



Critical Note  
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## *Critical notice*

### Flanagan and Cartesian free will: a defense of agent causation

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**Abstract:** In a recent book, *The Problem of the Soul*, Owen Flanagan discusses the Cartesian, or agent causation, view of free will. According to this view, when a person acts of his own free will his action is not caused by antecedent events but is caused by the agent himself, and in acting the agent acts as an uncaused cause. Flanagan argues at length that this view is false. In this article, I defend the agent causation view against Flanagan's criticisms and I go on to critically address his own 'neo-compatibilist' alternative to the agent causation view. In doing so, I hope to exhibit some common misconceptions about the nature of the agent causation view and to show that this is a view that deserves more serious consideration.

According to the theory of agent causation, when a person acts of his own free will his action is not caused by antecedent events but is caused by the agent himself, and in acting the agent acts as an uncaused cause. In his recent book, *The Problem of the Soul*, Owen Flanagan refers to this as 'the Cartesian view of free will' and he notes that the most significant twentieth century advocate of the view was Roderick Chisholm.<sup>1</sup> Flanagan believes that the view is false and presents several arguments against it.

<sup>1</sup> See Owen Flanagan 2002. References to the text of this book will be cited in the text as (Flanagan, p. #). For the classic presentation of Roderick Chisholm's view see his "Human Freedom and the Self," from the Lindley Lecture, 1964, at the University of Kansas. This article has been reprinted numerous times. It can be found in Robert Kane (2002, 47–58). References to the text of this article will be cited in the text as (Chisholm, p. #). The relevant page numbers will be from Kane's book.

In this essay I will explain Flanagan's arguments and show that each of them fails to refute the agent causation view. This is a worthwhile project for several reasons. First, by seeing the errors in Flanagan's arguments we will come to a better, clearer understanding of what the agent causation view actually entails. Second, the agent causation view is often looked at with scorn by philosophical naturalists. It is regarded as a silly view that couldn't possibly be correct. The arguments that Flanagan presents are fairly common arguments presented by opponents of the view. Thus, in refuting Flanagan's arguments I refute arguments which many philosophers regard as good ones.<sup>2</sup> I hope to show that if the agent causation view *is* mistaken, the opponents of it will have to do a better job refuting it. Third, Owen Flanagan is a very influential contemporary philosopher. Given his status within the philosophical community and the broader academic community, it is important that his arguments be given careful philosophical scrutiny.<sup>3</sup>

### The theory of agent causation

In further clarifying the nature of the agent causation view, I will draw from Chisholm's 'Human Freedom and the Self.' As noted above, according to the theory of agent causation, in free willed action the agent acts as an uncaused cause of his action. According to this theory, when a person acts freely he could have done otherwise than he in fact did. Advocates of this view believe that if he could have

For Descartes' views see his *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Descartes 1997. Another important historical figure who has defended this view is Thomas Reid. See Reid 1969.

For other recent defenses of the agent causation view see: Clarke (1993; 1996); O'Connor 2000; Rowe (1989; 1991); and Taylor 1966.

<sup>2</sup> For similar naturalist criticisms of the agent causation view see Dennett (1984; 2003); Double 1991; Pereboom 2001; Smilansky 2000; Strawson (1986; 1994; 2000); Waller (1990; 1998).

<sup>3</sup> Besides having published numerous influential books and articles, Owen Flanagan had the prestigious honor of serving as a Romanell Phi Beta Kappa Professor in 1998–1999. He also was part of a select group of Western intellectuals and scientists chosen by the Mind and Life Institute in Boulder, CO to meet with the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama to discuss the topic of 'Destructive Emotions.'

For notable publications see Flanagan (1991; 1992; 1996; and 2000).

done otherwise, then the agent's act must not have been necessitated by antecedent events.

[I]f a man is responsible for a certain event or a state of affairs, then that event or state of affairs was brought about by some act of his, and the act was something that was in his power either to perform or not to perform (Chisholm, 48).

At the same time, however, since free willed acts are not random events, it would seem that they should be caused in some way. This leads advocates of the agent causation view to postulate the agent as a cause of free willed actions.

We must not say that every event involved in the act is caused by some other event; and we must not say that the act is something that is not caused at all. The possibility that remains, therefore, is this: We should say that at least one of the events that are involved in the act is caused, not by any other events, but by something else instead. And this something else can only be the agent — the man (Chisholm, 51).

In the later stages of his essay Chisholm points out some of the implications of his view. I will mention two of them here. First, he notes that his view of free will suggests that human beings have a power which some would attribute only to God.

If we are responsible, and if what I have been trying to say is true, then we have a prerogative which some would attribute only to God: each of us, when we act, is a prime mover unmoved. In doing what we do, we cause certain events to happen, and nothing — or no one — causes us to cause those events to happen (Chisholm, 55–56).

Second, he notes that this view implies that there will always be significant limitations on our abilities to understand human behavior.

This means that, in one very strict sense of the terms, there can be no science of man. If we think of science as a matter of finding out what laws happen to hold, and if the statement of a law tells us what kinds of events are caused by what other kinds of events, then there will be human actions which we cannot explain by subsuming them under any laws. We cannot say, 'It is causally necessary that, given such and such desires and beliefs, and being subject to such and such stimuli, the agent

will do so and so.' For at times the agent, if he chooses, may rise above his desires and do something else instead (Chisholm, 56).

It is perhaps the latter implication of the agent causation theory which Flanagan finds most troubling. For in his book he discusses what he calls 'the scientific image' of the human mind and he argues at length that this image is consistent with the concepts of voluntary behavior and moral responsibility.

The scientific image says that we are animals that evolved according to the principles of natural selection. Although we are extraordinary animals we possess no capacity that permits us to circumvent the laws of cause and effect (Flanagan, ix).

Flanagan notes that many people see this image of human nature as a threat to the ideas that life is meaningful and that we have a capacity for moral responsibility. He believes, however, that there is good reason to embrace the scientific image of human nature and that doing so does not pose a threat to the latter concepts. He sees the agent causation view as the chief rival to the scientific image. Consequently, he makes various arguments against it in his book. In the next few sections I will explain and critically discuss different arguments he makes against the agent causal view. Later I will go on to consider the extent to which his own position, what he calls 'neo-compatibilism', can make sense of moral responsibility.

## The problem of unconstrained choice

One of Flanagan's arguments runs as follows:

Consider what it would mean to have such [Cartesian] free will. When I make a choice I do so *ex nihilo*, by electing, without anything constraining my deliberation, a course of action. But if nothing constrains my choice, then reasons don't constrain my choice either. And if that is so, then ordinary introspection must be deemed wildly wrong. After all it seems to most everyone that when they are deliberating among the options at hand that they are weighing pros and cons and that this information constrains the choice (Flanagan, 124).

Just to clarify we might accurately paraphrase this argument as follows:

- 1) If we act with Cartesian free will, then nothing constrains our choices.
  - 2) If nothing constrains our choices, then reasons do not constrain our choices.
- But 3) it seems to most everyone that reasons do constrain our choices.  
That is, the pros and cons we consider in the deliberative process do seem to constrain our choices.
- So, 4) if we act with Cartesian free will, then our introspective sense that our choices *are* constrained is wildly wrong.

The first premise of this argument is false. According to the Cartesian, or agent causation, view, in free willed action the agent acts as an uncaused cause. But this is compatible with having his decisions constrained. If I am thinking of going from Cedar Rapids, IA to Chicago, IL I cannot choose to flap my arms and fly there, since this is physically impossible for me or any other human beings. But just because my decision is constrained in this way does not mean that in making my decision to drive to Chicago I failed to exhibit Cartesian free will. It may be that I still acted as an uncaused cause in deciding from among the limited possibilities open to me.

Flanagan could have constructed his argument in a slightly different way so as to avoid this problem. The following version of the argument avoids this problem and preserves the spirit of the original.

- 1) If we have Cartesian free will, then the reasons we have for choosing one course of action over others does not constrain our choice.
  - 2) But it seems to most everyone that reasons do constrain our choices.  
That is, the pros and cons we consider in the deliberation process *do* seem to constrain our choices.
- So, 3) if we act with Cartesian free will, then our introspective sense that our choices *are* constrained is wildly wrong.

The first premise of this argument is false as well. I have already shown that a person can exhibit Cartesian free will while having his choices constrained by physical possibilities. For instance, I cannot choose to flap my arms and fly to Chicago. Additionally, I see no reason why the presence of some psychological constraints excludes Cartesian free will. Let's consider an example.

Suppose that a young woman, Rosa, has been accepted to three schools — a very snobbish private liberal arts college, the state university, and the local community college. Suppose that she is deciding which one she will attend in the fall. It may be that certain psycho-

logical realities present her with certain reasons that make the choice of the snobbish private liberal arts college an impossibility for her. Perhaps it is very expensive, none of her friends are going there, and she hates snobs. Perhaps these are all very significant factors in her choice of a college. Now, just because there are certain psychological realities concerning her tastes, as well as certain realities about the cost and the nature of the private school which make her choosing it an impossibility, it does not follow that in choosing from among these three schools she fails to act as an uncaused cause, exhibiting Cartesian free will. In such a case her choice is constrained. She has certain reasons that will not allow her to choose the private school, but that does not mean that she fails to act as an uncaused cause in choosing one of the other two schools.

The preceding considerations suggest that the first premise of the modified version of Flanagan's argument is false. Having Cartesian free will is consistent with the fact that our reasons for choosing one thing over another constrain our decision.

In reply to this Flanagan might argue that if certain psychological realities make my choosing the private school an impossibility, then we have very good reason to think there are also psychological realities making my choice of one of the other two an impossibility. In this way it could be argued that once we admit that psychological realities exclude some choices as possibilities, we have good reason to believe psychological realities exclude all other possibilities as well. Thus, if Rosa ends up choosing the state university, we have good reason to believe there were certain psychological realities excluding the possibility of her choosing the local community college. This picture of things suggests that we have no Cartesian free will, since the reasons for our choice ultimately exclude all possibilities of making any other choice.

The problem with this reply is that the mere fact that a person has reasons which make choosing one of several options an impossibility does not mean his reasons exclude the possibility of choosing options other than the one he ends up choosing. Again, suppose Rosa ends up choosing the state university. There's no good reason to think that just because her reasons made the choice of the private school an impossibility, then her choice of the community college was an impossibility too. It could have been that the reasons for and against attending the state university were on a par with the reasons for and against attending the local community college, such that until the actual moment of deciding each of these remained live options for

her. Until the actual moment of deciding, she literally could have decided in either direction.

I have been arguing that the reasons we have for making our decisions can place constraints on our decisions but that this is consistent with our acting as uncaused causers in making our decisions. In support of this I used the example of a young woman deciding which of three schools to attend and I argued that the reasons she considers might make the choice of one of them an impossibility. I noted that the young woman, Rosa, might still act as an uncaused cause in choosing from among the other two.

Another reply to my argument might involve saying that the example is misleading because it presents the situation as though Rosa is choosing between three schools when in fact the choice is between two, the community college and the state university. When one looks at her as choosing between these two, the case gives no evidence of how reasons can constrain her choice while she still acts with Cartesian free will.

This kind of response is inconsistent with Flanagan's original argument. The problem is that the response assumes that whenever one has reasons for acting which exclude certain options as being possible for the agent then those 'options' are not really options; they are not really courses of action one can choose. This means that any *real* choices must be among things that are real options for the agent which are not excluded by his reasons for action. But, if all real choices must involve options that are not excluded by one's reasons for action, then there is no way in which reasons can constrain our choices. Hence, the response under consideration here is inconsistent with Flanagan's argument.

### The problem of rational accountability

Another argument Flanagan makes against the agent causation view runs as follows:

[I]f when I choose I do so for no reason (choice may create a reason for action but does not itself rest on any reasons) then my choice is either arational or irrational. Since one of the main things — perhaps the main thing — any conception of free will worth wanting is supposed to do is to explain how rational choice is possible, and so to explain how I can be held rationally accountable for my choices, the orthodox conception of



free will is a miserable failure. It is conceptually incoherent, in the sense that it provides no coherent way of conceiving of what it wants to gain for itself (Flanagan, 125).

For the sake of further clarification this argument may be expressed as follows:

- 1) If we have Cartesian free will, then when we engage in free choice we choose for no reason, that is our choice is not based on reasons at all.
  - 2) If we choose for no reason, then our choice is either arational or irrational.
  - 3) But any conception of free will worth wanting is to explain how rational choice is possible and so to explain how we can be held rationally accountable for our choices.
- So, 4) Cartesian free will is not worth wanting.

The first premise of this argument is false. The Cartesian view of free will is the agent causation view. According to this view, in free willed choices the agent acts as an uncaused cause of his choice or action. But this does not mean he has no *reason* for choosing or acting as he does.

Let's go back to the example of Rosa who chooses to go to the state university instead of the local community college. If in doing so she exhibits Cartesian free will, then she must act as an uncaused cause in choosing to attend the state university. But does this mean she must act for no reason, she must have no reason for her decision? Not at all. Her reason for choosing the state university might be its relative affordability and the relatively high quality of instruction it provides. It is not at all clear why she can't choose on the basis of such reasons while acting as an uncaused cause, while acting with Cartesian free will.

Flanagan must be assuming that if we act for certain reasons those reasons must *cause* us to act or choose as we do. In which case if we act for certain reasons then we do not act as uncaused causes, we do not exhibit Cartesian free will.

Just as Flanagan appeals to introspective data in making his first argument, the Problem of Unconstrained Choice Argument, I will appeal to introspective data here.<sup>4</sup> What I will note is that we very

<sup>4</sup> Recall that in making the Problem of Unconstrained Choice argument Flanagan states: '[I]f nothing constrains my choice, then reasons don't constrain my choice either. And if that is so, then *ordinary introspection must be deemed wildly wrong*' (Flanagan, 124, my italics).

often make decisions and/or act with reasons without feeling *caused* to act by these reasons. We often make decisions for certain reasons and yet when we look back on our decision we see that we really could have decided in some other direction. In my example Rosa chooses the state university because of its relative affordability and its relatively high quality instruction. But maybe there were some reasons pointing in favor of the local community college as well. After making her decision she may still be left with the sense that she could have decided either way. Assuming she could have decided either way, this suggests that in making her decision she acted as an uncaused cause. But it does *not* mean she acted for *no* reason. Rather, as noted, she chose the state school because of its affordability and high quality instruction.

### The problem of completely self-chosen virtues and principles

Another of Flanagan's arguments states:

Think of the person of good character, who ordinarily acts well without conscious deliberation, as one ideal type, and the person who always consciously routes a moral decision through a principle or set of principles as an ideal type at the other end of the spectrum of moral agency.

[T]he question we need to ask is where might the relevant moral equipment, the virtues or principles that guide the action of these ideal types, come from?

The Cartesian can — indeed, should — say they are fully self-initiated, completely self-chosen. This is certainly false. By most everyone's lights, an individual needs to learn the right habits of perception, feeling, and action, or to learn the right principles (Flanagan, 148).

The argument here is:

- 1) If the Cartesian view of free will is true, then the virtues or principles which guide the action of the good person must be completely self-chosen.
  - 2) But these virtues or principles are not completely self-chosen, because 'an individual needs to learn the right habits of perception, feeling, and action, or to learn the right principles.'
- So, 3) the Cartesian view of free will is false.

Again the first premise of the argument is false. The Cartesian view is that when freely deciding and acting the agent acts as an uncaused cause. This does not mean that all of the beliefs, principles, and desires which he considers in making a decision must be self-chosen. They might be almost entirely the product of genetic and environmental factors. My genetic predispositions and the influence of my family and culture no doubt cause me to have various beliefs and desires and principles. But, again, this is perfectly consistent with the agent causation view.

Suppose someone, say Billy, feels that he needs to make an 'A' in his high school calculus course to get into a good college. Suppose he desires to go to a good college. Suppose that he believes he can only make an 'A' in his calculus course if he cheats on his final exam. Suppose he believes cheating is wrong. He is faced with a decision: cheat on the exam or don't cheat on the exam. According to the agent causation view, he will freely decide to cheat or not if in deciding he acts as an uncaused cause. No one, including the agent causation theorists, can reasonably deny the causal role of Billy's genes and upbringing in leading him to have the desires, beliefs, and principles he has. This, however, is perfectly consistent with the agent causation view, because for the agent causation theorist these beliefs, desires, and principles simply form the data to be considered in coming to a decision.

In response Flanagan might say that once these beliefs and desires and principles get into Billy's mind they ultimately control the nature of the decision he makes. Thus, if the beliefs, desires, and principles are not self-chosen but caused by genetic and environmental factors (as I admit they are) then there is no room left in which Billy can act as an uncaused cause. Additionally, Flanagan might add that if they don't control Billy's decision then his decision is ultimately random, which itself is a problem since random acts are not the same as free willed acts.

It is my view that even if Billy's beliefs, desires, and principles are not self-chosen there is still room for him to act as an uncaused cause in deciding to cheat or not. Additionally, this does not mean that his choice is ultimately a random event. For in choosing he will let some of those beliefs and/or desires and/or principles serve as his reasons for doing what he does. Acting with reasons is not to act randomly.

Further, to act with certain reasons is not to be caused by them.<sup>5</sup> For, as noted earlier, it is too common for us to act with certain reasons while having a strong intuitive sense that we could have equally well acted in some other way, letting some other reasons guide us.

### The moral harm argument

The last of Flanagan's critiques of agent causation runs as follows:

The view that assumes nonnatural causation of the sort a Cartesian free will requires not only assumes something we have good reason to believe is false and is lacking in credible resources to explain the advances of the human sciences, but is actually a morally harmful picture. It engenders a certain passivity in the face of social problems that lead certain individuals to be malformed. There are bad people in this world. But if we think that bad people are bad simply, or even mainly, because they choose to use their free will badly, we are making a big and costly mistake (Flanagan, 152–153).

According to Flanagan, many of the bad people in this world are led to be bad due to ignorance, poverty, discrimination, and other factors. But if we adopt the agent causation view, we will be led to believe that bad people are this way through their own free willed decisions. Thus, we will be less inclined to support the social reforms needed to eliminate the ignorance, poverty, etc. which give rise to these bad characters and their harmful misdeeds.

This is another bad argument, because it is not true that agent causation leads to passivity in the face of social ills, like poverty, ignorance, and discrimination. While it is true that the agent causation theorist believes that those who commit murder, rape, and theft are ultimately responsible for their own wrongdoing, this does not mean that he cannot also acknowledge that certain people being raised in certain sorts of situations, like poverty, are much more inclined to

<sup>5</sup> The point I make here has kinship with points made by Carl Ginet. He distinguishes between reasons explanations of action and causal explanations of action, and he denies that reasons explanations are a species of causal explanations. Ginet is actually a critic of the agent causation theory, but he is also neither a compatibilist nor a neo-compatibilist. He believes that free willed actions are causally undetermined but not random, because they are susceptible of reasons explanations. See Ginet, (1990; 1997).

commit criminal acts. Therefore, the agent causation theorist may very well support social programs to prevent poverty, ignorance, etc., in the recognition that these incline people towards criminal conduct and out of a desire to reduce the occurrence of such mischief.

Here Flanagan might object that the agent causation theorist cannot reasonably accept that poverty, ignorance, etc. *incline* persons towards criminal conduct because this is to accept that there are causes for such criminal conduct. Such a response is problematic however. The agent causation theorist can say that, for instance, growing up in poverty may give many persons a stronger desire to steal than persons who do not grow up in poverty, but just because A has a stronger desire to commit some act X than does B does not mean that when A acts on that desire the desire *caused* the act. For A may well know that doing X is wrong and he may well have the capacity to resist the desire to do X, despite his great desire to do X.<sup>6</sup>

The agent causation theorist may allow that poverty, racism, sexism, ignorance, etc. give rise to strong desires to engage in misconduct. He may also acknowledge that many people will cave in to such desires. Acknowledging the latter point may well induce him to support social programs designed at eliminating poverty, ignorance, etc. *But*, acknowledging that many people raised in poverty, ignorance, etc. will cave in to their strong desires to commit mischief *does not* mean one does nor must accept that such people fail to exhibit Cartesian free will in acting on such desires.

For all of the preceding reasons, the Moral Harm Argument is unsound.

### Flanagan's neo-compatibilism considered

I have now considered Flanagan's four main arguments against the agent causation view and I have argued that each of them fails. De-

<sup>6</sup> Roderick Chisholm talks about how desires may incline a person to act in a certain way without necessitating him to act that way. In his chapter on agency, Ch. 2, of *Person and Object*, he analyzes the concept of an inclining but nonnecessitating desire. This point could be used in support of what I am talking about here. The agent causal theorist might say that living in poverty and/or ignorance might lead us to have certain bad desires. But having those desires might merely incline us towards acting badly without necessitating us. For more on this point see Chisholm (1976, esp. Ch. 2, p. 69).

spite this, opponents of the agent causation view will probably still be left dissatisfied. This is likely because there will still seem to be something odd and/or mysterious about the agent causation view. It is odd to think of human beings as uncaused causers of their choices and actions when acting of their own free will. This will most likely seem odd because we are inclined to think that every event is caused by some antecedent event which determines the occurrence of the later event. Absent such determination by antecedent events we are inclined to think an event is random.

I have argued that the mere fact that we act as uncaused causes in free willed action should not lead us to think we act randomly in such cases, because we may act as uncaused causes while acting for certain reasons. Again consider Rosa who chooses to attend the state university because of its affordability and higher quality instruction, while she feels that she could equally well have chosen differently. Here she acts with reasons but the reasons don't necessitate her choice, they don't determine her decision.

Listening to this, opponents of the agent causation view are still likely to wonder why Rosa let those reasons guide her decision as opposed to some other reasons. They will think that surely there is some causal basis for her being moved by those reasons as opposed to others. And if there is a cause for her being moved by those considerations, then she does not act as an uncaused cause in making her decision.

I am willing to concede that it may be that all of our decisions are caused by antecedent events and that agents do not act as uncaused causes. While none of the arguments considered above shows that the agent causation view is false, it may nonetheless *be* false. However, if all our decisions are causally determined by antecedent events and we do not act as uncaused causes, then despite Flanagan's attempts to prove otherwise there is no room left for moral responsibility. Flanagan defends a position that he calls 'neo-compatibilism,' meaning he believes moral responsibility is compatible with the fact that human decisions are causally determined by antecedent events. In what follows I will show that his defense of this is inadequate and that we have good reason to believe that if all human decisions are causally determined, then there is no moral responsibility.

Before going further it is important to get clear about the nature of Flanagan's neo-compatibilism and to consider how it differs from traditional compatibilism. Traditional compatibilism is the view that

free will and causal determinism are compatible. Flanagan finds this position to be confused and confusing. When people talk about free will they typically have in mind something like agent causation. That is, typically when people say they have free will they mean they act as uncaused causers in making decisions and acting. But Flanagan finds this conception of free will to be incoherent, nor does he believe it is compatible with causal determinism. Thus, he proposes a different view which he calls 'neo-compatibilism' which is slightly different from traditional compatibilism. Neo-compatibilism does away with talk of free will altogether and instead maintains that moral responsibility and voluntary behavior are compatible with causal determinism.

Now it is far from obvious that moral responsibility is compatible with causal determinism. Being aware of this, Flanagan makes a case for their compatibility. He argues that even if our choices are causally determined by antecedent events there is still a sense in which we could have chosen differently, in which we could have done otherwise, which leaves room for moral responsibility. He writes:

What the neo-compatibilist means when she says that an individual could have done other than she in fact did is that *if* that person had seen the situation more clearly, had been sensitive to reasons she was not in fact sensitive to, she could have done otherwise. She does not mean that the person could have acted other than she did. If she acted from deterministic rational causes, whatever they were, then these necessitated her act. If some indeterministic neural firings caused her to think (mistakenly or not) that 'This is a really good idea, I'll do it,' her act was also necessary (Flanagan, 150).

Referring back to my example of Rosa who chose to attend the state university, Flanagan's view is that even if she so chose she could have done otherwise if, say, she had been more sensitive to other kinds of reasons. But, according to Flanagan her decision was still necessitated.

So far it is awfully hard to see how any of this can help make sense of moral responsibility. Of course, *if* Rosa had not valued high quality instruction so highly and/or had she valued more highly going to the community college with friends, then she would have chosen differently. But the fact remains that she didn't have those values, so ac-

according to the deterministic picture of things there really is no morally interesting sense in which she could have done otherwise.<sup>7</sup>

Flanagan would object to this assessment and the next paragraph of his book suggests a reply.

The fact remains that according to the account on offer, agents can in fact normally do any number of things. When I consider a number of options — going to the movies, having a friend over for a visit, staying home and reading a book — I normally do so only when all the options are open to me, when all are possible and, to some extent, attractive. When I deliberate and choose what to do all three options are open to me. If I were to choose any one of them, nothing would prevent me from carrying through on that choice. Insofar as the worry is about what I can do, the neo-compatibilist can make clear sense of the concept of live options. Furthermore, she can make sense of ‘could have done otherwise’ in the following sense. Even after I choose, say, to go to the movies, it is still true that I could have stayed home and read had I chosen to do so (Flanagan, 150).

Here he acknowledges that we engage in deliberation and choice, and he says this happens only because options are open to us. Ultimately, on Flanagan’s view it is because prior to deciding and acting we have various options open to us that we can reasonably be held responsible for what we do.

I agree with Flanagan that deliberation and choice occur and I agree that this happens when options are open to us. However, his assertion that we sometimes have options open to us is inconsistent with his belief in universal causation. If all events, including human actions and decisions are caused by earlier events, then options are not open to us. The vision of deliberation and choice which *is* consistent with Flanagan’s determinism is that these occur when competing values and desires pull us in different directions. In most cases where this occurs some higher order principles and/or the strongest desires dictate a decision and a ‘choice’ is made. I say ‘in most cases’ because there are those occasions where one is so vexed that no decision is ever made. I say ‘choice’ in quotes here because on this vision of things there really is no choice made. Rather, programming placed in our brains through genetic and environmental factors beyond our control cranks out a

<sup>7</sup> This kind of criticism of such compatibilist accounts of ‘could have done otherwise’ has also been made by Roderick Chisholm. See Chisholm (2002, 49–51).



decision for us. The feeling that we might decide in, say, one of three competing ways, the feeling that there really are live options, is brought on by values and/or principles tugging in different directions. But if causation is ubiquitous, as Flanagan maintains, then there really are no options.<sup>8</sup> Whatever ‘choice’ is made will just be the playing out of mental programming in our brains that gets there through genetic and environmental factors beyond our control.<sup>9</sup>

What I am suggesting here is that Flanagan’s claim that we have live options before us in those contexts calling for decision and choice is inconsistent with his belief in the ubiquity of causation. In support of this point I have tried to present an image of deliberation and ‘choice’ which would be more in line with his views of causation and its all pervasive nature.

In reply to my criticism it might be noted that my argument does not countenance the fact that Flanagan believes human beings have self-control. I argue that if causation is ubiquitous then our decisions are ultimately going to be the product of genetic and environmental factors beyond our control. For this reason I am led to conclude that the ubiquity of causation and moral responsibility are not really compatible. However, it might be objected that since Flanagan believes we possess self-control, then my characterization of the nature of human decision-making needs to attend to this fact and the role it plays in moral responsibility. For it could be argued that even if causation is ubiquitous, meaning even human decisions are causally

<sup>8</sup> Flanagan asserts that causation is ubiquitous in various places in his book. One implication of this for Flanagan is that all human behavior and decisions are caused by neurological events in the brain. He argues that even if some neurological events in the brain are ultimately the result of random, quantum level indeterminacies, the behavior and/or decisions following from these would still be determined. He maintains that the belief in the ubiquity of causation is part of the scientific image of human nature and in arguing that the agent causation view is incompatible with the scientific image he writes, ‘As long as *causation is ubiquitous*, whether deterministic or indeterministic, my will is never in a state that is not affected by prior causes (Flanagan, 124, my italics).’ A few pages later when distinguishing his neo-compatibilist position from other positions, such as hard determinism and libertarianism, he says, ‘*Causation is ubiquitous*. Ours is a causal universe. But no one yet knows the exact range of deterministic and indeterministic causation – assuming the universe contains some of each’ (Flanagan, 126, my italics).

<sup>9</sup> The argument I make against Flanagan in this paragraph echoes the insights of Peter van Inwagen. See Van Inwagen 1983.

determined, as long as we can exhibit self-control in decision-making, then we are still morally responsible.

Flanagan *does* believe that even though all of our decisions are causally necessitated we still have self-control. But when one actually examines his conception of self-control, one finds that it is not a conception that helps in preserving moral responsibility. His understandings of control and self-control are taken from the work of Daniel Dennett.<sup>10</sup> Flanagan writes:

[F]ar from ruling out causation, the concepts of control and self-control are causal notions. This is vivid in Daniel Dennett's analyses of the meanings of 'control' and 'self-control.' According to Dennett, we can define control as follows:

CONTROL: A *controls* B if and only if the relation between A and B is such that A can *drive* B into whichever of B's normal range of states A *wants* B to be in.

This definition captures most of what we mean when we say 'A controls B' when A and B are separate entities — when, for example, A is a person and B is A's car.

What about when B is a part of A? Suppose I want to attach a tabletop to table legs with screws. A is me with an active state of my will that contains both my desire and my strategy. B is my motor system. I want to screw in the screws, and this requires that my desire, my decision to do so, activate my motor system, B, in a certain way. This involves self-control, which Dennett defines as follows:

SELF-CONTROL: For some integrated system S, some *subsystem* Sa *controls subsystems* S1...Sn if the relation between Sa and S1...Sn is such that Sa can *drive* S1...Sn into the states Sa *wants* them to be in (Flanagan, p. 115–116).

According to this picture of self-control a person exhibits self-control when he is able to get his body to do what he wants it to do. If I am able to put the table together in accordance with my desires and plans, I exhibit self-control in doing so.

So far this notion does not seem to help in making room for moral responsibility. Since my wants and plans which ultimately

<sup>10</sup> See Dennett 1983.

control my decisions and body movements are causally necessitated by genetic and environmental factors beyond my control, then there is no sense in which one could have done otherwise that makes sense of moral responsibility.

Now passages I cited earlier suggest that Flanagan believes the capacity to have done otherwise and/or having had 'live options' are crucial to preserving moral responsibility. But I have argued that his belief in the ubiquity of causation is incompatible with these and that his conception of self-control does nothing to suggest we could do otherwise or that when making decisions we have live options.

At this point it might be interjected, 'I could not have done otherwise, so what?' Daniel Dennett has a famous article by this title.<sup>11</sup> In it he argues that the capacity for doing otherwise is inessential to moral responsibility. While, as just noted, Flanagan seems to think having such a capacity is important, he *could* make Dennett's move.

Dennett and other philosophers who think the capacity for doing otherwise is irrelevant to the question of moral responsibility, i.e. Frankfurt and Wolf, defend their view by critically examining our actual practices of praising and blaming people for what they have done.<sup>12</sup> They argue that in deciding whether to praise or blame someone for what she has done, we typically don't care whether she could have done otherwise. Rather, what we care about is whether in acting the person's real attitudes are reflected. Does the person's deep self get reflected in the act? Does the person act in accordance with his second-order desires? Etc. If so, the presumption is that the act is a product of who she is and then praise or blame are appropriate. According to Dennett, Frankfurt, Wolf, and friends, since in the actual practice of praise and blame we care about the latter sorts of things and not whether one could have done otherwise, it follows that the capacity for doing otherwise is really irrelevant to whether a person is morally responsible.

Again, as noted, Flanagan seems to think alternative possibilities and/or the capacity to do otherwise *is* important to moral responsibility. But if he does believe this, he could jettison this approach and grab on to a view more like that of Dennett and friends. Due to considerations of space, I cannot do full justice to the latter sort of view. How-

<sup>11</sup> See Dennett 1984.

<sup>12</sup> See Frankfurt 1971; and Wolf 1988.

ever, I will note that the argument strategy of Dennett and friends is problematic. Just because in assigning praise or blame we care about whether actions really reflect the attitudes of agents, whether they reflect the second-order desires or 'deep self' of the agent, does *not* mean we don't care about whether the agent could have done otherwise. In point of fact we care about whether the action reflects the real attitudes, or deep self, of the agent because: (1) if it *doesn't* then presumably some factor beyond the agent's control has led him to act as he did, meaning he's not responsible; and (2) if it *does* reflect his deep self then presumably the agent himself is the cause of the act, meaning he is responsible and deserving of either our praise or blame. But the reason why we assume the agent is morally responsible when his acts reflect his deep self is because we assume that people are in control of their deep selves, that they could do and be different from what they do and are. If we were to find out that we had no such control over our deep selves, if we found out that all of our beliefs and desires and decisions were ultimately under the control of genetic and environmental factors beyond our control, then we would no longer feel that such praise and blame are appropriate.

The problem with the views of people like Dennett, Frankfurt, and Wolf is that they think all of our beliefs, desires, and decisions are ultimately under the control of genetic and environmental factors beyond our control. This is what determinism amounts to and they embrace this belief. But then they also maintain that this is no threat to the existence of moral responsibility, because all that we really care about in assigning praise or blame is whether the agent's action reflects his deep self, second-order desires, etc. However, as I have argued, this is problematic because we only care about the latter because we assume that our deep selves and/or second-order desires are not causally determined by genetic and environmental factors beyond our control.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> My argument here rests on the assumption that people have incompatibilist intuitions, i.e. people believe that they cannot reasonably be held responsible for what they do unless they have the capacity to do otherwise. This assumption has been challenged in the recent literature through some interesting empirical research. See Nahmias, Morris, Nadelhoffer, and Turner 2005. They have performed experiments which they take to suggest that people have compatibilist intuitions. In contrast Shaun Nichols has done empirical research suggesting that young children have incompatibilist intuitions. See Nichols 2004. Also, in a jointly authored piece he and Joshua Knobe provide empirical evidence suggesting the results of the

For these reasons, Flanagan's position would still be problematic even if he resorted to a position like Dennett's, even if he said the capacity for doing otherwise is irrelevant to moral responsibility.

## Conclusion

In this essay I hope to have accomplished several tasks. First, I hope to have given a clear and accurate explanation of the agent causation view. Second, in answering Flanagan's criticisms of it I hope to have exhibited some common misconceptions about its implications. Third, by answering Flanagan's criticisms and by exhibiting certain weaknesses of compatibilist and/or neo-compatibilist views, I hope to have shown that the agent causation view is deserving of more serious and/or careful consideration than it often gets in the literature.

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research of Nahmias, et al. may be skewed by the nature of the questions posed to subjects. They show that most adults have incompatibilists intuitions, but that emotional reactions to certain scenarios can prompt them to express compatibilist intuitions. See Nichols and Knobe (forthcoming).

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