Reviving the Causal Perspective: A Response to Jeppsson’s Hard-Line Reply

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I. Introduction

In “The Agential Perspective: A Hard-Line Reply to the Four-Case Manipulation Argument,” Sofia Jeppsson offers a compatibilist response to Derk Pereboom’s manipulation argument. On her subjective account of moral responsibility, we must hold an agent fully responsible for her actions so long as she thinks of herself as responsible. In this paper, I defend Pereboom’s argument by showing that we do not have sufficient reason to adopt Jeppsson’s account. On the contrary, circumstances involving the agent’s total manipulation exonerate her from responsibility because being responsible requires that, at the very least, the agent’s actions are not fully controlled by someone else.

II. Jeppsson’s Hard-Line Reply

Derk Pereboom’s four-case manipulation argument is an attempt to show that compatibilism leads to counterintuitive conclusions about moral responsibility. To show this, he describes a set of four cases. In each case an imaginary character, Professor Plum, is manipulated in some way such that he kills his neighbor:

1. Case One: A team of neuroscientists press a button which induces a “strongly egoistic reasoning process” in Plum, causing him to decide to commit the murder.
2. Case Two: A team of neuroscientists programmed Plum from childhood on to often have strongly egoistic reasoning, causing him to decide to commit the murder.
3. Case Three: Plum’s community trained Plum from childhood on to be “frequently but not exclusively rationally egoistic,” causing him to decide to commit the murder.
4. Case Four: The past and the laws of nature determined that Plum would be frequently egoistic, causing him to decide to commit the murder.¹

¹ This is a very brief summary. For Pereboom’s more detailed explication, see pp. 76-79 in his Free Will, Agency, and Meaning in Life (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).
In all four cases, Plum meets standard compatibilist requirements for freedom because he rationally deliberates about what to do before the murderous act. However, the result of his deliberation in each of the four cases is “causally determined” by forces beyond his control.\(^2\) Pereboom claims that if we intuitively absolve the manipulated Plum of moral responsibility in Cases 1-3, even when he meets compatibilist requirements for freedom, then we must similarly absolve the determined Plum in Case 4. Consequently, compatibilism must be false.

In her paper, Jeppsson claims that this argument does not threaten the compatibilist. She argues that manipulation does not undermine moral responsibility so long as we make such judgments from the agent’s perspective.\(^3\) If manipulated agents have reason to disregard their manipulation, then we have a responsibility to adopt their perspective when judging their actions.

On Jeppsson’s account, it is in Plum’s best interest to dismiss his manipulation. Plum’s fixation on the fact that a mad neuroscientist controls his every action obstructs his deciding what to do, because this information prevents him from seeing himself as an agent with choices.\(^4\) Consequently, the fact of Plum’s manipulation is “largely irrelevant” to Plum.\(^5\) He may reflect on the mad scientist’s control over his life, but ultimately he must “set aside” these thoughts and make decisions “just like a non-manipulated counterpart would.”\(^6\) Plum has good reason to edit his self-perspective because it allows him to act as though he was a free agent.

Similarly, we should disregard Plum’s manipulation when judging his responsibility. When making such judgments, Jeppsson says that we can take one of two perspectives. The causal perspective (CP) focuses on the facts of the agent’s manipulation, whereas the agential

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\(^4\) Id. 1940.

\(^5\) Ibid.

\(^6\) Id. 1942.
perspective (AP) focuses on what the “action was like to [the agent].” Jeppsson argues that we must choose AP and “set aside” CP, because CP could sabotage our moral judgments. CP is detrimental in three ways: it is incommensurable with AP, it is irrelevant to questions of moral responsibility, and it interferes with our respect for Plum’s personhood.

1. Incommensurability

Adopting both perspectives is too challenging, so we must choose one. In developing this point, Jeppsson emphasizes that “either the causal or the agential perspective will tend to dominate” when assessing Plum’s moral responsibility. If, contra Pereboom, we cannot consider both CP and AP, then we must choose the perspective that will structure our moral intuitions best.

2. Irrelevance

CP is not obviously relevant to our moral judgments. Jeppsson argues that more information, especially irrelevant information, might actually derail our moral intuitions. For example, she cites a 2009 study where extraneous information about the agent’s race “distorted” participants’ moral intuitions. Since CP could have similar distorting effects, its relevance must be justified rather than assumed. Therefore, Jeppsson concludes that Pereboom’s suggestion to adopt both perspectives is not sufficiently justified.

3. Interference

CP could yield morally questionable intuitions. If Plum existed in real life and we focused on his manipulation, we could not have “normal” interactions with Plum. Instead, we would see him

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7 Jeppsson 1945.
8 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
11 Jeppsson 1944.
12 Id. 1945.
13 Id. 1947.
14 Id. 1946.
as a “sophisticated vending machine” and might disrespect Plum’s personhood by trying to control him.\textsuperscript{15} This threat subsides when we adopt AP. If we see Plum as he sees himself – as agential, because he disregarded his manipulation – then he indeed seems morally responsible for what he does.\textsuperscript{16}

Jeppsson concludes that Pereboom’s manipulation argument only seems to work because it draws attention to irrelevant information. If we adjust our focus, these misguided “non-responsibility intuitions” become “extinguished” because we can see that Plum is responsible even though he lacks control over his actions.\textsuperscript{17} Notably, Jeppsson claims that adopting AP is not question-begging because it entails focusing on \textit{different features} of the manipulated agent’s situation, not \textit{fewer features} (emphasis original).\textsuperscript{18} Plum’s manipulation is irrelevant for him because it hampers his decision-making process; Plum’s manipulation is irrelevant for us because it hampers our treating Plum as an autonomous human being. Consequently, viewing Plum’s actions as he does protects our moral judgments from being distorted.

III. Reviving the Causal Perspective

Though Jeppsson claims that we ought to disregard CP, the reasons she gives do not decisively show that we must do so. As we saw in the first section, Jeppsson says that information about an agent’s manipulation distorts, rather than clarifies, our moral intuitions in three ways. I argue that none of these reasons prove that CP deserves to be excluded from our deliberations. Rather, CP provides information that is necessary to judge a manipulated agent. To see why, let’s revisit Jeppsson’s three arguments against CP.

\textit{1. Incommensurability}

\textsuperscript{15} Jeppsson 1946.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{18} Id. 1944.
This reason grounds Jeppsson’s broader argument. If we cannot adopt both the agential and causal perspectives when judging Plum, then perhaps we should choose just one perspective. Yet Jeppsson does not explain the perspectives’ apparent incompatibility. She simply states that this is the case, which is a rather unusual position for a compatibilist. She also does not explain why this difficulty should determine our approach to moral deliberation. Even if holding both AP and CP is difficult, this does not entail that this fact should guide our process of moral reasoning. As it stands, it’s not clear that we should take just one perspective instead of both.

2. Irrelevance

Characterizing CP as irrelevant to our moral deliberations gives us reason to prefer AP instead. If CP is irrelevant, then it may lead us to the wrong conclusion about Plum. To illustrate why CP might have this effect, Jeppsson compares knowledge about an agent’s manipulation to knowledge about an agent’s race, but this seems like an ill-fitting comparison.\(^{19}\) The agent’s race is obviously irrelevant to determining his culpability, but whether the agent has been controlled by someone else is not obviously irrelevant in this same way. We need more justification for why we should think that CP distorts our intuitions.

3. Interference

Jeppsson’s final concern with CP is that it may lead us to disrespect Plum’s personhood. This worry is ultimately misplaced for two reasons. First, it is not obvious that we will inevitably see and treat Plum as a “sophisticated vending machine” if we choose to adopt both perspectives.\(^{20}\) Unless there is evidence that CP and AP are actually incompatible, we needn’t expect that CP will cause us to unilaterally (a) see Plum as merely a hapless automaton \textit{and also} (b) try to control him ourselves, as Jeppsson claims.

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\(^{19}\) Jeppsson 1945.

\(^{20}\) Id. 1946.
Second, perhaps CP should change how we see Plum. If Plum’s freedom has been compromised by a mad scientist, then we should see his agency as violated, not intact, and judge him accordingly. It’s not clear that disregarding CP in order to maintain the false pretense that he is still agential is better for our moral intuitions. If we treat Plum as free when he is under another person’s control, then we hold him responsible for the murder rather than the scientist who orchestrated it, and this is incorrect.

Further, our recognizing that Plum’s agency is impaired does not entail that we will subsequently treat him inhumanely, as Jeppsson suggests. Jeppsson writes that seeing Plum as a hapless automaton “precludes treating him with the respect we owe other people.” But acknowledging an individual’s loss of freedom need not result in treating that individual with disrespect. On the contrary, this recognition can lead us to help restore that individual’s agency. For instance, professionals and volunteers who work with individuals who suffer from substance abuse generally recognize that these individuals’ control over their choices has been compromised by their addiction. Yet we don’t consider addiction treatment programs and the work that these professionals and volunteers do to be dehumanizing; it is necessary and can help restore the control and dignity to the lives of people who struggle with addiction. For these reasons, we need not presume that CP entails disrespect toward individuals whose agency has been compromised.

Consequently, Jeppsson has not decisively shown why we must disregard an agent’s manipulation. Rather, it seems as though disregarding an agent’s manipulation carries distortionary risks of its own. I propose that this distortion results because the information

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21 Jeppsson 1945.
provided by CP is necessary for our moral deliberations. To see why, consider a few possible necessary conditions for Plum to be morally responsible for an action, A:

i. Plum is not determined to do A

ii. Plum is not unable to do otherwise than A

iii. Plum is not manipulated by a mad scientist who controls his every action, including A

Both (i) and (ii), though plausible, are controversial. The compatibilist denies that (i) is a necessary condition. While (ii) may seem like an intuitive candidate, it proves problematic when judging the moral responsibility of perfect divine beings such as the Abrahamic God. That leaves us with (iii).

While (iii) is likely not a sufficient condition for moral responsibility, it seems that at the very least it must be true of Plum if he is to be responsible. Denying that (iii) is necessary would contradict the very notion of responsibility itself. This is because talk about an agent’s being praiseworthy or blameworthy is generally connected to that agent’s being responsible for that action in some way. Of course, compatibilists and incompatibilists disagree about just what determines this responsibility. But at the very least, being fully controlled by someone else precludes being responsible for the actions that result. If a mad scientist orchestrates my every action, then it seems deeply unreasonable to say that I am responsible for those actions.

Notably, Jeppsson tells a very different story. On her account, Plum can be responsible regardless of any mad scientist’s interference because Plum’s agency is grounded in how he sees himself. Since Plum sees the murder as an action which he chose to take, he is responsible for the murder. But it is not quite accurate to characterize the murder as resulting from his decision, because the murder results from the mad scientist’s decisions, not Plum’s. Further, Plum only

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sees himself as a morally responsible agent because he ignores the fact that he cannot do otherwise. This seems like a precarious foundation: Plum’s moral responsibility is based on his self-perceived agency, which is based on his heavily edited understanding of his own situation.

Further, Jeppsson does not explain why we should be satisfied with a story about Plum’s subjective experience when our judgments of moral responsibility are generally concerned with metaphysical questions about what actually is the case. If we follow Jeppsson in defining free will as the agent’s feelings of being free to choose, this ignores what is arguably a necessary condition for moral responsibility, the absence of manipulation by someone, and Jeppsson must do more theoretical work to show that this condition is not necessary. When making moral judgments, we are generally not solely interested in whether the agent identifies with what s/he did, but also whether the agent had control over what s/he did as a matter of fact.

This shows that we cannot simply dismiss an agent’s manipulation as irrelevant. If a mad scientist has complete control over someone’s actions, then it seems highly unreasonable to hold that person responsible for the actions s/he takes. Whatever notion of freedom or moral responsibility we settle on, it must at the very least exclude such manipulation, and we can only confirm whether this is true of an agent’s situation by consulting CP. Yet if we follow Jeppsson, we are supposed to ignore this information. The causal perspective is thus relevant when we determine an agent’s responsibility, and it is up to the compatibilist to show why this is not the case.

IV. Ann’s Story: An Objection to the Causal Perspective

Someone might try to defend Jeppsson’s account by claiming that we still have reason to disregard Plum’s manipulation simply because this is how Plum views himself and his own

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actions. This objection relies on Jeppsson’s claim that Plum has good reason to disregard his own manipulation. If this self-perception is necessary for Plum to make decisions, and consequently this is how he sees himself, then we ought to judge his actions based on his perspective. For example, Jeppsson describes the case of Ann, whose experience of losing a parent as a young child molded her core values:

When Ann acts from those values, she judges herself morally responsible for doing so, and this is surely the intuitive, common-sense judgment … On the suggestion that it is responsibility undermining in itself when someone is caused to do what she does by causes beyond her control, however, we have to draw the counter-intuitive conclusion that Ann is not morally responsible for what she does, when acting on her deepest values.24

Jeppsson’s defender could claim that in Ann’s case, we obviously do not need to consider Ann’s causal history in order to judge Ann’s responsibility. In fact, doing so would lead us to deny Ann the agency that she obviously possesses simply because she is “caused to do what she does” by factors beyond her control. Since Ann’s identification with her decisions is enough to judge that she is responsible, then Plum’s plausibly could be, as well. Thus, Ann’s case provides evidence that CP can distort our moral intuitions and so should not always be considered relevant when judging responsibility.

V. A Tale of Two Agents: Why We Still Need the Causal Perspective

The problem with this objection is that the extent to which Ann’s childhood experiences determined her values is not clear from Jeppsson’s description. The force of this objection rests on the claim that CP generates the counterintuitive result that we not hold Ann responsible for actions with which she deeply identifies on the grounds that her life experiences determined her to have a certain set of values which in turn determine her actions. However, Jeppsson does not

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clarify whether Ann’s values determine her actions, or merely shape them. She notes that Ann’s life values “are shaped at an early age by factors completely outside of her control,” and that “Ann acts from those values.”

This is not the same as being “caused to do what she does.”

Jeppsson’s description of Ann’s case does not specify to what extent Ann’s values determine her actions, and this significantly weakens both her critique of CP and the objection raised in Section IV. According to Jeppsson, adopting CP will lead us to judge Ann as not being morally responsible because her actions are determined by something outside of her control. Consequently, the objection goes, CP leads us astray and so should not be considered in judgments of moral responsibility. Yet Ann’s actions are not obviously determined by something outside of her control. As a result, adopting CP will not inevitably lead us to the counterintuitive conclusion that Ann is not agentic or morally responsible. On the contrary, when we consider Ann’s causal history we will likely reach the intuitive conclusion that she is morally responsible because her actions were not determined by her past experiences. In this way, the objection to CP fails.

V. Conclusion

In conclusion, while Jeppsson’s subjective definition of freedom and responsibility seems at first to successfully vindicate compatibilism from Pereboom’s manipulation argument, it fails to meet a baseline condition for moral responsibility shared by compatibilists and incompatibilists alike. I have shown that if we accept Jeppsson’s account, an agent can be morally responsible for an action even if that action was caused by a mad scientist controlling everything the agent does. The absence of total manipulation seems at the very least required for any notion of freedom/responsibility, and yet on Jeppsson’s account an agent can be free even when fully

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25 Jeppsson 1948. McKenna’s original description uses much the same language.
26 Ibid.
manipulated. Consequently, when rendering moral judgments we have good reason to pay attention to any circumstances of manipulation experienced by the agent, in addition to her or his own self-perceptions, and this is information provided by the causal perspective which Jeppsson considers to be irrelevant.
Bibliography


