Reasons-responsive theories of freedom explain free agency in terms of an agent’s sensitivity to reasons. An agent who acts freely is responsive to variation in a suitable spectrum of reasons. Because many theorists understand free will in terms of the control condition(s) necessary for moral responsibility, reasons-responsive theories are also frequently cast in terms of theories of the control condition for moral responsibility.

Reasons-Responsiveness: An Initial Characterization

Consider a familiar case of unfree action: an agent, Handy, washes his hands from an extreme compulsive hand-washing disorder. Suppose Handy gets his hands dirty one day and washes them. It might be tempting to think that in washing his hands, he does so freely and that this consists in his responding appropriately to a good reason to wash his hands. But as it happens, Handy would have washed his hands at the time whether they were dirty or not in response to any number of whacky reasons. He would have washed them if they were clean and he just saw a garbage truck down the street, if someone within earshot had whispered the word ‘germ,’ or even if, when his hands were truly dirty, doing so would result in his being seriously injured (suppose for some reason that in the circumstances the only way for him to wash his hands requires breathing poisonous gas). What this suggests is that, in this situation, when Handy washes his hands when they are dirty, it is fortuitous that he does so in response to a good reason. The role of good reasons is not properly integrated with what leads him to action. This in turn suggests that Handy is not in control of his hand washing in a stable way. So he does not wash his hands freely.

Contrast Handy with Dandy. Dandy is a bit of a ‘dandy.’ He enjoys fancy dress and a very clean, well-groomed appearance. As such, Dandy might have an idiosyncratic commitment to keep his hands (and the rest of him) super clean—far more so than most normal people with good hygiene. Thus, he finds lots of good reasons for washing his hands and few good reasons not to, but his hand-washing is still well-integrated with the full range of reasons animating how he acts. Dandy, for instance, would not risk serious harm to himself just to wash his hands, and while he does find lots of good reasons to wash them, as in keeping with his dandy ways, these many reasons are still related to his overall goals and projects as a sane person. He does not wash them, for instance, just because the very mention of germs causes him to think horrible dirty
thoughts. Suppose, like Handy, Dandy dirties his hands in a situation much like the one Handy was in and so Dandy washes his hands. It seems that while Handy does not wash his hands freely, Dandy does.

The cases of Handy and Dandy suggest two related features of a credible reasons-responsive theory. First, to understand freedom in terms of reasons-responsiveness involves an agent’s control in relation to a spectrum of potential but non-actual reasons, and this spectrum comes in degrees. Second, the actual causal processes issuing in free action must involve the agent’s reasons-responsive resources.

To explain, consider first the matter of degree. Note that Handy would be regarded as unfree in his hand washing even if there was some sliver of reasons that would get him not to wash his hands compulsively in some situations. If, for instance, a murderer was threatening to kill Handy’s child if Handy washed his hands, or if Handy’s house was on fire and he were about to be incinerated, he would forgo washing his hands. It is just that the range of reasons to which Handy would be responsive is too limited to be the basis for his being free in any credible sense that would bear on free will and moral responsibility. Now consider Dandy. Suppose that there is some range of reasons to which Dandy would not be responsive but should be, even by his own lights. While he often would wash his hands in response to good reasons, there are a few occasions where even he is a bit reckless and does not wash them. For instance, perhaps he should wash them just before tending to his toddler’s breakfast, but when in a hurry he fails to do so. In this way, he is not perfectly reasons-responsive. Still he is reasons-responsive enough to model his freedom on the spectrum of reasons to which he is responsive.

Now consider the matter of the actual causal process. When Dandy washes his hands because they are dirty, we have reason to think that the reasons for hand-washing are related to his rational abilities as an agent and that these abilities function well in playing a proper role in his act of hand washing. This is in part because his adequate degree of reasons-sensitivity is good evidence that Dandy is ‘wired’ in the right way. Handy, by contrast, appears to be driven largely by his compulsion, at least in this sphere of his life. When he washes his dirty hands, there is reason to think that his dirty hands do not even play the right sort of role as a reason for him that is part of the etiology leading to his act of hand washing. To the extent that his dirty plans are part of the actual cause of his hand washing, it is by way of a deviant causal process that is not an appropriately rational one, and so is in this way not freedom-conferring. It is likely to be a fluke or an unreliable occasion for him to give expression to his compulsion. (The issue of deviant as opposed to non-deviant causal processes in the production of action is familiar to those who work on the theory of action. To illustrate, consider a famous case due to Donald Davidson [1963] of a climber who realizes that to survive he must let go of a rope. The thought so unnerves him that he does so, but in a way that was not intentional. Here, he does respond to reasons, but not through a causal process that involves his controlling his action. As readers might suspect, it is extremely difficult in these contexts to nail down in just what non-deviant as opposed to deviant causal processes consist.)

Reasons-Responsiveness and the Compatibilism vs. Incompatibilism Debate

In recent times, reasons-responsive theories are advanced mostly by compatibilists (about both free will and moral responsibility). But the appeal of a reasons-responsive
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theory is not limited to compatibilists; its merits extend beyond any having to do with the metaphysical problems associated with worries about determinism or indeterminism. Some (e.g., Irwin 1980) contend that Aristotle advanced a reasons-responsive theory as a way of explaining how man is a rational animal. And it is plausible to think that Kant required something like reasons-responsiveness—being able to track reasons in support of duty—as a condition for morality actually applying to persons. Historical origins aside, the contemporary appeal of a reasons-responsive theory is in part a matter of accounting for freedom in terms of features of agency that are distinctive of persons. Lots of agents with the capacity for sophisticated goal-directed activity, such as titmice or coyotes, are uncontroversially able to exercise a considerable amount of control over their environments. As such, there is a clear sense in which they possess a certain kind of freedom. But if one seeks a theory of freedom that explains what is distinctive about the freedom available to persons (skeptical worries aside), then it is plausible that this can be found in rational capacities unique to persons.

(I take it to be an open question which creatures—actual and possible—are persons. I assume the fictional non-human character Data from Star Trek is a person, as are the Replicants in the film Bladerunner. Moreover, it is not incredible that many actually existing non-human primates and other mammals are persons. Naturally, this turns on the philosophical question of what a person is as well as empirical questions about animal cognition.)

What of the appeal for compatibilists? Why have so many contemporary compatibilists opted for a reasons-responsive theory? (See, for example, Dennett 1984, 2003; Wolf 1990; Fischer and Ravizza 1998; Haji 1998; Nelkin 2011; Brink and Nelkin 2013; McKenna 2013; Vihvelin 2013; Sartorio, forthcoming) Here are two reasons:

First, an agent’s reasons-responsiveness is established in terms of the range of reasons to which she would be responsive at the time in which she acts. This in turn can be explained (even if not reduced to) a set of counterfactuals about how an agent would have acted had certain reasons been salient that were not salient in her actual context of action. These propositions are not in any way inconsistent with the assumption that at the time an agent acted she was determined. Why? Determinism is a thesis about what is physically possible for an agent given her exact actual past and the totality of the laws of nature. Determinism is silent as regards truths about how an agent would act were her past (or the laws) just a bit different than they were. Counterfactuals that postulate non-actual but possible reasons involve antecedents that presuppose, relative to the actual world, that the past is a bit different.

Second, as noted when reflecting on the cases of Dandy and Handy, reasons-responsive theories help to show how it is that, when an agent is reasons-responsive, the actions she freely preforms are caused in the right way by resources that are distinctive of persons. One of the major burdens of any theory of freedom—compatibilist or incompatibilist—is a matter of showing that an agent is the right kind of source of her actions. Many appeal to restrictive views about the metaphysics involved, which along with a requirement of indeterminism might include the notion of agent-causation. This is especially so for incompatibilists. Reasons-responsive compatibilist theories, however, are seemingly able to draw just upon far more mundane resources. Nevertheless, these resources assign a special role to the agent qua rational being as the source of her action. Moreover, by doing so, reasons-responsive theorists develop a familiar compatibilist strategy of distinguishing between kinds of causes of actions, some of which are freedom-defeating.
and others that are not. In a wide range of conditions in which the causes of an agent’s actions are freedom-defeating (compulsion, psychosis, phobia, coercion, delusion, and so on) the agent is not reasons-responsive.

So as to avoid any misimpressions, and in keeping with my earlier remarks about the general appeal of reasons-responsive theories, it should be emphasized that it is open to incompatibilists seeking to develop a libertarian theory of freedom to adopt a reasons-responsive view. They might, for instance, take on the major elements in a compatibilist’s proposal and then simply add a further requirement of indeterminism (suitably located) to cement a libertarian thesis (e.g., see Ginet 2006). The point of this section was simply to showcase the simple features that make reasons-responsive theories appealing to compatibilists. These features aid the compatibilists, but they do not entail a compatibilist conclusion.

Reasons-Responsiveness and Frankfurt’s Attack on the Freedom to Do Otherwise

One important detail about reasons-responsive theories is that they pose special puzzles for compatibilists who also defend Harry Frankfurt’s (1969) thesis that the freedom that is required for moral responsibility does not include the ability (and so freedom) to do otherwise. Frankfurt’s argument for this conclusion, if sound, would be of considerable benefit to compatibilists, since it would allow them to sidestep a powerful incompatibilist argument for the conclusion that if determinism is true, no agent has the ability to do otherwise. This incompatibilist argument, the Consequence Argument (Ginet 1966; Wiggins, 1973; van Inwagen 1975, 1983), has it that, under the assumption of determinism, a person is able to do otherwise only if she is able to alter the past or violate a law of nature, neither of which, it seems, an ordinary human person can do. While many able compatibilists have attempted to refute the Consequence Argument (e.g., Lewis 1981; Horgan 1985, 2015; Campbell 1997; Kapitan 2002; Vihvelin 2004, 2013; Berofsky 2012), others have instead seen that with Frankfurt’s argument, they can grant the soundness of the Consequence Argument—perhaps just for the sake of argument—but then advance Frankfurt’s argument to show that the freedom to do otherwise is not the sort that matters for moral responsibility. What of the freedom that is required for moral responsibility?

That freedom, it can be argued, is compatible with determinism even if the freedom to do otherwise is not. John Martin Fischer (1994) calls this thesis semi-compatibilism, and along with his coauthor Mark Ravizza, has offered the most sustained defense of it (1998). (Other compatibilists advancing a source compatibilist thesis include Frankfurt [1971], McKenna [2013] and Sartorio [forthcoming].) In this chapter, let us call this sort of compatibilism source compatibilism and the sort that requires the freedom to do otherwise leeway compatibilism. And call the two sorts of freedom source freedom and leeway freedom.

To appreciate why it is that reasons-responsive theorists have trouble accepting Frankfurt’s argument consider the examples motivating that argument. Here is a simple one, Shoot Smith, truncated just for the purposes of our present discussion:

Jones seeks to shoot Smith, which he does on his own. As it happens, unknown to Jones, Black wants Jones to shoot Smith and would prefer that Jones do so on his own. But Black arranges things so that, if there is any reason to think that Jones would not shoot Smith, Black would cause Jones (maybe by direct
manipulation of his brain) to shoot Smith. Since Jones acts on his own, Black never intervenes. He thus remains only a counterfactual intervener.

In the example Shoot Smith, Jones exercises source freedom, yet due to Black’s presence, he lacks leeway freedom. So, granting that he is morally responsible, it appears that leeway freedom is not required for moral responsibility. For ease of discussion in what follows, let us refer to Black (or anything playing Black’s role in a Frankfurt example) as a counterfactual intervener.

Frankfurt’s argument and the examples he used to advance it, like Shoot Smith, are regarded as highly controversial. Some reasons-responsive compatibilists reject it and instead build a reasons-responsive theory of leeway freedom (e.g., Nelkin 2011; Vihvelin 2013). But other reasons-responsive compatibilists take advantage of the dialectical benefits noted above, and so endorse Frankfurt’s argument. These source compatibilists face a striking problem. It looks on its face as if, whatever sort of freedom an agent does possess in a Frankfurt example, it cannot be accounted for in terms of reasons-responsiveness. Why? It seems that an agent in a Frankfurt example is not reasons-responsive. If she were given different reasons to do otherwise, she would not respond otherwise by acting otherwise. The counterfactual intervener would see to that by causing her to act as she does when she acts on her own for the reasons she actually has. Hence, a reasons-responsive theory of freedom appears ill-suited for the freedom found in a (successful) Frankfurt example. Does this mean reasons-responsive compatibilists are forced to defend a leeway theory?

Fischer and Ravizza (1998) attempt to get around this problem for source compatibilists by distinguishing between an agent’s reasons-responsiveness and instead an agent’s own actually-operative reasons-responsive mechanism of action. That is, they distinguish between an agent-based and a mechanism-based reasons-responsive theory. According to Fischer and Ravizza, an agent in a Frankfurt example is not reasons-responsive because she would not respond otherwise to different reasons by acting otherwise, given the presence of the counterfactual intervener. But now consider the actual causal process that led to the agent acting as she did when she acted on her own. Just call that causal process, or at least the internal states of the agent in that process, the agent’s mechanism of action. If we focus upon just this mechanism and then ask if it is reasons-responsive, we will have to test that by considering whether it would respond differently to reasons. But we can only run this test by considering possible situations in which it is allowed to function unimpeded in the presence of different reasons. This, however, requires that we ‘factor out’ the presence of the counterfactual intervener. Then we can determine how the agent would act by way of her mechanism of action were her mechanism left to function on its own. Thus, Fischer and Ravizza advance compatibilism by way of a mechanism-based reasons-responsive theory of source freedom.

While Fischer and Ravizza’s mechanism-based proposal offers an ingenious way to join a reasons-responsive theory to source compatibilism, it comes at a cost. Explaining reasons-responsiveness in terms of mechanisms rather than agents gives rise to a range of objections. Some contend that it is counterintuitive and it is better to theorize in terms of agents responding to reasons rather than in terms of mechanisms (Wallace 1997). Some object that it is just not clear what a mechanism is supposed to be (Watson 2001). Others claim that the postulation of mechanisms does not do any work in the theory (Ginet 2006). Finally, others raise more specific worries about how to identify and individuate mechanisms one from the other (McKenna 2001). Can we be
confident when we hold fixed an agent’s mechanism of action, as Fischer and Ravizza require (1998: 39, 40), and consider the influence of different reasons that it is the same mechanism we are assessing? (For Fischer’s replies, see his [2004: 166–71] reply to McKenna; his [2004: 169–71] reply to Watson; his [2006: 333, 334] reply to Ginet; and his [2012: 144–62] reply to Wallace.)

More recently, building on a point made by Carl Ginet (2006), I have argued that any mechanism-based view risks hamstringing an agent’s responsiveness in a way incompatible with her freedom (McKenna 2013). For instance, in Ginet’s example, an agent freely drives her car down a highway from a mechanism of unreflective habit. But if conditions were different (a closed road and no other routes she is familiar with), she would be given reason to deliberate about what other exit she should take. Her reasons-sensitivity should make room for that. However, if as Fischer and Ravizza would have it, we hold fixed the mechanism of unreflective habit, then we cannot assess how she would respond to reasons in deliberation, since this would not be unreflective habit. As I have argued, Ginet’s example reveals a general, structural problem with mechanism-based views. Any sophisticated system with subsystems will be designed so that the system as a whole—in this case the entire person as a practical agent—will be able to allow some subsystems (mechanisms) to run uninhibited unless there is occasion for ‘switching’ to other subsystems that can then take over. The flexibility of the system is thus designed to be greater than the flexibility of the subsystems composing it. The problem for any mechanism-based account of freedom is that it will always risk limiting the freedom-conferring responsiveness of the agent to the responsiveness of the mechanism (subsystem) by which the agent acts. But our standards for assessing an agent’s freedom in terms of responsiveness to reasons should surely be standards of the reasons for agents to act—not parts of agents. If I am correct, then reasons-responsive theories should be developed in agent-based terms rather than mechanism-based resources. (See Fischer [forthcoming] for the reply.) This, however, leads back to the problem for source compatibilists faced earlier: agent-based reasons-responsive views appear to require leeway freedom.

Can a source compatibilist overcome the apparent conflict with constraints on an agent-based reasons-responsive approach? The crucial question is this: is there a way for a source compatibilist to claim that an agent in a Frankfurt example is reasons-responsive even if, were different reasons put to the agent, the agent would not respond to those reasons by acting differently than she does when the counterfactual intervener remains dormant? I have argued (McKenna 2013) that we can make sense of an agent’s responsiveness even in a Frankfurt example as follows: while in the presence of different reasons, an agent would not act differently (the counterfactual intervener would see to that), but the agent would not act as she does for her own reasons. As such, in contexts in which the intervener takes over, she would be reacting differently than she did when she produced her actions as a result of her own reasons. In this way, an agent even in a Frankfurt example is responsive to different reasons, even if her responsiveness would not manifest itself in her acting any differently.

Yet a different way to advance an agent-based reasons-responsive approach has been developed by Carolina Sartorio (forthcoming). Sartorio turns to the metaphysics of causation and relies upon the thesis that absences can be causes (or instead quasi-causes). If so, then the absence of certain reasons can be part of the actual cause for an agent’s acting as she does. To explain, suppose Jones is not in a Frankfurt example when he decides to shoot Smith and that he is suitably reasons-responsive. Among the reasons
to which he would react differently and not shoot Smith is the reason that Smith’s child happens to be with him at the time. (In the actual situation, Smith’s child was not present.) Thus, it is true in this case—because there is no counterfactual intervener—that if Smith’s child were with him, Jones would not shoot Smith. Now add the presence of the counterfactual intervener, Black. This renders the preceding counterfactual false. But granting Sartorio’s thesis about absence causation, this remains true: In the actual scenario in which Jones acts—when Black remains dormant—the absence of a reason not to shoot Smith (a reason that involves the presence of Smith’s child) is one of the actual causes of Jones’s shooting Smith. Were that absence not part of the causal mix, Jones would not have shot Smith on his own. In this way, in acting as he does, Smith is responsive to a range of reasons that include not shooting Smith if his child is with him. This is an elegant proposal.

To summarize the results of this section, there are three positions reasons-responsive compatibilists might adopt when faced with Frankfurt’s argument. One strategy is to adopt a leeway compatibilist thesis and reject the contention that a free agent in a Frankfurt example is unable to do otherwise (e.g., Nelkin 2011; Vihvelin 2013). Nelkin (2011) and Vihvelin (2004, 2013), for instance, argue that in a Frankfurt example, an agent retains the uninterfered-with ability to do otherwise when she is left to act on her own. A second strategy is to accept the lessons of Frankfurt’s argument, embrace source compatibilism and opt for a mechanism-based theory (e.g., Fischer and Ravizza 1998). Yet a third also involves a commitment to source compatibilism, but seeks to explain reasons-responsiveness even in the context of a Frankfurt example by way of agent-based resources (e.g., McKenna 2013; Sartorio, forthcoming).

Getting Down to the Nitty-Gritty Details: Capturing the Spectrum of Responsiveness

Some reasons-responsive theorists only gesture in the direction of what is involved in suitable responsiveness to reasons as would be required for a theory of free will and moral responsibility (e.g., Dennett 1984). But most work out in some detail what responsiveness consists in and how to test for an adequate degree of sensitivity.

One way to clarify responsiveness is in terms of the content of the reasons that matter for the ability to act freely. Of course, a well-known historical version of this is Kant’s, with his requirement that rational beings be able to grasp the Categorical Imperative and act from duty. But in recent times, Susan Wolf (1990) proposed such a compatibilist view, which she called the Reason View, in terms of reasons in support of, as she put it, the True and the Good. The capital letters indicate the metaethical commitments Wolf intended. Even more recently, Dana Nelkin (2011) advances a compatibilist view like Wolf’s in terms of the ability to act for good reasons. Lest one think that Nelkin’s understanding of good reasons is meant to be neutral regarding any metaethical commitments, note that on her view, when one does wrong and is blameworthy, she does not act for good reasons. Her blameworthiness is thus dependent on her ability to act for good reasons when she fails to do so.

The Wolf-Nelkin reasons-responsive view gives rise to a much-discussed asymmetry thesis: praiseworthiness does not require leeway freedom but blameworthiness does. If an agent acts in a morally exemplary way for the right reasons and is praiseworthy for it, she does not need leeway freedom, since in acting as she did, she clearly was responsive to good reasons—she actually acted on them. When, on the other
hand, an agent does wrong and is a candidate for blameworthiness, her being blameworthy turns on whether she was able to respond to good reasons. Thus, Wolf and Nelkin are source compatibilists about praiseworthiness and leeway compatibilists about blameworthiness.

While the Wolf-Nelkin view is intuitive in certain ways—freedom is about the ability to act for good reasons—it makes room for an unusual result. Suppose that determinism is incompatible with leeway freedom but is not incompatible with source freedom. Then praiseworthiness would be compatible with determinism but blameworthiness would not. Naturally, Wolf and Nelkin resist this result by defending compatibilism about a reasons-responsive ability to do otherwise. But other reasons-responsive theorists (e.g., Fischer and Ravizza 1998) resist. In their view, Frankfurt’s argument refutes the Wolf-Nelkin asymmetry thesis since it can be used to show that blameworthiness does not require leeway freedom any more than praiseworthiness does. The dispute remains highly contested. (See Nelkin’s reply [2011].) I’ll not pursue it further here.

A different strategy for developing a reasons-responsive theory involves explaining the spectrum of responsiveness to show the way reasons hang together and as well what counts as a sufficient pattern of responsiveness (recall our discussion of the cases of Handy and Dandy). (This distinct strategy is not in competition with one that specifies the content of the reasons to which one should be responsive in order to count as suitably free. For an example of a view that joins the two approaches, see Brink and Nelkin [2013].) In a highly influential paper, Bernard Gert and Timothy Duggan (1979) explained reasons-responsiveness in terms of patterns of threats and incentives that would be sufficient for an agent to act other than as she does. If, for instance, $100 would not be sufficient to convince me to lie to my boss but $1,000 would, then my sane response to such incentives should pass a plausible test that like-reasons falling on a scale of descending and ascending strength should also fail to move me or instead move me. So, if $100 would not move me, then neither should $99, $98, and so on. Likewise, if $1,000 would move me, then so should $1,001, $1,002, and so on.

While Gert and Duggan’s suggestion showed promise, it was Fischer and Ravizza (1998) who demonstrated just how sophisticated this strategy could be. In what follows, I will examine Fischer and Ravizza’s proposal in some detail. As explained in the preceding section, they account for reasons-responsiveness in terms of the sensitivity of mechanisms of action. In this section, I will forgo qualifying each point in terms of a mechanism’s sensitivity and instead just write in terms of agents. This is adequate for present purposes.

The problem with Gert and Duggan’s original proposal according to Fischer and Ravizza (1998: 67, 68) is that the patterns identified as sufficient for reasons-responsiveness might permit such a strange collection of preferences that it would be consistent with an agent who is not sane, and so not sufficiently free. Suppose as in the example above that I would not for some reasons and would for others be moved to lie to my boss in the ways specified (would not for incentives of $100 and under and would for incentives of $1,000 and over). But suppose also I would be moved to lie if my pea soup told me to do so, or if a Springsteen song was playing on the radio, which I would take as a secret message from Martians, and so on. The problem for the Gert and Duggan proposal, as Fischer and Ravizza put it, is that it relied exclusively on a quantitative assessment of the spectrum of responsiveness required for freedom. So, according to Fischer and...
Ravizza (1998: 71–3), what is also needed beyond an adequate quantity of reasons-sensitivity is a sanity constraint, which they propose in terms of a hypothetical third-party interviewer seeking to establish whether the agent has a coherent understanding of the world that is grounded in reality. To this they also add a requirement that an agent be able to grasp moral reasons (1998: 77–81). They do not commit as Wolf and Nelkin do to more substantive metaethical views about morality and reasons. All they require is that an agent be able to understand moral reasons as providing sufficient conditions for action.

To develop their reasons-responsive theory, which they call Moderate Reasons-Responsiveness (MRR), Fischer and Ravizza distinguish between two different aspects of reasons-responsiveness: reasons-receptivity and reasons-reactivity. Reasons-receptivity is a matter of recognizing and assessing the reasons an agent takes to be sufficient to act otherwise or instead to persist in acting as she does. Reasons-reactivity is a matter of choosing and acting in accord with the reasons one takes to be sufficient for acting. The distinction appears to be implicit in Kant's conception of moral freedom. Susan Wolf draws a similar distinction in developing her view (1990), and other reasons-responsive theorists (e.g., Brink and Nelkin 2013; McKenna 2013; Kozuch and McKenna 2016); have also relied upon this distinction, drawing mostly from Fischer and Ravizza’s illuminating development of it.

According to Fischer and Ravizza, the spectrum of sensitivity to reasons is asymmetric between the receptivity and the reactivity components. Whereas the degree of receptivity has to be fairly robust, as is in keeping with the conditions specified in the previous paragraph, the degree of an agent’s reactivity need not. How so? An agent like Dandy must be receptive to a considerable range of sufficient reasons to do otherwise (as well as reasons to persist in acting as he does), yet he need only be reactive to a very limited range of reasons. Thus, as Fischer and Ravizza put it, MRR requires moderate receptivity but only weak reactivity.

Why the asymmetry? One reason is to make room for a familiar sort of blameworthy conduct. Sometimes an agent freely does what she knows to be morally wrong in the face of reasons she herself takes to be good reasons not to act as she does. She might act recklessly or succumb to temptation. In such cases, she is receptive to good reasons to act otherwise, but in fact she does not react to them. If a requirement of reasons-responsiveness for free and responsible action is that an agent is just as reactive to the spectrum of reasons to which she is receptive, then when she fails to react as she knows she should, the theory would have it that she acts unfreely and so is not morally responsible and blameworthy for what she does. That would count strongly against the theory. It is for this reason that a reasons-responsive theory needs to allow for an asymmetry.

Granting that some sort of asymmetry should be accommodated, is it correct that mere weak reactivity is sufficient for acting freely? All that Fischer and Ravizza require for weak reactivity is that there is some reason to which an agent is receptive that is such that, if it were present, the agent would react to it and act otherwise. They contend that this is enough to establish that an agent is able to react otherwise to any of the reasons to which she is receptive. That is, according to Fischer and Ravizza, reacting otherwise to one good reason to do so proves a general ability (of an agent's mechanism) to react otherwise to any good reasons to do otherwise. But now recall the case of Handy, who suffered from a compulsive handwashing disorder and so was unfree when he washed his hands. Handy was reactive to some reasons to do otherwise. Recall he
would not wash his hands if someone threatened to kill his child should he wash his hands. Still, he was not reactive to a large range of good reasons not to do so—including being exposed to poisonous gas. As such, his freedom was impaired. Handy is a counterexample to Fischer and Ravizza’s requirement of weak receptivity. (This criticism is developed by McKenna [2005] and Mele [2006]. In reply to Mele, Fischer [2012: 190] grants the point and has revised his view so that what is required is stronger than mere weak reactivity.)

As an amendment to Fischer and Ravizza’s theory, I propose a requirement of moderate reasons-receptivity and a degree of moderate reasons-reactivity that may be but need not be weaker than the receptivity component. Regardless, the reactivity component must be moderate enough to display a stable, sane way of relating to a sufficiently robust spectrum of reasons. Why weaker? Recall, as explained two paragraphs back, we want to leave open the possibility of an agent who is receptive to a reason to which, as a matter of fact, she would not be reactive and, as upshot be blameworthy for so acting. (I am indebted to David Brink and Dana Nelkin for an especially fruitful conversation regarding how to clarify the reactivity component. Brink and Nelkin helped me to see that it was too restrictive to require that the receptivity component be weaker. That’s right. Still, it is important that it may be weaker.)

It is worth asking why Fischer and Ravizza opted for such a striking asymmetry thesis when a mild proposal like the one I offer here seems an obvious contender. One reason has to do with the battle between compatibilists and incompatibilists. Fischer and Ravizza wanted to establish that reactivity to one reason to do otherwise is sufficient to establish an agent’s ability to react to any reason to do otherwise (from the same mechanism). They thus contended that “reactivity is all of a piece” (1998: 73). Call this thesis RIP. If RIP fails, then the ability to react to good reasons to do otherwise, as in the case of Handy, is selective; an agent might be able to react to some good reasons to do otherwise but not others. This provides an opening for an incompatibilist attack. How so? Consider an agent who is blameworthy and does not react to the good reasons to do otherwise that morality counsels. Suppose furthermore that she is receptive to these good reasons. In this case, the actual good reasons to do otherwise are reasons to which, as a matter of fact, she did not react. The worry is this: what if she is not able to react to these reasons? If so, then when she acts for bad reasons rather than the good ones, isn’t she unfree?

If in response the reasons-responsive theorist attempts to establish an agent’s ability to react otherwise to the very reasons present that an agent did not react to, it appears we are back to requiring leeway freedom. So the source compatibilist element of Fischer and Ravizza’s view is threatened. Finally, the incompatibilist critic might then note that under the assumption of determinism, holding fixed the past and the laws, in the nearest possible world where the agent faces these actual reasons—the actual world—the agent does not react otherwise by acting for the morally good reasons. This then suggests, the incompatibilist might continue, drawing upon the Consequence Argument, that she is not able to react to those good reasons in that context, at least not without the ability to alter the past or the laws.

In my estimation, reasons-responsive source compatibilists have the resources to answer these incompatibilist charges. They can do this while rejecting RIP and embracing a version of MRR that requires only a modest reasons-reactivity thesis. (Elsewhere [2005], I have taken up this issue and defended Fischer and Ravizza against these incompatibilist charges.) But I will not pursue that topic here. My only goal in this section was
to set out the skeleton of a carefully worked out reasons-responsive theory and then just show where and how an incompatibilist might resist it.

Conclusion

In closing, it is worth reflecting upon reasons-responsive compatibilist theories in relation to their closest compatibilist competitors, which are mesh theories of freedom, such as Harry Frankfurt's (1971) and Gary Watson's (1975). Mesh theories account for freedom in terms of the internal psychological architecture of a person qua practical agent. When an agent's action-generating subsystems mesh in a harmonious way, then she acts freely. But when her actions arise from a deviant or unharmonious mesh, then the agent's freedom is compromised. On Frankfurt's (1971) view, for instance, the different systems are cast in terms of orders of desires. When an agent's higher-order desires about which desires she wants to move her to action are misaligned with which first-order desires do lead her to action, then she is unfree. But when all goes smoothly, she instead acts freely. Watson (1975) instead works from distinct systems playing different roles in the exercise of free agency. An agent's motivational system aids in moving her about and gives rise to various kinds of desires. An agent's evaluative system provides resources for assessing what an agent values and takes to be worthy of pursuing. When an agent acts in such a way that her motivational system is out of whack with her evaluative system, she acts unfreely. She acts freely when the elements mesh harmoniously.

Note that one advantage that reasons-responsive theories appear to have over mesh theories is that they seem to be able to account much more easily for such phenomena as weakness of will. On a view like Frankfurt's, for instance, when an agent acts from desires that she does not want to move her, she is simply unfree. And this gets things right in certain cases, such as action from strong addictive desires. But in some such cases, it seems more plausible to say that the agent freely acts from desires that at a higher order she prefers not to act from. A mesh view like Frankfurt's has a difficult time explaining this (McKenna 2011). Reasons-responsive theories, by contrast are able to explain rather easily the difference between unfree actions from addictive desire as in contrast with free, weak-willed actions. In the former, the agent is responsive to a narrower class of reasons than in the latter.

While this shows that reasons-responsive theories have an advantage over mesh theories, there are also points at which it seems mesh theories are preferable. For instance, reasons-responsive theories do not offer resources to capture a unique fact about how our freedom as human agents can be compromised. Sometimes our struggles are internal to our own psychology, as in the case of the addict who struggles with cravings that she feels plague her in some way. Mesh theories offer the resources to identify how an agent's own psychological architecture can be a source of trouble for her freedom and responsibility. One interesting possibility worth exploring is a hybrid view that joins the resources of reasons-responsive and mesh theories (see McKenna and Van Schoelandt, forthcoming).

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References


REASONS-RESPONSIVE THEORIES OF FREEDOM


Further Reading


Fischer, J. (2012) *Deep Control: Essays on Free Will and Value*. New York: Oxford University Press. (In this book, Fischer offers a comprehensive defense of his theory of free will developed with Mark Ravizza [1998], and responds to numerous critics. It is an excellent follow-up to his earlier work and reads as a natural extension of Fischer and Ravizza [1998].)

Fischer, J., and Ravizza, M. (1998) *Responsibility and Control: An Essay on Moral Responsibility*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (Fischer and Ravizza’s [1998] is perhaps the most thorough development of a compatibilist reasons-responsive theory, especially in developing an account of the proper spectrum of responsiveness and in applying the view to the full scope of the various items for which an agent can be morally responsible, including acts, omissions, and consequences of acts and omissions.)

Gert, B. and Duggan, T. (1979) “Free Will as the Ability to Will,” *Noûs* 13: 197–217. (In this groundbreaking paper, Gert and Duggan propose a way to theorize about freedom and responsiveness in terms of a suitable spectrum of reasons. This paper served as the basis for the view Fischer and Ravizza [1998] developed.)

Kozuch, B. and McKenna, M. (2016) “Free Will, Moral Responsibility, and Mental Illness,” D. Moseley and G. Gala (eds), *Philosophy and Psychiatry*. New York: Routledge Press, pp. 89–113. (In this paper, Kozuch and McKenna apply a reasons-responsive theory of freedom to questions of psychiatric disorder and in doing so offer an account of how an agent might still be free and responsible even if sometimes her conduct is causally influenced by mental illness.)

McKenna, M. (2011) “Contemporary Compatibilism: Mesh Theories and Reasons-Responsive Theories,” in R. Kane (ed.), *Oxford Handbook of Free Will*, 2nd ed. New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 175–98. (In this paper, McKenna surveys recent reasons-responsive theories and assesses them along with a competitor identificationist (or mesh-theory) approach of the sort advanced by Harry Frankfurt or Gary Watson.)

McKenna, M. and Van Schoelandt, C.V. (forthcoming) “Crossing a Mesh Theory with a Reasons-Responsive Theory,” in A. Buckareff, C. Moya, and S. Rosell (eds), *Agency and Responsibility*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. (In this paper, McKenna and Van Schoelandt propose a theory of freedom that couples the best elements of a reasons-responsive view with the best elements of a mesh theory.)


Sartorio, C. (forthcoming) *Causation and Free Will*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. (In this book, Sartorio develops a source compatibilist account of freedom in terms of reasons-responsiveness. Unlike Fischer and Ravizza’s approach mechanism-based approach, she argues for an agent-based approach. She argues that the problems forcing Fischer and Ravizza away from an agent-based view and to a mechanism-based view can be avoided by attending to the metaphysics of causation.)

Wolf, S. (1990) *Freedom within Reason*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. (Wolf’s highly influential compatibilist theory of freedom relies on the elegant idea that freedom is a matter of responsiveness to reasons that track what is good and true. In this respect, Wolf establishes a substantive constraint on the content of what kinds of reasons an agent needs to be responsive to in order to be adequately free.)
Related Topics

- Semicompatibilism
- Identificationist Views
- Dispositional Compatibilism
- Frankfurt-Style Examples
- Aristotle
- Immanuel Kant
- Determinism