

AGENCY INCOMPATIBILISM AND DIVINE AGENCY

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Abstract. In this paper, I consider whether an argument for compatibilism about free will and determinism might be developed from the thought that God's agency seems consistent with the rational determination of at least some divine actions by the True and the Good. I attempt to develop such an argument and then consider how to respond to it from the point of view of my own position, which I call *Agency Incompatibilism*. I argue that a crucial premise in the argument is ambiguous and offer responses to the argument on behalf of the Agency Incompatibilist, on each of the two disambiguations.

There is a motivation for compatibilism about free will and determinism which is less often voiced than those which are based on suppositions about what science has shown us, and which stems instead from the philosophy of religion. In many important religious traditions, God is conceived of as an agent, and it is natural to suppose that if God *is* an agent, then he must be an agent with free will. For we usually consider ourselves to have free will, and moreover, we tend to believe that free will is a necessary condition for the possession of some of our most importantly ennobling capacities, including, for example, the capacities for moral responsibility, for creativity, for artistry, and perhaps even for thought itself. Arguably, free will is essential to true personhood and many have wanted to argue that God should be conceived of as a person. And yet there are also reasons for supposing that God's actions, if he ever performs any, must be determined – not indeed by prior causes, but by such things, perhaps, as the True and the Good. It should be *settled*, one might think, what God will believe, and what he will desire, simply because he will believe only what is true and want only what is best, so that there is no question of his having to *make up his mind* about anything, in the way characteristic of limited human beings who have to

do such things as wonder, deliberate, process information. In command of all the reasons for all the various possible courses of action, and their relative weightings and priorities, a determinate answer to any question of the form ‘What ought to be done?’ should inevitably and immediately be forthcoming for God, one might think, unless there is either more than one equivaluable best option – what one might call a tie for first place – or else real, objective indeterminacy about what is true or best in the particular instance, such that even God could not know the answer, there being no answer. But provided the question ‘What ought to be done?’ does indeed have a unique and determinate answer in a given case, God’s will with respect to that case should be settled. And it would follow from these claims about God that free will must be compatible, at any rate, with a certain *kind* of determinism in the generation of action – what one might call *rational* determinism – the determination of what an agent does by the best *reasons*. I shall define the Divine Rational Determination Thesis thus:

DRDT: At least some of God’s actions are such that they constitute, in the circumstances in which they occur, the uniquely best action which could possibly have been performed by God in those circumstances – and hence it is not possible, in respect of any such action, that God should not perform it.

DRDT is in some respects a relatively weak thesis, since it asserts merely that at least *some* of God’s actions are rationally determined – allowing that it is perfectly possible that not all of them are, and hence that incommensurability and ties for first place might exist with respect to at least *some* divine actions. Weak though it is, of course, one might still conceivably be a theist and yet deny it. One might believe, for example, that the incommensurability of distinct values goes so deep, and infects the realm of value and morality so thoroughly, that indeterminacy concerning what it would be best to do is present at every juncture, even for the Divine Being, so that even he must deliberate and constantly attempt to weigh the incommensurable. Or one might believe that just as in the human case, the presence of different, equivaluable ways in which to ensure a wanted result is ubiquitous, even for God – so that, for example, even supposing it to be determinate that the best thing for God to do now is to part the Red Sea (say), he might do so by parting it exactly *here*; or else perhaps *here*, one centimetre further to the west, say. It might seem plausible that it could not possibly make any difference

to anything to which any kind of value was attached, where precisely God chooses to part the Red Sea, provided the parting takes place in the right general area, generating options for God that are distinct, at least at a certain level of description. Divine action would, in either of these eventualities, retain some of the contingency, indeterminacy and uncertainty that is present in the human case, and there would be no reason to deny that certain kinds of alternate possibility are omnipresent, even for God. But for the sake of argument, I want to concede DRDT for the time being, because I want to attempt to prosecute a certain kind of argument which generates a conclusion which is apparently at odds with one for which I have elsewhere argued, and in doing so, I am happy to concede my potential opponent this assumption about divine agency. In particular, I want to consider the potential for using DRDT as a premise in a distinctive form of argument for a version of compatibilism about free will and determinism.

One might wonder, of course, why anyone would think there is any connection at all between DRDT and the traditional question whether free will is compatible with determinism. The claim that a given agent is, in acting, sometimes subject to rational determinism is, after all, very different from the claim that that same agent is, in acting, sometimes subject to *causal* determinism, so one might fairly ask what bearing the idea that God is a rationally determined agent could possibly have on the usual questions raised in the free will literature, where it is generally the compatibility of free will with *causal* determinism that is at issue. It certainly does not follow immediately without a great deal of further argument from the claim that God's actions are rationally determined that they are thereby *causally* determined. Nevertheless, I think there is an interesting relationship between DRDT and the traditional free will problem. The relation is this. If the rational determination of a given action is truly consistent with that action's being freely willed, then we are surely going to need an account of free will which reveals it to be exercisable by agents on occasions on which it is nevertheless impossible that the action they in fact perform should not occur. If DRDT is true, that is, at least some of God's actions are such that a certain kind of necessity attaches to them; with respect to the relevant class of uniquely best actions, it is impossible that any alternative action should have occurred. And yet this does not appear to get in the way of our supposing that these actions of God are freely willed by him. Whatever exactly we mean, therefore, by 'free will', it looks as though it must be a property that does

not require the kind of alternate possibilities on which libertarians have often been wont to insist, alternate possibilities which remain available, even holding fixed the exact circumstances in which the actual act took place. And this might make one inclined to distinguish very sharply between the *ability* to have done otherwise, which one might think could not sensibly be denied to an omnipotent being, and the *possibility* that one should have done otherwise, circumstances remaining unaltered – allowing the former to God, but insisting that it does not entail the latter. And it might seem likely that this claim could be turned to the advantage of the compatibilist about free will and *causal* determinism. If God can have free will, even though it can in some cases be settled what he will do, one might think, perhaps *humans* can have free will, even though it is settled (in a different way) what they will do. Thus, one might suggest an argument with something like the following form:

P1. God exists and is an agent.

P2. If God exists and is an agent, all of his actions are freely willed.

But,

P3: If God exists and is an agent, at least some of his actions are such that they constitute, in the circumstances in which they occur, the uniquely best action which could possibly have been performed by God in those circumstances.

P4: If God exists, and is an agent, it is not possible that God should perform a non-optimal action.

Therefore:

C1 (from P3 and P4): If God exists and is an agent, at least some of his actions are such that it is not possible that any alternative to them should have occurred.

Therefore:

C2 (from P1, P2 and C1): There are some freely willed actions which are such that it is not possible that any alternative to them should have occurred.

I take it that the truth of C2 would represent a victory for compatibilism. For the sake of having a handy label, I shall call this argument *the Argument from Divine Agency*.

I have argued in recent work, however, for a version of *incompatibilism* about free will and causal determinism. And it is reasonable to ask anyone who is an incompatibilist what their reaction is to the suggestion that God, at any rate, can act freely and yet in such a way that it may be impossible that he will do anything other than precisely what he does in fact do. It is reasonable, I think, to ask this even of atheists; indeed, I am myself an atheist, and hence my interest in divine agency is not motivated by the desire to formulate an account of God's actions merely for the sake of having such an account. But in so far as they reveal the shapes and structures of our concepts, reflections about what sorts of properties might be found combined in the person of God are relevant to questions about humanity also. The compatibilist may allege that the case of God, whether or not it is *actual*, shows that we can readily conceive of a free-willed agent who nevertheless at least sometimes – and conceivably even always – acts in such a way that it is impossible that he should act in any other way. And this is an important challenge to the incompatibilist, which deserves to be met.

In the rest of this paper, I plan to consider this challenge from the point of view of my own recently developed position, which I call Agency Incompatibilism. In the next section, I shall attempt a brief outline of the view itself, before moving on to consider how the Agency Incompatibilist should respond to the compatibilist-friendly line of reasoning I have outlined above. I shall argue that it is crucial in understanding what is implied by the conclusion of the argument to undertake a certain disambiguation of its conclusion. On one reading, I shall suggest, C2 is not inconsistent with Agency Incompatibilism at all. Moreover, I shall suggest that the capacity to stave off the compatibilist's challenge by making the distinction on which this ambiguity rests is a feature of my particular version of incompatibilism which gives it an advantage over many others. On the second reading, for which I concede there may indeed be theological motivations, C2 *is*, I think, inconsistent with Agency Incompatibilism and so a decision must be made about how to respond. My suggestion will be that Agency Incompatibilism provides a reason for treating the argument as a *reductio* of its first premise. I thereby hope to provide a principled justification for someone who wishes to retain commitment to the first conjunct of P1, to deny the second. Then finally, I shall conclude with some reflections on the question what alternative notion of God these considerations might seem to recommend to a theist who was also attracted by Agency Incompatibilism.

AGENCY INCOMPATIBILISM

In *A Metaphysics for Freedom*, I argued for the libertarian view that agency itself – and so, *a fortiori* also ‘free’ agency – is incompatible with determinism. I mean by ‘agency’ to denote a capacity that is common to humans and a great many animals, a property that does not demand tremendously high-level powers of reason and reflection, deliberation or moral sense, but which simply consists in the ability of a conscious being to effect movements of, and changes in its own body, and thereby bring about further changes in the world, under its own direction, in accordance with its desires and other forms of motivation, guided by its perceptions. I reject the idea that there is a special class of actions, the so-called ‘free’ actions, concerning which a peculiar conflict arises with the thesis of determinism. Rather, on my view, all actions whatever are such as to generate the conflict – hence the label, ‘Agency Incompatibilism’.

In many traditional versions of libertarianism, the alleged alternative possibilities requirement on freely willed actions is the source of the supposed inconsistency with determinism. But this alternative possibilities requirement is generally derived from principles that demand it be interpreted in a particular way. Often, the requirement that there be alternative possibilities available when an agent acts is tied to the idea that unless there are such possibilities, the agent of the action cannot be morally responsible for it – the thought being that it would be *unfair* to blame an agent for what he cannot help doing (and perhaps also beside the point to praise him, if the action is good). What must be undetermined, then, one might think, according to this style of libertarian thinking is a fact of the form ‘that A will \emptyset at t ’, for some morally relevant act-type \emptyset of the sort that might figure in an agent’s deliberations. For example, if an agent, Peter, has in fact robbed the poor box at time t , it must have been undetermined *that Peter would rob the poor box at t* , an action that he might have considered under that very description. Agency Incompatibilism, though, derives the inconsistency between freely willed actions and determinism from a different source, and its focus is accordingly on the non-determination by prior events and states of a much wider class of facts – including many that are quite below the radar of anyone’s deliberative mechanisms, and which are rarely, if ever, objects of our choice – such as, for instance, the fact that I will move my finger just *thus and so* at t , as I type the word ‘deliberative’; or that this sheep will meander along precisely *this route* between t_1 and t_2 . The *detail*

of action, as well as, on occasion, its description at the levels relevant to motivation and morality is part of what is alleged to be undetermined until the agent determines it, in acting. The incompatibility is traced to a robustly metaphysical, rather than to a moral source and has its roots in considerations not of fairness, but rather in considerations concerning what it is to be an agent in the first place.

What are these considerations? The basic idea on which my position is based is that within certain important limits, all animals above a certain degree of complexity are self-determiners of certain aspects of their fate – they can determine, or *settle*, to use a concept on which I place some weight in the book, such things as where, precisely, they will go, at what speed, precisely when and how they will go there. It must be conceded, of course, that instincts, as well as basic physiological limitations, place enormous *constraints* on any animal's possible futures – but the Agency Incompatibilist insists that these constraints will never narrow an animal's possibilities down to a single token action, such that nothing other than that particular action could have occurred in the circumstances. The distinction between type and token actions is extremely important in the articulation of the view – for any sensible view must concede that in certain circumstances, a given animal may be rigidly determined to perform an action of a certain *type*. It might be absolutely impossible, for example, for a gazelle that has just spotted a lion crouching in the bushes not to begin running in the opposite direction, or for a lapwing whose chicks are threatened by a gull not to attempt to fight it off. But the idea is that the precise details of the responsive action must remain to be settled at the time of action by the animal itself, if the action is really to *be* an action in the first place – the precise trajectory and timing of any flight, for example, or the exact mode of an attack, from within a repertoire of available possibilities. Even if it is settled by matters beyond the control of the individual agent at the time of action, then, that a *type* of action of which the individual act is an instance will occur, the fact that *other* types of action of which the individual act is *also* an instance will occur is not – which implies in turn that the occurrence of the *token* action in all its rich spatiotemporal, material particularity, is not a necessitated event.

Why should one think that this has to be so? Having granted that it may be determined for a given agent in given circumstances that she will F in those circumstances, for at least some types of action F, why cling on to the insistence that nevertheless, each particular action must be such that there is at least *some* type G it instantiates, such that the agent might

not have G-ed, even given all the circumstances immediately precedent to the occurrence of the action? Roughly, the motivation is rooted in a suggestion about what an action *is*. Reflection reveals, I think, that the concept of action is a much richer and more complex concept than has generally been recognised, a concept that is connected tightly to a whole set of categorisations that come naturally to human beings. In particular, it is essential to an action that it is performed by an agent; its source in the agent is arguably the most fundamental thing about an action. But what is it for an event to have its source in an agent in the way characteristic of action? In my view, the right answer to this question has a modal aspect – for an event to have its source in the agent in the way that an action does, is for it to *depend* on the agent whether or not it occurs at all, and for that to be the case it always has to be possible which respect to each \emptyset -ing which really is an action, that the agent could have refrained, as it were, from bringing that particular action into existence, by moving her body in the precise way that she does. For if the agent lacks the power *not* to bring the individual act into existence, the question whether or not that token action will occur is settled not by the agent but by something else – the occurrence of some prior events or states, perhaps, which then bring about the relevant bodily movement inevitably. But no such deterministically caused event, on the Agency Incompatibilist's view, could be an action. An action must be a spontaneous production, and truly spontaneous production is possible only of non-necessitated events.

The compatibilist may object at this point that as long as the events and states from which a bodily movement deterministically flows are of the right type – as long as they are beliefs and desires, say, or intentions – that will be sufficient for the whole causal process to constitute the occurrence of an action, and that the deterministic nature of any causal relationships here either cannot be to the detriment of, or might perhaps even be *beneficial* to the operation of agential powers. But the Agency Incompatibilist will insist that such things as beliefs, desires and intentions are simply not the sorts of things from which a bodily movement can flow deterministically. All the intending in the world, she will note, is not enough, by itself, deterministically to precipitate any kind of bodily movement – in order for that to occur, the agent also has actually to *do* something. And when she does, it is *she*, and not her intention, who gets her body to move in the right way at the appropriate time. That is so phenomenologically; it is so conceptually, too. For the

doing really to be a *doing* in the requisite sense, she will argue, it must be an appropriately *spontaneous* injection by the agent into the course of nature, something which no deterministically caused event could ever be. An action which it is not possible for an agent *not* to perform, the thought is, is not a performance at all – for it lacks a modal feature essential to an action – that of coming into existence only as the exercise of a *two way* power – a power which the agent could, at the crucial moment, have refrained from exercising instead.

AGENCY INCOMPATIBILISM AND DIVINE AGENCY

Various possible objections to Agency Incompatibilism are, I am sure, likely to have arisen in readers' minds already – but I cannot attempt to defend the view against all-comers here. My aim in this paper is rather to consider how the Agency Incompatibilist might meet the challenge from the Argument for Divine Agency. For it may look as though the Agency Incompatibilist simply cannot concede C2, the conclusion of that argument. C2 claims that there are some freely-willed actions such that it is not possible that any alternative to them should have occurred. But this implies that there are some *actions* such that it is not possible that any alternative to them should have occurred – and that seems simply to contradict the Agency Incompatibilist's thesis that there are no necessitated actions.

One must be careful here, however – because as elsewhere in the philosophy of action, the distinction between type and token actions is important. As stated, the Argument from Divine Agency simply quantifies over 'actions', without specifying whether it is types or tokens that is meant. And one might think there is a fairly strong argument for supposing that the argument is best interpreted as one whose premises and conclusion quantify merely over act-*types*. It is arguable that rational determinism, indeed, is in general properly considered to be a thesis about *types* of action, not tokens, simply because it is plausible that reasons for action are always reasons why *types* of thing should be done. I may, for example, have a reason to visit my neighbour if she is old, vulnerable and lonely. But the reason here relates to the act-type 'pay my neighbour a visit' – not to the individual action that I may execute in doing so, which will have a wide array of other properties, none of which is rationalised in any way by this reason, and many of which will not be

rationalised in any way by *any* reason. For example, in the execution of the particular action, I may exit my gate at a particular place, but exiting at this place might not be something for which I have any reason.

If the quantifications in P2, P3 and P4 ('all of his actions', 'at least some of his actions', 'a non-optimal action') are interpreted as quantifications over act *types* – such as 'creating the Universe', 'parting the Red Sea', 'raising Lazarus', or whatever – actions which, even if they in fact occur only once, are still *kinds* of thing one can do in a vast number of specific ways – then there is in fact no conflict between Agency Incompatibilism and C2. For the Agency Incompatibilist already concedes that there is no conflict between the idea that it is determined, or settled, that in circumstances C, an action of a particular *type* will be performed, and the idea that the token action remains non-necessitated. This is indeed quite crucial to the view, for as I remarked earlier, any sensible position simply *has* to concede that there are important constraints upon the agency of any animal being – that it may be settled, for example, that the gazelle will run from the lion on seeing it, even though it is not settled that her run will have this trajectory rather than that. The consistency of rational determinism with agency, then, need be no bar to the truth of Agency Incompatibilism, focused as that doctrine is on the token action, rather than the type.

There is, however, a complication, which is due to the fact that the agency we are considering is the supposed agency of a divine being. For someone might wonder whether God chooses not only the *types* of action he performs, but also all their precise features, such that in effect he chooses not only the general parameters but the precise contours of every token act. Perhaps unlike a limited human being, that is, God is able to see that there are individual token divine actions which are such that these *token* actions are the uniquely best actions to be performed in the circumstances in which they occur. Perhaps, given the omniscient, divine perspective on things, there might indeed be reasons for performing an action in a way so precisely defined in terms of such respects as timing, location, material result, etc., that it is not conceivable that there should be *two* distinct token actions of this same type. And in that case, P2 would become,

P2*: If God exists and is an agent, all of his token actions are freely willed;

P3 would become:

P3* If God exists, and is an agent, at least some of his *token* actions are such that they constitute, in the circumstances in which they occur, the uniquely best *token* actions which could possibly have been performed by God in those circumstances.

And then C2 would become C2*:

C2* There are some freely willed *token* actions which are such that it is not possible that any alternative to them should have occurred.

And that is indeed a thesis that is incompatible with Agency Incompatibilism. What should the Agency Incompatibilist say?

I think we need, at this point, to recall the Agency Incompatibilist's motivation for insisting that token actions can never be necessitated events. The reason had to do with the nature of action in general; an action, the Agency Incompatibilist believes, has to be a contingent, spontaneous intervention into the course of nature, something with its own distinctive modal character, an event that is essentially the exercise of a two-way power. And so if some of God's token actions are said to be necessitated, in effect, by the True and the Good, by the facts about what it is best to do, given the circumstances as they actually are, the Agency Incompatibilist will want to ask the question why the source of their results should be taken to be an agent at all, given that the exercise of power involved appears to be strictly one-way. Why is it not something much more like a law, a force or a principle that is at work, taking the world inevitably in a particular direction, a direction that could have been predicted long in advance, and therefore leaving nothing to be settled in the moment itself? It would seem that on the view of divine agency now being considered, there is a seamless and necessary transition from certain facts about what is best to certain facts about what will occur. Why, then, is the particular, temporally specific kind of intervention that we know as agency required in order for the transition to occur? Surely the view of God that is encouraged by such a picture is a view which rather accords him the status of something more universal, a view of God as something much more like a general principle than like a particular agent. God, one might say, is not, on this view, a causal nexus of an agentive type – since the consequences that we attribute to God's will simply flow with inevitability from the True and the Good. One attractive possibility, indeed, might be that we should simply identify these things – the True and the Good – in some way with

the Divine itself. My suggestion is, then, that Agency Incompatibilism gives one a reason to reject the second conjunct of P1, on the reading of the Argument for Divine Agency which generates conclusion C2*. On that reading, given Agency Incompatibilism, the argument represents a *reductio* of its first premise. And for a theist, who is not free to reject the first conjunct of that premise, my suggestion is that she should reject the second, and embrace a non-agentive view of the Divine.

I have argued, then, that the Argument from Divine Agency is in fact no threat to Agency Incompatibilism. It is susceptible, I have suggested, to alternative interpretations, depending on whether the actions over which it quantifies are taken to be types or tokens. If types, the Agency Incompatibilist is well-placed simply to concede the conclusion of the argument – an advantage her position enjoys over most other libertarian positions. If tokens, she must reject it, but can do so in a principled way, by arguing that the view of divine power which is implied by the relevant version of C2 suggests that God is better thought of as a universal law, force or principle than as a particular agent. Being myself, as I have confessed, an atheist, I have no particular stake in any given vision of God – but I do think any tenable conception of God as agent must present God in such a way as to respect the essential contours of the concept of agency. That can be done, on my view, only by *rejecting* the idea that God's token actions are ever rationally necessitated events.