and Science is Not*, 210–219, for discussion.

[42]See for example Part II, sec. X of Edwards's *Freedom of the Will.*

Boris: I have no fear of the gallows.

Father: No?

Boris: No. Why should I? They're going to shoot me.

Just as Boris reasonably lacks some fears and harbors others, so also the position I've defended recommends to many Christian philosophers that they worry less about *some* alleged threats to moral responsibility—but not about *all* such threats. That is, I have not made the claim that Christian commitments with respect to moral responsibility can appropriately be insulated from every criticism. Imagine, for example, that we were to discover that contrary to appearances, many of our apparently morally significant actions are performed for reasons of which we are not consciously aware, and moreover, that these reasons are of a sort that were we to learn of them we would not endorse them as relevant reasons for our behavior.[43] Christian philosophers should seek to identify and evaluate potential challenges of this more direct sort, regardless of their stance on the compatibility of determinism and moral responsibility.[44]

Similarly, what we now know about the nature and effects of various psychological disorders raises serious questions about whether and to what extent those affected are responsible for their behavior—disorders like psychopathy, mania, clinical depression, certain types of Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder, and more. Given the multifaceted significance of such questions, Christian philosophers should increasingly bring their resources to bear here as well.[45]

In the preceding, I have tried to show that compatibilism has little to fear from certain arguments, insofar as these seek to elicit or appeal to intuitions that tell against the compatibility of causal determinism and moral responsibility. But I've also argued that this strategy for guiding commitment on this issue will be a poor one for many Christian philosophers. These persons will not wish to wager their security within the

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[43]See Nahmias, "Scientific Challenges to Free Will," 353–354, for discussion of this and similar challenges to morally responsible agency. For a careful discussion of many proposed threats to such agency, see Mele, *Effective Intentions* and *A Dialogue on Free Will and Science*.

[44]It's worth noting that Christian B. Miller has modeled this kind of approach to multiple issues in moral psychology in a recent paper in this journal, "Should Christians Be Worried About Situationist Claims in Psychology and Philosophy?" In that paper, Miller articulates and responds to a challenge to moral responsibility within a Christian framework that turns on the fact that much of our behavior is influenced by situational factors that activate "surprising" mental dispositions—surprising in the sense that we are typically unaware of their influence, or of the extent of their influence, on our behavior. He also argues for a kind of skepticism about our reasons for forming moral judgments in cases in which we don't consciously deliberate before making such judgments; since such cases are fairly common, and ordinary practice (among many Christians and non-Christians alike) seems to assume knowledge of our reasons in these cases, his conclusion is a highly revisionist one.

[45]For an example of careful philosophical inquiry into such questions, see Shoemaker, *Responsibility from the Margins*. Note that Shoemaker's approach demonstrates the way in which a better understanding of moral responsibility in these and other atypical cases may ultimately illuminate the nature of human moral responsibility generally.

bounds of orthodoxy on the falsity of an empirical thesis, especially when that thesis is one that is not widely taken to be inconsistent with orthodoxy in the first place. For these Christian philosophers—and I suspect there are many—agnosticism is to be preferred.[46]

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