Manipulation and Moral Standing: An Argument for Incompatibilism

Patrick Todd
University of California, Riverside

© 2012 Patrick Todd
This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 3.0 License.
<www.philosophersimprint.org/012007/>

Oh, Thou, who didst with Pitfall and with Gin
Beset the Road I was to wander in,
Thou wilt not with Predestination round
Enmesh me, and impute my Fall to Sin?
—The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam, Verse LVII

1. Introduction

A prominent recent strategy for advancing the thesis that moral responsibility is incompatible with causal determinism has been to argue that agents who meet compatibilist conditions for responsibility can nevertheless be subject to responsibility-undermining manipulation. If moral responsibility is compatible with causal determinism, so the thought goes, it must also be compatible (for instance) with the thesis that a given agent designed the world at some past time precisely so as to make it causally inevitable that one performs the particular bad actions one performs. In short, compatibilism has it that our responsibility is consistent with the thesis that all of our actions, down to the finest details, are the inevitable outcomes of the designs of some further agent “behind the scenes”. According to the incompatibilist, however, once we became aware that agents had been “set up” in this way, we should no longer judge that they are responsible for their behavior, nor should we hold them responsible for it by blaming them, in case what they did was wrong. Manipulation arguments so far have thus focused on what our response to manipulated agents should be. Incompatibilists allege that, intuitively, we should no longer regard such agents as responsible. And, on the whole, compatibilists have disagreed. Such is the state of the debate over manipulation arguments.

In this paper, I aim to shift the debate onto different terrain. The focus so far has been simply on what we may or may not permissibly say or do concerning manipulated agents. But I believe a powerful new incompatibilist argument can be mounted from considering whether the manipulators can justifiably blame the agents they manipulate in compatibilist-friendly ways. It seems strikingly counterintuitive to suppose that they may do so. The argument of this paper, however, is that incompatibilism ultimately provides the best explanation for
why this is so. As will become clear, the crucial issue at work in this paper concerns the conditions under which an agent has or lacks the \textit{moral standing} to blame a particular wrongdoer. In short, I argue that compatibilists must accept the claim that (some) manipulators may justifiably blame the agents they manipulate, or they must provide a plausible theory of moral standing that blocks this result. Accepting this first claim would be a (previously unnoticed) severe cost of compatibilism. With respect to the second possibility, I will argue that no such compatibilist theory will be forthcoming. Furthermore, though articulating this new incompatibilist argument is the primary goal of this paper, I believe that considering these issues uncovers important questions about the notion of moral standing itself, and I intend this paper to be an independent contribution to the (small but growing) literature on this topic as well.

Of course, the manipulators at work in the various manipulation thought experiments proposed so far have been purely fictional entities. Our actions do not actually trace back to the workings a team of neuroscientists, as Derk Pereboom has asked us to imagine, nor has a goddess intentionally designed the world long ago so as to make it inevitable that you read this paper at this precise moment, as in an example put forward by Alfred Mele.\footnote{See Mele, Alfred, \textit{Free Will and Luck} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 188; and Pereboom in Fischer, J., R. Kane, D. Pereboom, and M. Vargas, \textit{Four views on free will} (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007), p. 75. Note, however, that Mele does not consider his scenario to be (strictly speaking) a ‘manipulation’ scenario. Rather, it is what he calls an ‘original design’ scenario. For my purposes here, I will construe ‘manipulation’ broadly so that what Mele calls ‘original design’ scenarios are a subtype of manipulation scenarios.} The point is that these are conceptual possibilities the compatibilist must address, and the same, I say, goes for the scenario I will place at the heart of this paper. In my scenario, God will (for various reasons) take the place of Diana, and the question will be whether God can determine us to perform an action and blame us for performing it. Here, of course, it is worth noting that there is a long tradition in Western philosophy and theology that has affirmed not simply the conceptual possibility but the actual truth of the thesis under consideration — namely, that everything that happens, including our bad actions, has long ago been irrevocably determined by God to occur, and that God moreover stands ready to judge us for performing those very actions.\footnote{Arguably, this tradition begins with St. Paul in the New Testament, and, in broad strokes, continues on through the late Augustine, perhaps receives its most notorious expression in the Reformation theologians Luther and Calvin, was later supported by Leibniz, and indeed continues to enjoy wide support to this very day. Perhaps the “unifying theme” of this tradition is an opposition to libertarian accounts of free will on grounds that such an understanding of freedom would compromise an adequate account of God’s omnipotent providential control over what happens in the world. The details of this tradition, however, lay beyond the scope of this paper.} The question before us is not whether compatibilists must agree with this unhappy tradition that God exists and \textit{does} both determine what we do and blame us for doing it, but whether compatibilists can adequately explain what I take to be the fundamental injustice of the picture it puts forward. If they cannot, then I think this constitutes a serious cost for compatibilism. I believe that asking these questions will reveal deep issues about the compatibility debate that have so far been neglected.

First, I discuss some terminological preliminaries. I then present the case that will allow us to begin considering these issues: Mele’s \textit{“Zygote Argument”} scenario.

2. Preliminaries

In this paper, I will rely on the distinction between an agent’s \textit{being responsible} for a particular action and someone’s \textit{holding} that agent responsible for the action. It is hard to say anything substantive about these issues that will please everyone, and so I aim to say very little. In short, suppose a given agent is morally responsible for performing some morally wrong action. As I will have it, it thus follows that the agent is to some degree \textit{blameworthy} for performing it. But it is a further issue whether some other given agent may hold her responsible for performing it by \textit{blaming} her. It might very well be that an agent is blameworthy for performing an action, but that no one has the \textit{moral standing} to blame her.
What counts as “holding” an agent morally responsible? This is a difficult question. Here I simply stipulate that one holds an agent morally responsible if and only if (1) one responds to the agent’s behavior with the relevant so-called reactive attitudes, such as resentment, anger, and indignation or (2) one punishes the agent, even if one does not respond to the agent with the reactive attitudes. (For purposes of this paper, I focus only on blame, punishment, and the associated negative reactive attitudes.) Thus, it is necessary for holding responsible that one does more than simply judging that the agent is responsible (or is blameworthy). Concerning the reactive attitudes, such responses, as I will have it, need not be expressed directly to the agent in question. One might hold a wrongdoer responsible by becoming inwardly angry with him, or by expressing one’s outrage to a friend. Lastly, I assume that an agent’s being responsible (or being blameworthy) for a particular action is a necessary condition for the appropriateness of someone’s holding that agent responsible. In other words, in the sense of ‘appropriateness’ at stake, it is never appropriate to blame or punish an agent who actually isn’t responsible; no one ever has the moral standing to blame the innocent. Moreover, for purposes of this paper, I will suppose that free will is simply whatever sort of control is required for moral responsibility; it is the “control condition” on moral responsibility. Having free will is thus a necessary condition on being responsible, which is in turn a necessary condition on the appropriateness of being held responsible.

3. The Zygote Argument

According to determinism, the intrinsic state of the world (say) 5 billion years ago, together with the laws of nature, entails everything we do in the present; everything we do is a causally inevitable outcome of how the world was 5 billion years ago. Now, according to compatibilism, free will (as understood above) is consistent with causal determinism. Thus, the following challenge arises for the compatibilist. Take the causal sequence — whatever it is — that actually culminates in, say, Ernie’s responsibly doing A. If this causal sequence can be brought about by mere naturalistic factors, then, in principle, it seems that it also could be brought about by intentional design. That is, if it is consistent with responsibility that the state of the world 5 billion years ago (together with the laws) necessitates one’s actions, it must also be consistent with responsibility that the state of the world 5 billion years ago was arranged to be that way precisely so that one would do what one actually does. In other words, the mere fact that the world was once intentionally arranged in this way should be irrelevant to the facts of responsibility.

It is this fact that Mele’s Zygote Argument exploits. The argument relies on the following background information, where Diana is a goddess who oversees a deterministic world:

Diana creates a zygote Z in Mary. She combines Z’s atoms as she does because she wants a certain event E to occur thirty years later. From her knowledge of the state of the universe just prior to her creating Z and the laws of nature of her deterministic universe, she deduces that a zygote with precisely Z’s constitution located in Mary will develop into an ideally self-controlled agent [call him Ernie] who, in thirty years, will judge, on the basis of rational deliberation, that it is best to A and will A on the basis of that judgment, thereby bringing about E.

In short, take a deterministic causal sequence that according to the compatibilist results in Ernie’s freely doing A. Now imagine that a goddess so arranged Ernie’s physical constitution (and other matters) long ago to bring about this causal sequence. The compatibilist is thus committed to saying that Ernie had free will with respect to doing A and bringing about E. But, says the incompatibilist, this is intuitively the wrong result.

3. However, I briefly address the issue of praiseworthiness in fn. 17, below.

4. Mele, ibid., p. 188
Of course, the case in question is—as are all such cases—rather esoteric. But I believe that, appropriately considered, the incompatibilist intuitions they elicit are powerful ones. Think of the last thing someone did to seriously hurt you. And now imagine, so far as you can, fully taking on board the fact that her having done so—in all of its minute details—was part of the inevitable unfolding of a plan long ago set into motion. As you realize, say, that her snapping at you for your minor infraction—her uttering those precise words in that precise tone in that precise way—was the outcome of someone else’s plan, a plan that moreover had no chance of failing, I think it would be difficult to continue holding her actions against her. Indeed, one hardly knows how one would react to really understanding the truth of the thesis under consideration; as Gary Watson has remarked, to think that we might be living out someone else’s plan for our lives is “vertiginous.” Once you have overcome the vertigo, however, is it really plausible to suppose that you should disregard such knowledge as of no consequence to your friend’s responsibility? Such must the compatibilist believe. With other incompatibilists, however, I simply say: so much the worse for compatibilism.Compatibilists, however, have resisted this conclusion. In short, they simply contend that Ernie is morally responsible for doing A, despite the fact that his doing so is the inevitable result of Diana’s scheme.

4. The Argument

But we can now begin considering a new dialectical pathway. Suppose Ernie’s doing A was wrong: suppose A was the murder of Jones for selfish ends. Compatibilists so far have been willing to say that we can blame Ernie for killing Jones. But can Diana blame Ernie? That is, having once determined for Ernie to kill Jones, can Diana later blame him for doing so? As I see it, it is deeply counterintuitive to suppose that we may blame Ernie for what he has done. But it seems much more counterintuitive to suppose that Diana may blame Ernie for what she determined him to do.

In some respects, however, the case of Diana and Ernie does not provide a suitable test case to investigate the issues I aim to explore. For unless we make a wide range of stipulations, it may turn out that Diana cannot blame Ernie for reasons not relevant to the issue at hand. For instance, as far as Mele’s story goes, there is no reason not to think that Diana herself is a rather wicked, conniving goddess, and so cannot blame Ernie for what he does on those grounds alone. But we could change the story in various ways so that she is not (or not obviously) wicked in these respects. In short, we could change the story so that Diana more and more closely approximates the role some—as noted above—attribute to God. Rather than going through these steps, however, and to keep these cases apart, I propose simply to consider the case of God—the “limiting case”, so to speak—directly. Here it is worth emphasizing that in what follows my main points do not depend on anything essentially religious or theistic, and though they will certainly bear on such issues, they are meant to have application beyond them. For instance, though God has traditionally been taken to be omnipotent, there is no reason why (for our purposes) we could not ultimately relax this assumption, or instead consider the case of God*, who is otherwise similar to God but is not omnipotent. The case of God traditionally conceived is nevertheless a particularly theoretically useful (and perfectly legitimate) test case to examine the issues I wish to explore.

Thus, suppose that God—who has no defects in knowledge, power, or goodness—has created the world and fixed it certain deterministic laws, with the result that everything that happens is the causally inevitable result of God’s creative actions. On this picture, God (as it were) designs the stage, writes the script, and puts the play into motion—and it is causally impossible that the play depart in the slightest detail from the script he wrote for it. Crucially, we are not to imagine that God merely foreknows how the play will unfold; he knows how the play will unfold because he wrote it and put causes in place which guarantee

that it will unfold in that way. On this picture, then, God wrote a script including our performing all the bad actions we actually perform and put causes in place which guarantee that we perform them. We are, in short, characters in his deterministic play. (Of course, in employing this analogy, we should keep in mind that God causally determines a real world with real people.) Call this thesis theological determinism.6

Now, just as it is deeply counterintuitive to suppose that Diana may blame Ernie, I claim that it is likewise deeply counterintuitive to suppose that God may blame the characters in his deterministic play. How could it be appropriate for God to blame us for (so to speak) perfectly performing the roles he assigned to us? I suspect that most compatibilists will agree with me in this judgment. Of course, we will have occasion shortly to ask why God cannot do so. But I am now ready to state the core argument of this paper:

(1) On theological determinism, God cannot blame us for the wrong actions we perform, even if we meet all compatibilist conditions for being morally responsible with respect to performing them.

(2) The best explanation for the truth of (1) is incompatibilism.

So

(3) Incompatibilism is true.

6. Note that on theological determinism (as I will understand it here), we need not suppose that God in any way intervenes in the world or serves as a sustaining cause of the world’s existence, even if traditional theists have maintained these theses. Thus, with respect to the facts of moral responsibility, there can be no relevant difference between theological determinism and mere ‘natural’ determinism, since there should be (in principle) no way to tell the difference between a world where theological determinism holds and one where it does not. In other words, on natural determinism, the state of the world at the Big Bang (together with the laws) in some sense encodes a script for how the future will unfold. It is, however, a script that no one has written. Here, theological determinism is simply the thesis that someone indeed wrote this script — that is, someone thought of this arrangement and intentionally created it so that the ‘script’ it encodes would unfold. It seems obvious that whether someone wrote the script or not has nothing whatever to do with whether we are or are not responsible for what we do.

The argument is enthymematic; I here simply assume that if the truth of incompatibilism is the best explanation for (1), then incompatibilism is true. Again, I suspect most compatibilists will agree with me about (1); though I will later return to a defense of (1), I am content here to note that denying it would be a (previously unnoted) cost for compatibilism. But what about (2)? Is the best explanation for the fact that God cannot blame us (on theological determinism) the truth of incompatibilism?

Well, the incompatibilist certainly has an easy time explaining why God cannot both determine what we do and blame us for doing it. God cannot blame the characters in his deterministic play because he does not give them free will. God cannot blame them because having determined them to do the bad things they do, they lack free will with respect to doing them, and thus they are not blameworthy for doing them, in which case it would be inappropriate for God to blame them for what they do. In other words, if God writes the script and determines the play, then he should — and, being omniscient, would — know that the beings he is dealing with are not morally responsible agents with free will, but more akin to his (no doubt very fancy) preprogrammed automata. Knowing this, God would know that it would be entirely unfair to blame them for what they do. For, again, he did not even give them free will. The incompatibilist is thus able to provide a plausible, well-motivated account of why God cannot blame those whose actions he determines.

But on what grounds can the compatibilist object to (2)? I think the compatibilist’s only hope here is to invoke considerations having to do with the moral standing to blame. The compatibilist must maintain that if God determines us, then though we are in fact still blameworthy, God lacks the standing to blame us: it is this that explains the truth of (1). For instance, suppose (as above) that God’s plan includes Ernie’s freely killing Jones. The compatibilist must maintain that Ernie is still blameworthy for killing Jones, despite the fact that his doing so is part of the inevitable unfolding of God’s plan. And (other things being equal) we can blame Ernie. It’s just that God cannot, says the compatibilist. Consider, however, if God said the following to the compatibilist:
You say that I lack the standing to blame Ernie. But why is this so? As you’ll admit, nothing I did (and nothing I caused to occur) forced Ernie to kill Jones. I did not compel him to do so. Remember: you are careful to distinguish mere determination from force and compulsion. Moreover, he did not have to kill Jones; he could have done otherwise — anyway, he could have if determinism itself doesn’t rule out the freedom to do otherwise. What he did was particularly awful, and he did it freely and responsibly. In short, as Ernie’s creator, you’ll admit that I gave him free will. And what more need I have given him in order to be able to blame him for what he has done?

God certainly seems to have a point (naturally enough), and the compatibilist seems to owe him an explanation. The argument of this paper is that the only explanation the compatibilist may offer here in the end must appear (on compatibilist assumptions) unduly ad hoc. In order to argue for this claim, I turn to the literature on moral standing.

5. Moral standing: bad faith criticism

Needless to say, I will not here discuss all the various factors which bear on the question of when it is permissible for someone to blame a morally responsible wrongdoer. Rather, I focus only on those factors which may plausibly explain why God cannot blame us on the hypothesis of theological determinism. My discussion of moral standing will take its cue from G.A. Cohen’s treatment of this topic. Cohen identifies two broad categories of responses to criticism which are meant to undermine the standing of the agent doing the criticizing:

For [the] first sub-type of would-be discrediting response I have three good labels: ‘look who’s talking’, ‘pot calling the kettle black’, and ‘tu quoque’. For my contrasting

For the first sub-type of would-be discrediting response I have three good labels: ‘look who’s talking’, ‘pot calling the kettle black’, and ‘tu quoque’. For my contrasting

For the second sub-type I have no good vernacular or Latin tag. But I will point you in the right direction by reminding you of retorts to criticism like “you made me do it”, and “you started it”, even though those phrases don’t cover all the variants of the second sub-type. I shall name the second sub-type “You’re involved in it too”, but if anybody can think of a better name, then I welcome suggestions.

More on this second sub-type later. As an instance of this first sub-type, Cohen gives the following: 8

The first of these techniques for compromising a critic’s voice was signalled in my childhood by the retort “Look who’s talking!” Shapiro might say, “Hey, Goldstein, how come you didn’t come to the club last night? All the guys were expecting you.” And Goldstein might reply: “Look who’s talking. Twice last week, you didn’t show up.” Unless Shapiro could now point to some relevant difference, his power to condemn was compromised, whether or not the criticism he originally made of Goldstein was sound. Such cases are familiar; critics open to the “tu quoque” response are engaged in a certain sort of hypocrisy. In short, the response in question says, “How can you blame me for what I have done, when you yourself do (or have done) similar things?”

Now, it is a complicated question just how and why having done similar things undermines one’s standing to blame. Nevertheless, most would agree that (at least in certain cases) it does. For my purposes here, however, it is important to see that the “tu quoque” does not appear to help the compatibilist. That is, if God can’t blame Ernie, it will not be because God has done similar things as Ernie. Bringing about conditions which causally determine someone to pick up a gun and shoot someone for selfish reasons is not the same thing as picking

up a gun and shooting someone for selfish reasons. In other words, if Ernie wishes to deflect God’s criticism, his best response to him is not to say, “Where do you get off criticizing me for what I’ve done when you’ve done similar things yourself?”

Still, it may seem that something that is objectionable about hypocrisy might also be objectionable about God’s blaming Ernie. As Jay Wallace says:

9. Of course, the compatibilist might try to construe “having done similar things” in such a way that God (on the imagined scenario) has done similar things as Ernie, and thus cannot blame him. However, if “having done similar things” is construed this broadly, then (very plausibly) it will turn out that everyone has done similar things as Ernie, and thus cannot blame him. And this, I take it, is a result the compatibilist would wish to avoid.

Consider, again, persons who blame others for their unreliability or dishonesty, but who are routinely unreliable and dishonest themselves. Their resentment or indignation suggest that they value moral ends, but their own behavior reflects an indifference to the very same ends.... The hypocrite’s indignation or resentment reflects the kind of emotional investment in moral ends that is characteristic of valuing such ends; but the behavior of hypocrites shows a striking indifference to the very same ends, a willingness to disregard them in their own deliberations about what to do. These attitudes do not cohere with each other.

In short, part of what is objectionable about (at least some cases of) hypocritical blame is that the hypocrite represents himself as caring about the moral values at stake, but his behavior in doing the very same things suggests otherwise. The worry then is that the hypocrite is blaming in bad faith.

Now, in blaming Ernie, God may not be blaming Ernie for things he himself has done, and thus he may not be open to the charge of bad faith.


bad faith on those particular grounds. Nevertheless, it might seem that God is open to such a charge on other grounds. For didn’t God include Ernie’s killing Jones in his script? How, then, can he represent himself as caring (say) about the moral value of human life and respect for persons that would undergird a negative moral reaction to Ernie’s behavior? If he is so morally opposed to murder, one might reasonably have expected him not to have put it in the script in the first place.

However, I think God has a good reply to such worries, a reply familiar from the project of theodicy. It seems perfectly possible that an author of a given script should intensely dislike some of the actions of the characters in his script, especially when those actions are considered in themselves, in isolation from the rest of the story. In other words, I take it that God’s aim in writing a script is to write a very good script — and, according to some accounts, the best of all possible scripts. And from his including a particular episode in the script, one cannot infer that he approves of that episode considered by itself — that he would not object to a script consisting solely (or mostly) of such episodes. (Further, I think these points hold even if we keep in mind that God is determining a real world with real people; just because God determines a world in which someone performs a morally wrong action, it doesn’t seem to follow that he approves of that action, considered in itself.) In short, from reading about the actions of the villains in someone’s story, one certainly cannot conclude that the author of the story does not condemn such actions. Reconsider Ernie. If he wished to deflect God’s criticism, his best response to God is not to say, “Where do you get off criticizing me for what I’ve done, when obviously you don’t really disapprove of it in the first place — seeing as how this is in your plan?” Again, God has a good reply: just because it was part of his plan, it doesn’t follow that he morally approves of Ernie’s action.

Similar points serve to deflect another potential concern about God’s blaming those he determines. There seems to be some sense in which God wants things to unfold as he has planned for them to unfold. In other words, it seems as if, when we perform the bad actions we
perform, we are in some sense doing precisely what God wanted us to do. And how can someone blame someone for doing what she wants him to do? If she wants him to do it, then, again, this seems to suggest that she doesn’t really disapprove of his doing it. Again, however, there seems to be a good response to this worry. In the first place, want does not entail approval. Suppose Bob’s house has been getting broken into regularly by an unknown culprit. Bob has his house staked out, and sees Fred approaching the back door. Bob says to himself: “I hope he breaks in!” He wants Fred to break in so the mystery is solved and so that Fred can be apprehended and Bob’s possessions returned. But he certainly stands ready to blame Fred should Fred actually break in.

At any rate, it seems entirely open to say that God does not want Ernie to kill Jones in any sense that implies God’s approval of Ernie’s action. What God wants in the sense that implies approval is an overall excellent play; standing back and looking at his play, God approves of it. Of course, God approves of Ernie’s action being in the play, but this does not imply that God approves of Ernie’s action. Similar points apply to an associated complaint, namely that Ernie’s killing Jones was according to God’s intentions. In short, one might wonder how God can blame Ernie for killing Jones when his intent in putting the relevant causes into place was for him to do so. The deeper worry seems yet again that if Ernie’s action was according to God’s intent, then God must somehow approve of his action. And, yet again, this worry seems misplaced. Reconsider Bob. Suppose Bob knows that Fred is the culprit and wishes to catch him in the act of stealing. Bob invites Fred over and sets out an expensive item where he thinks Fred will see it and likely steal it; if he does so, Bob will have caught Fred’s thievery on tape. Sure enough, Fred takes the item. In this case, Fred acts precisely according to Bob’s intent; Fred did just what he intended him to do. But Bob can certainly blame Fred for stealing the item in question. In general, from the mere fact that someone is acting as you intended him to, it does not follow that he is acting in a way you approve of, and it does not follow that you cannot blame him for what he does.

So even if God did intend that Ernie kills Jones, it is not clear how this fact in itself rules out God’s standing to blame Ernie. However, it is of course crucial to note that partisans of the view in question have traditionally wished to deny that God intends for us to perform the bad actions we perform. Instead, they have wished to maintain (or anyway, could maintain) that our performing them is a merely forseen but unintended consequence of his creative action. That is, of course God knows that if he puts the relevant causes into place, Ernie will kill Jones. But this is not his intent in putting such causes into place; rather, it is a mere side effect of his achieving what he really intends to achieve. Here, however, we enter increasingly dark waters; intention and cognate notions are notoriously vexed, as is the associated normative principle, the Doctrine of Double Effect. I simply note that anyone wishing to advance this criticism would have serious work to do. I further note that it seems clear that the fact — supposing it is a fact — that Ernie’s killing Jones was not according to God’s intent does not make it any more plausible to suppose that God may in fact blame Ernie for what he does. It is still radically counterintuitive to suppose that God may put causes in place which he forsees will inevitably culminate in Ernie’s killing Jones, and then blame him for doing so.

To sum up, what unites the proposed compatibilist explanations so far of why God lacks moral standing to blame Ernie for killing Jones is that they call into question God’s moral disapproval of Ernie’s action. If God includes this event in his script, it might seem that he doesn’t disapprove of Ernie’s doing so: his doing so is (allegedly) what God wants or intends, and these things imply moral approval. God would thus be blaming Ernie in bad faith; he would have to be merely representing himself as being truly opposed to what Ernie does, though his actions say otherwise. As we have seen, however, God seems to have a good response to these worries. Of course, I do not claim that have decisively shown that these worries are illegitimate. However, I do claim that the dialectical burden is on anyone wishing to make such charges stick. In short, considerations pertaining to hypocrisy and bad faith
criticism do not seem fit to explain why God cannot both determine and blame us.

6. Moral standing: you’re involved in it too

The basic response to God on behalf of Ernie we have considered so far has been this: “How can you blame me for doing it when (given that ...) it doesn’t seem that you disapprove of my doing it in the first place?” But if he wishes to call into question God’s moral standing to blame him, Ernie seems to have a better response available. It is this: “Regardless of whether you did or didn’t want or intend for me to do it, and regardless of whether you disapprove of my doing it – in short, regardless of what I was saying previously – it is still your fault that I did it. And how can you blame me for doing it when it is your own fault that I did it?” Now Ernie is talking. Now we are coming closer to the heart of the issue. It is still God’s fault that Ernie killed Jones; God knowingly put causes in place sufficient for him to do so. How could God possibly evade the charge?

But we need to get clear on just what Ernie’s charge amounts to. Ernie alleges that it is God’s fault that he killed Jones. But — understood in a certain way — God should deny this. God should admit that he is responsible (even morally responsible) for Ernie’s killing Jones; this simply cannot be denied. But he should deny that it is his fault that Ernie killed Jones, at least if being at fault is understood to entail some degree of blameworthiness or moral wrongdoing. In other words, God should admit that, in virtue of knowingly putting such causes into place, he is morally responsible for Ernie’s killing Jones, but he should deny that he did anything wrong in putting such causes in place. God should admit responsibility but deny wrongdoing. And Ernie’s charge — that what he did is God’s fault — seemingly implies wrongdoing.

But on what grounds can God deny wrongdoing? On grounds again familiar from the project of theodicy. Does God act wrongly in creating a world that is overall very good, if there are bad parts of that world which are necessary to secure its overall goodness? Very plausibly, he does not. In short, God will take responsibility for creating the world, and will take responsibility (even moral responsibility) for what everyone does in his world. But when someone does something wrong, he will not accept that he acted wrongly in bringing such an action about. For he did not — instead, if anything, he acted rightly (or certainly permissibly) in doing so, since he knows that such an action at such a time is necessary to secure some good which outweighs it. Of course, some will object to the (more or less) consequentialist reasoning here. But whose rights (or some such) does he — or must he — violate in creating such a world? After all, says the compatibilist, he does not force anyone to do anything wrong. We do what we do freely and responsibly, according to the compatibilist. So it is unclear how God violates any non-consequentialist duties in creating such a world. In short, given compatibilism, it will be difficult to show that God acts wrongly in putting such causes into place.

Clearly, we have here landed in the middle of a range of issues pertinent to the traditional problem of evil. However, while the issues of this paper are certainly relevant to the problem of evil, this paper is not about the problem of evil. In particular, we are not considering whether God would have been acting wrongly to create (and determine) our world. Nor are we considering the plausibility of the thesis that the evils in our world are necessary for some outweighing good. We are just considering a certain charge: that simply in virtue of putting sufficient causes in place for Ernie’s freely killing Jones, God (or someone relevantly similar) acts wrongly, even given the truth of compatibilism. And this thesis seems implausible. We should be able to tell a story to everyone’s satisfaction according to which God includes such free actions in some given world, but does not act wrongly in doing so. And that is enough to generate the problem of this paper.\(^{11}\)

\(^{11}\) Strictly speaking, we don’t even need it that Ernie kills Jones — we just need that he freely tries to kill Jones, or tries to steal a cookie, for that matter. The point would remain the same: God cannot blame Ernie for trying to kill Jones or for trying to steal the cookie. Surely God may permissibly create a world in which some agent at some time freely tries to perform a morally wrong action. It could be the only time anyone ever tries to do something wrong. Again, however, let me emphasize that I do not here claim to have decisively shown that in the relevant scenario (on compatibilist assumptions) God does...
So, again, God should deny that it is his fault that Ernie kills Jones, at least if fault implies some degree of blameworthiness or wrongdoing. But suppose Ernie changes his tune. Suppose he says, “OK, even if it isn’t your fault that I killed Jones, as you admit, you are still responsible—even morally responsible—for my having done so. And if you are responsible for my having killed Jones, how can you blame me for having killed him?” Such a reply from Ernie is more sensible. But his reply now lacks a certain bite that it had previously. I think we will be able to see this point by taking up Cohen’s second sub-type of discrediting responses: the “You’re involved in it too” response. Cohen says:

In this second sub-type of silencing response you are disabled from condemning me not because you are responsible for something similar or worse yourself but because you bear at least some responsibility for the very thing that you seek to criticize. My Nazi superior cannot condemn me for doing what he orders me on pain of death to do, even if I should disobey, and accept death.

---

Now, Cohen certainly is right that there are ways of being (morally) responsible for what someone does that disable one’s ability to criticize her for doing it. However, for our purposes, it is crucial to note that there appear also to be ways of being (morally) responsible for what someone does that do not disable one in this way. For instance, Cohen certainly seems right that the typical Nazi commander cannot blame his soldiers for following his orders, even if such orders should be disobeyed. Importantly, however, what accounts for this fact is not merely that the commander is (morally) responsible for what his soldiers do when following his orders. Rather, it will be because of either one or both of the following: (1) what the soldiers do is his fault (in the blame implying sense) and/or (2) he would be blaming his soldiers in bad faith.

Suppose Steffen is a typical Nazi commander working in a death camp. He hears rumors of an escape attempt. Thus, he orders Thomas to investigate the fence and sound the alarm, should he see any prisoners escaping. Thomas sees the prisoners, sounds the alarm, and the prisoners are caught and executed. Now, Thomas should have let the prisoners go; he should have had mercy and simply reported back to Steffen that there was nothing to the rumors. But he doesn’t. In this case, of course, Steffen cannot blame Thomas for sounding the alarm. Consider Jonas, however. Jonas is a Nazi commander working in a death camp. However, Jonas is secretly opposed to the Nazi regime. He thus does everything within his power to save the lives of as many prisoners as possible, consistent, of course, with maintaining his position as a committed Nazi; Jonas (correctly) reasons that he can do much more good secretly sabotaging the Nazi efforts as a trusted commander than he could by open defiance. Jonas hears rumors of an escape. In order to keep appearances, he must order someone to investigate the fence. Jonas thus orders Thomas to investigate the fence and sound the alarm should he see anyone attempting escape. Jonas chose Thomas for this task because he thought that, of all the people he might choose, Thomas would be the most likely to have mercy and not sound the alarm should he actually find prisoners escaping, and instead report back that there was nothing to the rumors. Instead,
However, Thomas discovers the escaping prisoners, sounds the alarm, and the prisoners are caught and executed.

It seems clear that, in this case, Jonas may permissibly blame Thomas for sounding the alarm. It seems perfectly appropriate for Jonas, hearing the alarm, to inwardly condemn Thomas for not showing mercy. And later Jonas might confront Thomas about his act. Thomas might say, “But you ordered me to do it!” And Jonas might reply: “Yes, I ordered you to do it, but that gives you no excuse; you should have disobeyed my orders, even at great risk to yourself.” What, then, makes the difference (in moral standing) between Jonas and Steffen? Well, it is not that whereas Steffen is responsible for what Thomas did, Jonas is not. Jonas is responsible for what Thomas did; anyway, if Steffen is, so is Jonas. That is, both are morally responsible for what Thomas did, at least to the extent that commanders generally are morally responsible for what their soldiers do when faithfully following their orders. Plausibly, what explains why Steffen cannot blame Thomas is firstly that Steffen is a committed Nazi who would have to be merely representing himself as being opposed to Thomas’s action. Secondly, it is Steffen’s fault (in the blame-implying sense) that Thomas sounded the alarm; Steffen was blameworthy in making the given command. Jonas, however, is not a committed Nazi, and nor is it (in the blame-implying sense) his fault that Thomas did so; Jonas did not do anything for which he was blameworthy in making the given command. He is responsible for what Thomas did, but doesn’t endorse it, and isn’t blameworthy for it. Thus, it seems his standing remains intact.

So there appear to be ways of being responsible for what someone else does, and not all such ways are made equal. Thus, the compatibilist might simply suggest the following principle concerning the moral standing to blame:

(4) If X freely and knowingly brings it about that there are sufficient causal conditions for Y’s doing A, then X cannot blame Y for doing A.

In short, if God wants to know why he can’t blame Ernie, then the suggested response is simply to say, “Because you freely and knowingly brought it about that his act was determined to occur.” Now, here we must be careful. Note that (4) does seem true. That is, it does seem very plausible that if God freely and knowingly brought about sufficient conditions for Ernie’s act, then God cannot blame Ernie for what he does; it is this very fact that the argument of this paper exploits. The problem for the compatibilist, however, is twofold. First, as I will explain, it is not clear that the compatibilist can even accept (4). Secondly, even if the compatibilist can accept (4), it is not clear that (4) is fit to serve as a fundamental fact about the moral standing to blame. In other words, consider the proposed explanation in the mouth of the incompatibilist. The proposed explanation is (so to speak) “code” for “You freely and knowingly did not give Ernie free will.” In this sense, while (4) is true, and while the proposed explanation is a good one, the truth of (4) and the appropriateness of the explanation hold in virtue of something deeper, namely the truth of incompatibilism. Consider God pressing further on the proposed explanation: “And why does this fact—that I brought about such sufficient conditions—remove my standing to blame?” The incompatibilist can say, “Because your having done so means that Ernie was not after all acting freely, but was instead something like your preprogrammed automata.” The compatibilist, however, would have to simply answer, “Because it does.” And this seems odd.

We can sum up so far as follows. It is, I think, severely counterintuitive to suppose that God can blame the characters in his deterministic play. Here, I have been arguing that if God cannot do so, it will not be
because God wants or intends us to do what we do. It will not be because God would have to be blaming us in bad faith. Nor is it because God would be at fault for what we do; given the appropriate story, God does not do anything wrong in bringing it about that we freely perform immoral actions. And while God is responsible for what his characters do, it is again not clear how this in itself implies that he cannot blame them. However, on the hypothesis of theological determinism, God does freely and knowingly bring it about that there are sufficient causal conditions for what we do. Can the compatibilist maintain that this fact in itself explains God’s inability to legitimately blame us? This is the question for the following section.

7. Putting the causes in place

Again, consider:

(4) If X freely and knowingly brings it about that there are sufficient causal conditions for Y’s doing A, then X cannot blame Y for doing A.

Before we consider whether the compatibilist can regard (4) as a fundamental fact about moral standing, we first need to ask whether the compatibilist can even accept (4) to be a fact at all. The answer is: not obviously.

Suppose determinism is true, and suppose some of us know that determinism is true. The problem with any compatibilist acceptance of (4) is that it would then seem that we would regularly freely and knowingly bring it about that there are sufficient causal conditions for agent’s performing certain actions. This is because, on determinism, for anything that happens, it was determined that it happen. Thus, from knowing that someone will do something, given certain actions of one’s own, one thereby knows that it will be determined that she do it. And, given (4), it would then follow that one cannot blame her for doing it. But this seems to be an unacceptable result for compatibilism. Suppose Diego and Cameron are having dinner. Cameron asks Diego for a ride home. Under other circumstances, Diego would agree to give Cameron a ride, but on this night, it would be particularly inconvenient for Diego to do so. Now, Diego knows two things. First, he knows that determinism is true. Second, having been in this and similar situations with Cameron before, he knows that if he refuses to give Cameron a ride home, Cameron will become unduly angry. Now, it is sometimes perfectly acceptable to refuse to do certain things, even knowing that someone will react improperly to one’s having refused; what other people’s reactions to our behavior will be cannot always hold us morally hostage. So Diego politely refuses. Sure enough, Cameron becomes unduly angry. Can Diego blame him for doing so? It would certainly seem that the compatibilist should say that he can. But (4) would imply otherwise.

This is because, in the scenario, Diego would be freely and knowingly bringing it about that there are sufficient causal conditions for Cameron’s becoming angry. That is, Diego freely refuses to give Cameron a ride, and he knows that such behavior will be sufficient for Cameron’s becoming angry, since he knows that (if he refuses) Cameron will become angry, and knows that anything that will happen will be determined to happen. So, again, (4) would imply that Diego cannot blame Cameron. But this seems like an unacceptable result for compatibilism. The truth of (4) would imply that if we were to know that determinism is true, we could not blame people for doing what we know they will do, given completely innocent behavior from us. And, while a compatibilist could accept this result, I take it that this is a result no compatibilist would wish to accept.

Now, the compatibilist might wish to draw a distinction between the sense in which Diego freely and knowingly “brings it about” that there are sufficient causal conditions for Cameron’s becoming angry and the sense in which God is said to “bring about” the relevant sufficient causal conditions on theological determinism. In particular, we might notice the following. In Diego’s case, while surely the compatibilist must say that there is some sense in which his action brings about sufficient conditions for Cameron’s anger, we can notice that, on determinism, such conditions were in place before — indeed, long
before — Diego’s action took place. That is, Diego serves as something of an intermediate cause of Cameron’s anger; but for his action, Cameron would not have become angry, and thus there is some sense in which Diego ‘brings about’ the relevant sufficient conditions. On the other hand, before God’s creative action, there perhaps were not sufficient conditions for our performing the bad actions we perform. And the compatibilist might allege that there is something particularly problematic about originally initiating a causal sequence one knows will inevitably result in someone’s performing a wrong action, and merely acting within such a sequence that was already in place. Thus, the compatibilist might wish to replace (4) with (5):

(5) If X freely and knowingly brings it about that there are sufficient causal conditions for Y’s doing A, when, prior to X’s actions, such conditions did not obtain, then X cannot blame Y for doing A.

Now, the truth of (5) would have the desired result that God cannot blame us, on theological determinism, but would allow Diego’s blaming Cameron. However, (5) is arguably no progress over (4). To see this, we need only imagine worlds in which there exist what we might call ‘local pockets’ of determinism. That is, it would seem perfectly possible for worlds to be deterministic in some respects but indeterministic in others. For instance, there might very well be sufficient causal conditions in place, say, for Obama’s being reelected in 2012. But no conditions may yet be in place sufficient for someone’s being elected in 2016. Now, suppose that, just prior to Diego’s action, there are not sufficient conditions in place for Cameron’s becoming angry. However, with Diego’s refusal, such conditions would come to be in place, and Diego knows this. In this scenario, the truth of (5) would imply that Diego cannot blame Cameron. But, as above, this seems like an unacceptable result for compatibilism. While the world would in fact be to some degree indeterministic, those actions that are determined may still be free and responsible, and thus there would appear to be no reason to suppose that Diego — who is completely innocent in the matter — cannot blame Cameron when Cameron freely and responsibly becomes angry.

Of course, there are ways of modifying (5) so as to obtain the desired result. Indeed, there would appear to be any number of ways to do so. For instance, one might say that if you put in place causes sufficient for someone’s doing something wrong, and your name starts with the letter ‘G’, then you cannot blame him or her for doing it. The point here is that there will of course be some way in which God (or someone similarly situated, such as Mele’s Diana) brings about the relevant conditions that differs from the way in which we bring about such conditions. Plainly, however, the question will be whether the difference makes a difference — that is, whether the proposed principle is independently plausible and sufficiently motivated. And here, I simply confess that I do not see such a compatibilist-friendly principle on the horizon.  

There are, again, two problems for the compatibilist here. The first is simply formulating a principle relevantly similar to (4) which does not (in certain contexts) unacceptably rule our standing to blame one another and that is not (as noted above) obviously ad hoc. The second problem, however, is that the compatibilist will still have to regard the resulting principle as a fundamental fact about the moral standing to blame. Recall the original proposed compatibilist explanation: God cannot blame Ernie simply in virtue of the fact that he freely and knowingly put sufficient conditions in place for his action. Again, it is not clear that this explanation is fit to be the fundamental explanation for why God cannot blame Ernie: plausibly, it holds in virtue of something deeper. But the compatibilist has further problems here. In fact, 

13. Note that the proposed principle would have to be sensitive to the ways in which the case could be changed. For instance, the standard story about God has it that God creates ex nihilo. But we could change the story so that the relevant creator simply arranges matter that was already there. Similarly, it would not seem to help to note that Ernie would not have existed at all but for Diana or God. We could change the story (suitably creatively embellished) so that Diana (say) takes some infant newborn and from there arranges matters to achieve her plan; nothing in the relevant story essentially depends on Diana or God being Ernie’s original creator.
the compatibilist will have to say that God cannot blame Ernie simply in virtue of the fact that he is *in a very particular way* — a way that distinguishes what he did from what we might do in other contexts — freely and knowingly put sufficient conditions in place for his action. And if it is not clear that the truth of (4) is fit to be a fundamental fact about moral standing, surely it will be even less clear that the suitably modified principle is fit to be fundamental. That is, it seems clear that the relevant principle — some modification of (4) or (5) — will have to appear at least relatively "cooked up", and a poor candidate to be a fundamental principle governing the moral standing to blame.

We can briefly recap as follows. I have considered various proposed compatibilist explanations for why God cannot blame Ernie. Ultimately, I considered whether the compatibilist might simply say that God cannot blame Ernie because God freely and knowingly put sufficient conditions in place for what Ernie does. It turns out that this is indeed an explanation the compatibilist seemingly cannot invoke, unless she is prepared to admit that, in the contexts discussed above, we cannot blame one another. And no non-arbitrary "fix" seems immediately available to the compatibilist. Furthermore, as I think will become more clear in the following section, any such explanation plausibly would hold in virtue of something deeper about the nature of moral responsibility or moral standing. Of course, I do not here claim to have considered all the explanations the compatibilist might invoke here. However, again, I do claim that providing such an explanation is a challenge the compatibilist must address.

**8. Reasons for skepticism**

Again, I have sought to argue that the compatibilist has no good explanation for the truth of (1) — that God cannot blame those whose actions he determines. Here I wish to make a positive argument that the compatibilist cannot offer such an explanation. Recall Cohen’s second sub-type of discrediting responses: the “You’re involved in it too” response. As I have been arguing, the challenge for the compatibilist is to specify a sense in which God (on theological determinism) is “involved” in our actions that undermines his standing to blame us. And I have argued that it is not clear what the compatibilist may offer us here. However, I think we can learn an important lesson from considering Cohen’s examples of such involvement. Cohen says:

> Here’s part of the relevant wide array: you ordered me to do it, you asked me to do it, you forced me to do it, you left me with no reasonable alternative, you gave me the means to do it… . When such responses from a criticized agent are in place, they compromise criticism that comes from the now impugned critic, while leaving third parties entirely free to criticize that agent.

Importantly, it seems that all of the responses here will compromise criticism only when the critic’s involvement either (1) was wrong or (2) took away or diminished the criticized agent’s free will. Thus, one might propose a constraint on the “You’re involved in it too” response: the response is available only when the critic’s involvement was wrong or diminished freedom.

Consider “You ordered me to do it”. We have already considered a story above on which someone orders someone to do something but can still blame him for doing it. Of course, if one was wrong for making the order in the first place, then one plausibly cannot blame those who follow the order. Similarly, if one’s order somehow coerces compliance, one can hardly blame those who follow the order, for in that case, those who follow it did not follow it freely. Similar points hold for asking someone to do something. Plausibly, if I morally shouldn’t ask you to do something, but do so anyway, against morality, then I cannot blame you for doing what I ask. But there would appear to be ways (relevantly similar to cases imagined above) of asking someone to do something that leave one able to criticize her for doing it. And consider “You gave me the means to do it”. Again, there would seem to be ways of giving someone the means to do something that leave...
intact one’s ability to criticize her for doing it. Yet if one wrongly participates in someone’s bad action by wrongly or negligently giving her the means to do it, it would seem that one cannot blame her.

Now, consider “You forced me to do it”. Forcing someone to do something is certainly a way of being involved in his doing it. However, if someone genuinely forces someone to do something, then the forced agent lacks free will with respect to doing it, and thus is not responsible for doing it. It is thus easy to see how “You forced me to do it” could disable criticism; insofar as one was forced, one isn’t responsible. Similar remarks apply to “You left with me no reasonable alternative”. If your involvement in my coming to do something left me with no reasonable alternative to doing it, then your involvement seemingly took away my freedom with respect to doing it; instead, I was forced. The important point here is that the responses Cohen identifies presuppose (in their own distinctive ways) that the critic’s involvement in one’s action was either wrong or responsibility-undermining or both. And it would seem that it is a necessary condition for the appropriateness of the response that one of these conditions is met. Indeed, it would seem that there shouldn’t be a way of being involved in someone’s decision that removes one’s moral standing to blame when one’s involvement is neither wrong nor responsibility-undermining. How could one be disabled from criticizing in this way if one’s involvement is completely innocent and did nothing to undermine responsibility?

So it would seem that meeting at least one of these two conditions is necessary for the appropriateness of the response. But — and this is the point — God’s involvement in our actions, on theological determinism, is (given compatibilism) neither blameworthy nor responsibility-undermining. As I argued above, given that we are free, and given the appropriate story, God does nothing wrong in putting the relevant causes in place. Nor does his having done so undermine our responsibility; rather, God’s involvement leaves us entirely free and responsible, according to the compatibilist. As I see it, it is these two facts that explain why any compatibilist explanation of why God cannot blame us must seemingly appear problematically

11. On behalf of (1)

At this stage, I hope that compatibilists have begun to appreciate the difficulties associated with accepting (1) — that God cannot blame us on theological determinism — but denying (2) — that incompatibilism is the best explanation for why this is so. That is, perhaps some compatibilists are convinced (or nearly so) that they cannot plausibly maintain that God cannot blame us on theological determinism. Thus, these compatibilists might be reviewing their options. And one option would plainly be to simply accept the result that God can blame the characters in his deterministic play. Now, I have claimed that this result is massively counterintuitive. At this point, however, some compatibilists may wish to demur. Indeed, perhaps the best compatibilist reply to the argument I have presented is to simply contend that though (1) does seem initially compelling, I myself have successfully explained away its intuitive force. That is, the compatibilist may say that (1) was initially compelling perhaps because we were thinking of God as malevolently intending us to do wrong precisely so that he could blame us. But once it is clear that this is not the case — once it is clear that God is not acting wrongly, and so forth — accepting the result that God can blame us is no additional cost the compatibilist must bear.\footnote{I thank Kenny Boyce for suggesting this reply on behalf of the compatibilist.}

To this compatibilist reply, I do not have much to say besides that, to me, this clearly does seem to be an additional cost. That is, even if God is not getting a perverse joy out of determining us to do wrong, it is still considerably mysterious how it could be appropriate for him
to determine and blame us. In keeping with our story, suppose you “wake up” to find yourself in an afterlife, during which time it is somehow made clear that everything you ever did was part of a divinely preordained plan. And then God says to you: “You know, what you did on this occasion was really a horrible thing to do have done. What’s your excuse? How could you?” Isn’t there something deeply unsettling about this scenario? Would you suppose that something had gone completely wrong? In the end, it simply seems to me that if God determines us to perform an action, he cannot blame us for having performed it. I do not know how to argue for this claim. I simply say that it is eminently plausible, and that we would need some very good reason to deny it.\(^5\)

16. Though I have focused solely on blame in this paper, it would seem that the points I have made concerning the permissibility of God’s blaming us could (\textit{mutatis mutandis}) be applied to show the permissibility of God’s punishing us. We could thus make the scenario considerably more unsettling by imagining that God says: “What you did was a horrible thing to have done, and its horribleness deserves punishment: 15 years in jail.” Even if you were convinced that (abstractly considered) 15 years in jail is a perfectly just punishment for such an act, wouldn’t you think – quite rightly – that the whole game is rigged, and that the universe is deeply unfair? That the moral universe could be this way strikes me as intolerable, though I’m sure some could find it in their hearts to tolerate it.

17. In this paper, my main contention has been that the compatibilist about moral responsibility (or, more particularly, blameworthiness) and determinism cannot account for the truth of (1) — that God cannot blame those whom he determines to perform morally wrong actions — and thus that we have reason to think that blameworthiness and determinism are incompatible. Of course, a natural question arises: Can God appropriately \textit{praise} those whom he determines to perform \textit{exemplary} actions? There are at least two options I should consider here. First, one might maintain an asymmetry thesis: Even if God cannot appropriately blame those whom he determines, he can nevertheless appropriately praise those whom he determines (and so praiseworthiness is compatible with determinism, even if blameworthiness is not). Perhaps this is the right view; for purposes of this paper, I need not take any official stand on this question — I am content to note that compatibilists generally will not want to grant the blameworthiness is incompatible with determinism. But this is not the option I favor. Rather, I contend that God cannot appropriately praise those whom he determines.

Suppose that God (or Diana, or ...) imagines a certain story, a beautiful story on which a man named Ernie donates $10,000 to charity. And suppose that God thinks that the story is so beautiful that it deserves to be “brought to life.” Hence, God sees fit to bring about causally sufficient conditions to guarantee that the relevant story unfolds, in precisely the manner in which he has imagined. Consequently, there comes to exist a man named Ernie, and he donates $10,000 to charity, precisely as God envisaged, and precisely as he himself determined. And now imagine God congratulating Ernie for having done the thing for which God determined him to do. More generally, imagine God thinking of various good actions for people to perform, determining them to perform them, and then congratulating them for having done so. Doesn’t there seem to be something, well, \textit{farcical} about this situation? Again, it is hard to know how to argue for this claim, but I think something is clearly amiss here. Moreover, that the situation as imagined would be a farce arguably at least partially explains the enduring appeal of the so-called “free-will defense” with respect to the problem of evil. If God (understandably) wants to create beings whom he could truly regard as praiseworthy, then, so the thought goes, he will have to give these beings the power to become good independently and on their own — in such a way that would imply that he cannot in advance causally settle it that they shall perform only and exactly those good actions he wishes them to perform.

So I think it is deeply implausible to suppose that God can appropriately praise those whom he determines. In the end, it seems to me that such praise would have to be on the model of how an artist might praise or admire her own work of art, and could not be the distinctively moral, desert-entailing praise that incompatibilists have traditionally thought is incompatible with determinism. Still, an anonymous referee reports a weaker intuition to the effect that God cannot appropriately praise those whom he determines than that he cannot appropriately blame those whom he determines. But I think we can plausibly explain this weaker intuition (to the extent that we have it) roughly as follows. Again, suppose a manipulator determines someone to perform an exemplary action. If, now, after the fact, the manipulator wants to praise the given agent for having performed it, at worst this will seem (again) like something like a farce, or perhaps the manipulator will simply strike us as naïve, silly, or harmlessly benighted. On the other hand, there is much more at stake in the case of blame — that God should blame those whom he determines does not strike us a farce but as seriously unjust. In short, if one has a weaker intuition to the effect that God cannot appropriately praise those he determines, I would seek to explain this by way of an asymmetry in what is at stake in the case of praise and blame: praise is typically harmless, whereas blame is typically not. (I thank an anonymous referee for raising this issue, and John Fischer, Neal Tognazzini, Garrett Pendergraft, and Philip Swanston for helpful discussion.)
picture? As I noted, there are many who presently accept (or claim to accept) such a theological picture. However, I am not inclined to regard these facts as evidence of the intrinsic reasonableness or defensibility of the view in question, but rather as testimony to the sometimes incredible power religious commitments can have in leading people to accept what would otherwise seem to be overwhelmingly implausible. Of course, some believers in theological determinism are such believers in spite of the discomfort they have with the position, and accept it because they feel compelled to by religious authority. Indeed, it would seem that something like this was the case for Augustine, and perhaps for other notable philosophical figures who in places seem to endorse this picture (or one like it). But this is simply my point. We should be deeply uncomfortable with a denial of (1), and if we were to deny it, it would have to be in spite of its plausibility, and because we were compelled in some way to deny it. Now, I imagine that certain religious believers would indeed contend that we are so compelled. Absent such considerations, however, why should we be compelled to deny (1)? Unless we are compelled to deny it, (1) should stand. And together with (2), we thus have what I believe to be a powerful new argument for incompatibilism.

12. Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to reflect briefly on the dialectical force of the argument I have presented. Naturally, in the course of developing this paper, I have presented it to various philosophers who work on these issues, some compatibilists, and some incompatibilists. What has been remarkable about the responses I have received is the almost total diversity of opinion about what the proper reply on behalf of the compatibilist should be. For instance, one prominent compatibilist counseled simply accepting the claim that God can blame those he determines. Another prominent compatibilist, conversations with whom prompted me to write this paper, keenly felt the force of the claim that God cannot blame those he determines, this despite the fact that he is known for taking a “hard-line” reply to manipulation cases in general. One reader thought that the compatibilist—insofar as she has no specifically theistic or religious commitments—should simply hold that God does act wrongly in the relevant scenario. Another compatibilist sought to resist my claims made in Section 8 concerning whether Diego could in fact blame Cameron; on his response, the compatibilist should maintain that our standing to blame would in fact be severely circumscribed, were determinism known to be true. Other readers pressed elsewhere. But hardly anyone pressed in the same place. Anyway, each compatibilist considered that his or her own reply adequately deflected the force of the argument.

There are various lessons one might attempt draw from this result. One lesson might be that the argument is weak: it is subject to a range of replies and, so the thought may go, it is likely that the compatibilist will be able to avail herself of one of them. But that the argument is subject to a range of replies is of course consistent with all such replies’ being weak, and an abundance of weak replies do not somehow add up to a comprehensive strong one. The lesson I would instead suggest is that the argument is strong, or anyway free from obvious defect. For if there were some obvious defect in the argument, I should have expected (subject to the standard caveats about sample size) that the group of philosophers who considered the argument would have more closely converged on what constitutes its proper reply. But no such consensus emerged.

Moreover, I freely admit that the argument is unlikely to convince compatibilists to give up their view. But it would be unreasonable to expect of an argument for incompatibilism that it should do so. I doubt very much that there is any purely philosophical argument capable of such a feat, whether in a clever philosopher’s head or in Plato’s heaven. A more reasonable standard with which to judge the success of the argument would be whether it shows that compatibilists must defend certain claims that are philosophically controversial and which some reasonable philosophers would find implausible. And by this standard, I believe the argument succeeds. That is, I believe the argument succeeds in making dialectical progress; it reveals that compatibilists in
Patrick Todd

Manipulation and Moral Standing

fact must accept a claim that it was previously unknown that they were committed to — that God (or someone similarly situated) could both determine and blame us — or that they must find a way to block this result, while it seems clear that any such way will prove to be controversial.

In this paper, I have advanced a new argument for incompatibilism. Some manipulation-style arguments for incompatibilism have asked us to imagine scenarios in which all of our choices are the inevitable outcome of someone else’s plan long ago set into motion. Intuitively, says the incompatibilist, such agents are not responsible for what they do. And compatibilists have resisted this conclusion. Here I have pursued a different question: whether the manipulators can blame the agents they manipulate. It seems strikingly counterintuitive that they may do so. As I have argued, however, given the appropriate story, the compatibilist has a hard time explaining why this should be so. I do not claim to have proven that no such compatibilist explanation is possible. But I believe we should be skeptical that one will be forthcoming. Minimally, I believe the dialectical burden is squarely on the compatibilist to provide such an explanation. Absent such an explanation, we have powerful new reason to be incompatibilists.\(^{18}\)

18. For many helpful conversations about these topics and comments on previous drafts of this paper, I thank my friends and fellow (or former) members of the Agency Reading Group at the University of California, Riverside (where a version of this paper was presented), Neal Tognazzini, Garrett Pendergraft, Justin Coates, Chris Franklin, Philip Swenson, Benjamin Mitchell-Yellin, and Coleen Macnamara. Thanks also to Kevin Timpe, Andrew Bailey, and Kenny Boyce for useful feedback. Thanks to Gary Watson for suggesting the epigraph and helpful discussions. I owe a special debt of gratitude to Michael McKenna for initially encouraging me to write this paper, and for insightful comments on a previous version. The paper benefited from several discussions with members of the 2009 Aspects of Responsibility summer program at Central European University, including Derk Pereboom. Finally, once again I owe deep thanks to John Martin Fischer for comments on countless drafts of this paper and for his constant support and encouragement of this project from the very beginning.