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## Pereboom and premises: Asking the right questions in the experimental philosophy of free will

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### ABSTRACT

Sommers (2010) argues that experimental philosophers of free will have largely been asking the wrong question – the question whether philosophically naïve individuals think that free will and moral responsibility are compatible with determinism. The present studies begin to alleviate this concern by testing the intuitive plausibility of Pereboom's (2001) four case argument. The general pattern of responses from two experiments does not support Pereboom's predictions. Moreover, those who were high in the personality trait emotional stability tended to judge that manipulated agents were more free and morally responsible compared to individuals low in emotional stability.

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### 1. Introduction

Experimental philosophy is a general approach to philosophical problems that uses some of the empirical methods of the behavioral sciences to help shed light on some philosophical questions.<sup>1</sup> The philosophical study of free will is one area where experimental philosophers have done a substantial amount of work. Largely, the experimental exploration of free will has centered on what Sommers (2010) calls “the compatibility question.” The compatibility question concerns whether philosophically naïve people – “the folk” – think that free will and moral responsibility are compatible with determinism. Sommers (2010) has argued that directly assessing folk intuitions about the compatibility question misses an important part of the philosophical debate about free will and moral responsibility. Namely, directly assessing this relation does not address *premises* that philosophers use in arguments that lead to an answer to the compatibility question.

This paper begins to address Sommers's concerns. To do so, central claims about Pereboom's (2001, 1995) “four case argument” for incompatibilism are investigated. Contrary to Pereboom's predictions about the four case argument, the general pattern of intuitions does not support an incompatibilist answer to the compatibility question. Overall, people have intuitions that some manipulated agents are free and morally responsible whereas Pereboom predicts that people should not have those intuitions. Supporting Sommers's argument, these data illustrate new and needed ways for experimental philosophy to play a role in philosophical debates by testing premises that philosophers use in their arguments.

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<sup>1</sup> Experimental philosophy is now widely regarded as a legitimate approach to some philosophical questions (Sommers, 2010). See Feltz (2009), Knobe and Nicholas (2008), Nadelhoffer and Nahmias (2007) for overviews.

## 2. The compatibility question and experimental philosophy

One of the central concerns in the contemporary free will debate is whether freedom and moral responsibility are compatible with determinism.<sup>2</sup> Compatibilists think that the answer is ‘yes’. Incompatibilists think the answer is ‘no’. Deeply held and pervasive intuitions are widely regarded as being important to answering the compatibility question by traditional and experimental philosophers of free will (Ekstrom, 2002; Kane, 1996; Nahmias, Morris, Nadelhoffer, & Turner, 2004; Nahmias, Morris, Nadelhoffer, & Turner, 2005; Nahmias, Morris, Nadelhoffer, & Turner, 2006; Nichols & Knobe, 2007; Pereboom, 2001; Pink, 2004; Sommers, 2009, 2010). For example, issues surrounding free will and moral responsibility are often claimed to be widespread and part of the fabric of human existence. These issues are thought to be so important to everyday life that some suggest that if we find out we are not free or morally responsible, we should leave people to their mistaken beliefs in free will and moral responsibility (Smilansky, 2002). Because freedom and moral responsibility are thought to form an important part of what it means to be human, folk intuitions about freedom and moral responsibility are taken to be important to philosophical theorizing about freedom and moral responsibility. An analysis or theory of free will and moral responsibility that only takes into account the possibly idiosyncratic intuitions of a small group of people (perhaps just one person) is less compelling than a view that takes into account widespread and deeply held intuitions (Feltz, Perez, & Harris, 2012b). As such, compatibilists and incompatibilists frequently reference widespread intuitions to support their views.

But what intuitions people have and how widespread they are is an empirical question—a question that some experimental philosophers have attempted to answer. Some of the first studies suggested the folk have predominately compatibilist intuitions (Nahmias et al., 2004, 2005, 2006). Subsequent studies suggested that folk intuitions about free will and moral responsibility vary with factors including affect (Feltz, Cokely, & Nadelhoffer, 2009; Nichols & Knobe, 2007), psychological distance (Roskies & Nichols, 2008; Weigel, *in press*), personality (Feltz & Cokely, 2009; Feltz, Perez, et al., 2012), and expertise (Schulz, Cokely, & Feltz, 2011). The typical methodology of all of these researchers has involved providing a scenario with some description of determinism.<sup>3</sup> Importantly, all of these researchers directly ask whether a person in such a scenario is free or morally responsible for acting.<sup>4</sup> These intuitions are then used to help answer the compatibility question.

One way folk intuitions have been used to help answer the compatibility question is by situating argumentative burdens. Some experimental philosophers of free will have argued that those views that are inconsistent with folk intuitions shoulder an additional argumentative burden that those views that are consistent with folk intuitions do not. Some researchers suggest that incompatibilists shoulder the argumentative burden because direct tests of the compatibility question indicated most people have compatibilist intuitions (Nahmias et al., 2005, 2006). However, Sommers (2010) argues

[I]ncompatibilists can accept that they have this ‘argumentative burden’ but claim that they have discharged it with, well, arguments. After all, van Inwagen’s ‘consequence argument’, Strawson’s ‘basic argument’, and Pereboom’s ‘four case argument’, to name just a few, are designed to precisely lead the reader to the conclusion that determinism precludes free will and moral responsibility... It would seem that in order to truly test the plausibility of the incompatibilist position, we need to examine the intuitions supporting the premises and principles of their argument... (2010, p. 205–6).

As Sommers notes, it would be obviously question begging if incompatibilists *started* with the intuition that the answer to the compatibility question is ‘no’. Rather, philosophers of free will typically *argue* for an answer to the compatibility question. Attempting to help answer the compatibility question by directly assessing folk intuitions about agents’ freedom and moral responsibility in deterministic universes largely misses the mark.

## 3. Pereboom’s four case argument

Sommers recommends that experimental philosophers should test premises or principles that philosophers of free will use to answer the compatibility question. One set of claims that Sommers suggests that experimental philosophers should investigate surrounds Pereboom’s (2001) four case argument for incompatibilism. Pereboom (2001) aims to show that prominent compatibilist conditions for freedom and moral responsibility are not sufficient for moral responsibility if determinism is true. According to some compatibilists, one can be free and morally responsible even if determinism is true when one’s psychology is related in the right way to acting. Some prominent compatibilist conditions for free will and moral responsibility include not being constrained to act (Hume, 1978), having desires play the right causal role in the production of an action (Ayer, 1954), having the action issue from the character of the individual (Hume, 1978), having first-order desires

<sup>2</sup> Determinism is the thesis that “at any instant exactly one future is compatible with the state of the universe at that instant and the laws of nature” (Mele, 2006, p. 3).

<sup>3</sup> Since determinism is a technical, philosophical term, experimental philosophers have often tried to describe it in ways that the folk would understand. For example, one description Nahmias et al. (2005) used involved a supercomputer with a complete description of the universe and all the laws of nature that could predict with certainty what individuals would do. While individual researchers use different ways to describe determinism, all of them use some description of determinism.

<sup>4</sup> Sommers rightly notes that there has been important work related to free will and moral responsibility that has not centered on the compatibility question. For example, Nadelhoffer and Feltz (2007), Miller and Feltz (2010), Woolfolk, Doris, and Darley (2006).

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