



Compatibilism can be natural



John Turri

Philosophy Department and Cognitive Science Program, University of Waterloo, 200 University Avenue West, Waterloo, Ontario N2L3G1, Canada

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ABSTRACT

Compatibilism is the view that moral responsibility is compatible with determinism. Natural compatibilism is the view that in ordinary social cognition, people are compatibilists. Researchers have recently debated whether natural compatibilism is true. This paper presents six experiments ($N = 909$) that advance this debate. The results provide the best evidence to date for natural compatibilism, avoiding the main methodological problems faced by previous work supporting the view. In response to simple scenarios about familiar activities, people judged that agents had *moral responsibilities to perform actions* that they were unable to perform (Experiment 1), were *morally responsible for unavoidable outcomes* (Experiment 2), were *to blame for unavoidable outcomes* (Experiments 3–4), *deserved blame for unavoidable outcomes* (Experiment 5), and *should suffer consequences for unavoidable outcomes* (Experiment 6). These findings advance our understanding of moral psychology and philosophical debates that depend partly on patterns in commonsense morality.

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1. Introduction

Attitudes toward freedom and moral responsibility have important social consequences (Monroe, Dillon, & Malle, 2014). For instance, they can influence people's job performance, academic performance, and frequency of prosocial behavior (Baumeister, Masicampo, & DeWall, 2009; Feldman, Chandrashekar, & Wong, 2016; Stillman et al., 2010). In light of their social importance, it is no surprise that these issues have been studied extensively in the humanities and social sciences. For example, philosophers and psychologists have long debated the merits of compatibilism and its denial, incompatibilism. Compatibilism is the view that acting freely and moral responsibility are compatible with determinism.

The theoretical debates surrounding these issues can become extremely complicated, often turning on subtle matters concerning topics ranging from cognitive neuroscience to quantified modal logic (for reviews, see McKenna, 2009; O'Connor, 2010; Vihvelin, 2011). Nevertheless, one aspect of the debate has remained firmly rooted in commonsense, and it is this aspect of the debate that I focus on here. It is often claimed that compatibilism or incompatibilism is a natural part of ordinary social cognition (e.g. Hume, 1748/1993; Kane, 1999, p. 217; Pereboom, 2001; Reid, 1785, p. xvi; Rose & Nichols, 2013; Roskies & Nichols, 2008). That is, it is often claimed that our commonsense moral psychology is implicitly committed to one view or the other.

The question about commonsense moral psychology is important for at least two reasons. On the one hand, understanding moral psychology is an important part of understanding human psychology overall. Indeed, it might be argued that moral psychology is one of the more fascinating aspects of human mentality and culture, because it is so unlike anything else observed in the animal world, even if it certainly has origins in more primitive instincts and mechanisms shared with other

E-mail address: john.turri@gmail.com

primates and mammals more generally (Haidt, 2007; de Waal, 2006). On the other hand, the theoretical debate has often assumed that the burden of proof rests with the side that contradicts commonsense (for a review, see Nahmias, Morris, Nadelhoffer, & Turner, 2006). For example, if ordinary moral psychology assumes that compatibilism is true, then incompatibilists will need stronger arguments to persuade us that their position is correct.

Several recent studies have begun examining the status of compatibilism and incompatibilism in commonsense moral psychology (e.g. Cova & Kitano, 2014; Nahmias, Morris, Nadelhoffer, & Turner, 2005; Nichols & Knobe, 2007; Sarkissian et al., 2010; Woolfolk, Doris, & Darley, 2006; for reviews, see Sommers, 2010 and Nichols, 2011; see also Monroe & Malle, 2010 and Nahmias & Thompson, 2014). The results have been mixed, with some suggesting that people are natural compatibilists and some suggesting that they are natural incompatibilists (for a review, see Deery, Davis, & Carey, 2014; see also May, 2014; Schulz, Cokely, & Feltz, 2011).

However, prior work supporting natural compatibilism suffers from several methodological concerns. First, it uses long, complicated, and incredible stimuli. Second, as has been previously noted (Nichols & Knobe, 2007), some stimuli are provocative, raising the worry that results are due to emotional interference and performance error (e.g. one case involves egregious marital infidelity, terrorists hijacking a plane at gunpoint, the execution of an elderly person, and an agent who “blow[s] his friend’s brains out” with a pistol; see Woolfolk et al., 2006). Third, control conditions were only loosely matched (e.g. one manipulation consisted of 15 words being exchanged for 46 words; see Nahmias, Shepard, & Reuter, 2014, Appendix, scenario for Experiment 1, penultimate paragraph). Fourth, the studies did not assess whether participants understood variables in the relevant way. This is important because recent work suggests that our naive understanding of psychological and physical processes is surprisingly indeterministic. In one recent study, when asked to assess the probability of an “inevitable” and “causally determined” outcome, people rated it between 70% and 85% likely (Turri, *in press*; see also Nichols, 2004; Rose & Nichols, 2013).

If people’s interpretation of scenarios is often surprisingly indeterministic, then it complicates attempts to assess whether people are natural compatibilists or incompatibilists. Indeed, it suggests another possibility: pre-theoretically, the question of compatibilism might be irrelevant and thus never arise. If indeterminism is assumed to be true, then it would not matter whether responsibility, or anything else, is compatible with determinism. Simply put, ordinary social cognition might never confront the question. To circumvent this worry, it is important gather people’s judgments about moral responsibility in contexts where they agree that the agent cannot perform the relevant action.

Motivated by that possibility, the goal of the present research is to gain better evidence about natural compatibilism regarding moral responsibility. In order to avoid the methodological concerns raised above, I conducted six experiments using simple, clear, short, and closely matched stimuli about familiar actions. I also included multiple measures to assess how people understood key variables. The results provide the best evidence to date for natural compatibilism. More specifically, the results provide evidence for natural compatibilism about five categories connected to moral responsibility, including having a moral responsibility to perform an action (Experiment 1), being responsible for an outcome (Experiment 2), being to blame for an outcome (Experiments 3 and 4), deserving blame for an outcome (Experiment 5), and deserving to suffer (Experiment 6). I do not assume that these five exhaust the list of potentially relevant categories. I chose them because they are common moral judgments that, I think, are intrinsically interesting, and because they are implicated in the theoretical literature on “determinism and moral responsibility” (e.g. see Vihvelin, 2011; Russell, 2014). Studying them all in the same context provides an opportunity to discern whether, say, natural compatibilism is true for some but not all of them, or whether it better captures the central tendencies for some.

Each experiment tests the principal predictions of natural incompatibilism and natural compatibilism for a specific moral status. In each case, natural incompatibilism predicts that people will deny that agents have the relevant status, whereas natural compatibilism predicts that people will attribute such a status. For example, natural incompatibilism about *having a moral responsibility* predicts that when it is impossible for an agent to perform an action, people will deny that the agent has a responsibility to perform it; by contrast, natural compatibilism predicts that people will agree that the agent has a responsibility. Of course, the predictions of natural incompatibilism depend upon people understanding the cases in the relevant way. For instance, if people reject the assumption that the agent cannot perform the relevant action, then natural incompatibilism does not predict that people will deny moral responsibility. The point can also be expressed in a way that respects the fact that these judgments come in degrees. Natural incompatibilism predicts that people’s judgments about ability will strongly constrain their attribution of the relevant moral status. More specifically, the prediction is that attributions of the relevant moral status will not significantly exceed attributions of the ability to perform the relevant action.

2. Experiment 1

2.1. Method

2.1.1. Participants

Two hundred and three participants were tested (aged 18–72 years, mean age = 34 years; 96 female; 93% reporting English as a native language). Participants were U.S. residents, recruited and tested online using Amazon Mechanical Turk (AMT) and Qualtrics, and compensated \$0.40 for approximately 2 min of their time. The same recruitment and compensation pro-

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