

The Problem of Extra-Rational Persuasion: Why We Must Analyze Both the Motivations We  
Consider Our Own, and the Ones We Do Not

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# The Problem of Extra-Rational Persuasion: Why We Must Analyze Both the Motivations We Consider Our Own, and the Ones We Do Not

## Abstract

Whether we are free or not should not be ambiguous: at any time we are either free or constrained. Compatibilists think a physics whose laws constrain our actions is compatible with human free will thanks to our conscious deliberative processes. To them, saying that physical laws determine our thoughts is like putting the cart before the horse. However, whether this deliberative process is responsible for our choices or not is ambiguous, as certain studies in Social and Cognitive Psychology will show. This ambiguity, I will argue, seriously undermines the appeal of arguments that our deliberative processes are sufficient to describe our free will. I will explore some responses to the PERP from the perspectives of both a classical Compatibilist and a Frankfurtian Compatibilist. My hope is that this work will encourage further, more nuanced analysis of the relationship between our motivations in general and the motivations we consider our own, as well as further integration of empirical work in Social Psychology with theoretical work in Analytical Philosophy.

## Introduction

In response to Incompatibilists, who argue that physical laws seem to reveal that our choices are better described as things which happen to us than as things over which claim ownership, many Compatibilist philosophers, such as John Perry, appeal to our intuition that so long as we operate on motivations within ourselves, we operate on our own beliefs and desires, and are therefore as free as we could hope to be. Perry, a classical Compatibilist, says that therefore, so long as our actions are not coerced, we are free. However, I argue that the appeal of the Compatibilist story trades on an implicit identification between our *motivations* and the *beliefs and desires we consider our own*. I will discuss why many empirical studies seem to indicate that there are plenty of ways by which motivations that we do not consider *our own* can be influenced to override, undermine, or cast doubt on the motivations which we consider our own. In these three ways, the implicit identification between *motivation* and *the beliefs and desires we consider our own* seems flawed. I will argue that the Problem of Extra Rational Persuasion (PERP) appears to reveal that Perry's tools are inadequate in preserving the authenticity of our sense of freedom.

An Incompatibilist, Determinism threatens the authenticity of our freedom because physical laws seem to puppeteer our actions. In this same way, so too would motivations which we are neither aware of nor accepting of appear as strings that manipulate our choices. In response to this threat, we will further examine how Frankfurt offers a Compatibilist model that is better equipped to address the PERP. We will also discuss why Frankfurt's model is forced to address the difficult question of identifying which motivations belong to us and which do not. Certain empirical studies reveal how this question is complex enough to warrant much more

analysis in the future, and that it does not yet seem clear how the PERP will be answered in a way which retains the authenticity of our freedom.

### Perry's Compatibilist Option

Perry describes an intentional action as one which consists of two components, the first being what we can do it, or “all the basic abilities... tapped when one decides to do something that requires a certain ability.” (Perry, 242) Whether I am able to lift a rock consists of whether I have the necessary muscle tissue, bone structure, and understanding to lift the rock. The second component required for an intentional action is that the action be caused by one's motivational complex, operating independently and without coercion. The motivational complex “includes beliefs (...fleeting perceptual beliefs, implicit beliefs, and so on) and desires (...wants, urges, whims, and so forth) that rationalize [performing a particular action].” (Perry, 243) Perry argues that the motivational complex will “cause volitions to perform actions,” and that the only situations in which one, with both an ability and a motive to take an action, may not be considered free are situations in which we are constrained in certain ways. (Perry, 244) For instance, “if there is an invisible shield between me and the glass [of water], or if the steward is a smart aleck who will move the tray when I get close to it... then I cannot get a drink of water.” (Perry, 245) In other words, the only times we are not free are when our abilities are restrained in some fashion.

Perry's option acquires its plausibility through the assumption that when we make a choice for our own reasons, our own reasons, beliefs and motivations, we garner a sense of ownership over that choice from self-consciously pointing what we believe the reasons for that choice were. This ownership, this act of self-conscious pointing, is meant to be possible and

potent even in a Deterministic universe. When a rational agent “does something intentionally, there are a bunch of beliefs perceptions, wants, desires, preferences, and the like” which will select a particular action if doing so “will promote the satisfaction of the desires... given the truth of the beliefs.” (Perry, 243) Perry does not want to say that there are *no* unconscious processes involved in our decision-making, and he even affirms that we operate on “implicit desires.” (Perry, 243)

Perry also implies that at some level we are aware of the reasons for our decisions. “If I intentionally order a vanilla ice-cream cone, the motivating complex might include the desire for a vanilla ice-cream cone; the perception of a counter; a belief that I can afford it; a belief that it won’t do me any harm; and so on.” (Perry, 243) These desires and beliefs, while not running through our mind at a significant level, all still seem to compose a rational mind that seeks to fulfill particular goals. The *very notion* of a belief *begs* to be read as something conscious, something we use while deliberating multiple options. When we make a choice with some moral weight, we might defend ourselves by saying that, at the time, I did what I believed was right. Actions which come from us seem, intuitively, to be our own.

#### The PERP and Perry

A satisfactory Compatibilist option must be one that clearly describes when our actions are due to ourselves and when our actions are not due to ourselves. Perry seems to achieve this, but we must recognize that when Perry describes our motivational complex as one which contains our beliefs and desires, there is an implicit assumption that these beliefs and desires are always our own. For a belief to be one’s own, it must be the case that one has some awareness of and identification with that belief. One’s relationship to the beliefs which motivate one’s actions, if one also considers those beliefs to be untrue, would be a relationship of restraint in which one

does not think that their choices are their own. Simultaneously, because the common understanding of a desire seems to be akin to a wish to achieve some purposeful goal, such as to enjoy some ice cream, if one began acting on desires which one did not understand, or worse found reprehensible, they would not describe the experience of acting on those desires as freedom.

As evidence that there are times when the motivations which we do not consider our own may be influenced to override the motivations which we do consider our own, without coercion, we will discuss the famous Milgram Authority experiments. Milgram had one of his graduate students sit participants in front of a switch and ask them to shock someone the participant believed was another participant (though in reality they were a confederate). Participants were led to believe shocking the confederate was necessary to studying the effects of learning, and were told before entering the experiment, that they could leave at any time without the risk of consequences befalling them (Kite). In other words, participants were not coerced to obey, and in fact the very purpose of the Milgram experiments was to test when participants would *disobey*. Milgram conducted preliminary surveys: given the four prods, or arguments, a graduate student would be permitted to use as they pressed the participant to continue the study, both experts and lay-people overwhelmingly responded that any reasonable person would disobey well before the experiment concluded.

The vast majority of participants, when they began hearing recordings of the confederate begging not to be shocked or release, said that they too wanted to stop the experiment, so they might ensure the confederate's well-being. Milgram found that over 65% of participants were sufficiently influenced by an authority figure in a lab coat providing prods such as "the experiment must go on," to the extent that they did not disobey that authority figure (Kite). Many

continued to behave in ways that appeared to reveal their sympathy for the confederate: they apologized to the confederate when they shocked them, saying they had no choice. Many during the post-experiment debriefing even expressed surprise that they were as influenced as they were. This was illustrated by the increased smoking of participants compared to their daily smoking rates.

To Perry, these participants would be described as free agents. They had a desire to conform to an authority figure which was stronger than their desire to not harm someone. Although participants could choose between continuing the experiment or quitting, those with a stronger desire to conform did so. Though the participant's actions may not have been as virtuous as they would have desired, these individuals were still free. There is an important disconnect between Perry's description of the participant's freedom and the participant's own experience of freedom. Perry would surely think that someone under no illusion that any harm would come to themselves if they disobeyed, that seemed to believe that stopping the experiment was the right thing to do (because they continually asked for permission to stop) and that had every ability to disobey, if free, would do so. Yet many participants still did not disobey. Moreover, because many participants were highly distressed during the experiment, illustrated by their occasional apologies to the confederate during the test, it seems difficult to confidently state that the participants are truly acting freely. Participants instead seemed to relate to their decision to conform to an authority figure and to relate to their belief that the authority figure is more accurate than their own moral intuitions.

Perry might reply that people sometimes merely excuse their behavior, and that despite what they might have said, in reality they are simply not as morally driven as they would like others to believe. As participants are also told they will face no consequences for *continuing* with

the experiment, they may simply weigh the consequences of what will happen to themselves against the beliefs that they are aiding in the scientific quest for knowledge. Additionally, many of the participants did not have sufficient knowledge on electrical shocks, which may have resulted in them deferring to the expert when told the shocks did not put the participant in harm's way. Finally, whether or not a participant feels distressed is not particularly relevant to whether or not one has freedom, because plenty of people are distressed even when making choices freely. Despite one's freedom, regret could reasonably lead someone to pretend that they had no choice.

In response, while it may be that people have a normal, strong desire to help the progress of science, and that they may decide that this desire is more important than a certain amount of pain, we must remember that most experts and lay-people surveyed seemed to think that when it became clear that the shocks were *against the confederate's wishes*, that most participants would go no further with the experiment. To obey a desire whose strength one understands is one matter, but surely it is another to follow a desire one rejects or completely underestimates. To respond to the point about not understanding the strengths of the shocks and thus deferring, we must remember that participants argued *while being prodded* that so long as the *confederate himself* wanted to leave the experiment, the expert's opinions were beside the point. It thus is odd to say that some sort of rational weighing of particular goals was truly the reason for the participants' decision.

Second, the PERP is defined as it is because free choice, by its very name, implies that we are aware of the desires and beliefs that make up our decision, and that we follow them somewhat rationally. However, following the commands of the graduate student to comply with the experiment may not seem particularly rational. The most potent argument in the graduate

student's script of phrases is the final prod, prod number four, that "You have no other choice but to continue" (Kite). Additionally, compliance rates in both conditions dropped to approximately 20% when the graduate student either wore casual clothes rather than a lab coat, or issued their commands over an intercom rather than in person. If participants were merely making choices they found displeasing, then one would not expect significantly more people to make a different choice due to factors which did not seem to change the substance of the decision itself. Certainly no person would say, would even believe, that the reason they chose to shock someone against that person's will was due to whether a graduate student was wearing a lab coat or not, but such subtle factors significantly impact how we make our decisions. If these auras are not related to the substance of our choices, of the beliefs and desires we would point to when explaining why the choice is our own, and yet these auras have significant implications on which choices we make, then surely the authenticity of the sense of ownership we feel over our choices may be called into doubt.

Finally, responding to the point that even free choices can be distressing, it is important to clarify that the problem being addressed is not whether one may not like the two bad choices presented before them, but rather that there is a particular kind of stress which is symptomatic of feeling that one has no ownership over their decisions. The PERP is derived from a concern with preserving this sense of ownership one has over their desires and beliefs. The Milgram experiments appear to give evidence that, just as chains or a gun held to our heads can feel foreign and restrictive, so too can a number of the beliefs and desires which make up our motivational complex.

Frankfurtian Response

The Compatibilist should now be convinced that there are some situations where, despite the ability and desire to act in some way, some aspects of our motivational complex with which we do not identify may prevent us from fulfilling our will. If so, then the next logical move for the Compatibilist is to turn to Frankfurt.

Harry Frankfurt's *Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person* defines freedom both in the context of motives with which one identifies and with which one does not. Specifically, Frankfurt argues that if the beliefs and desires which motivate an action fall somewhere between being considered alien to oneself and repugnant to oneself, then those actions do not constitute the actions of a free agent. To Frankfurt, a free agent's desires and beliefs do not merely drive actions, but allow the agent to "Want to have (or not to have) certain desires and motives. They are capable of wanting to be different, in their preferences and purposes, from what they are" (Frankfurt, 7). If one acts on desires that are implicit or unconscious, despite conscious, intentional desires to *not* act in that way, then that agent is not truly free. If one is addicted to drugs despite not wanting to be, for instance, then the act of taking drugs is an act which seems to happen to oneself, and which seems restrictive.

What Frankfurt helps us to identify is that a description of our motivations must include both the motivations we consider our own and those which we don't, for if there is a discrepancy between these two then the freedom of the agent may be called into question. For instance, when a hungry person decides that a delicious ice cream cone is worth purchasing due to their past experiences involving the consumption of ice cream, then that person is acting freely. But when a conflicted person decides that shocking a confederate is acceptable due to a belief they would find repugnant if they were made aware of it (such as a belief that whether one wears a lab coat or not is indicative of how much authority one has), then that person is not acting freely.

Frankfurt offers a method to clarify between the instances where our freedom is or is not authentic.

The way I will modify the PERP to respond to a Frankfurtian Compatibilist will be by arguing that knowing which motives drive us, and whether we in fact identify with them, is a very difficult project. While it would be odd to say that many people hold the implicit belief that dressing in a lab coat lends someone enough authority to be trustworthy, there do appear to be unconscious processing systems crucial to the manner in which we make decisions. These systems do seem to take factors, such as a lab coat, into account without our knowledge or even our consent. If factors such as these were conscious, many of the participants in the group with someone dressed in more casual clothes would take note of the experimenter's attire, but instead they would identify their belief that one should not harm without consent. It proves difficult to preserve the authenticity of the sense of ownership one has when one's choices seem to depend not on the beliefs which one prefers, but instead on systems outside our conscious beliefs.

We will examine another example of individuals making choices for reasons they are unaware of, and who believe that an entirely different set of reasons were responsible for motivating them. Stanley Schachter and Jerome Singer had participants injected with adrenaline, and either placed next to a confederate who exhibited outgoing, joyful behaviors or aggressive, irritated behaviors (Kite). Many of the participants behaved differently than a control group injected with a placebo, who acted normally. Whether the participants were next to the joyful or the aggressive confederate was predictive of whether that participant acted in a joyful or aggressive way. When researchers later asked why participants acted as they did, many blamed the drug, but few blamed the behavior of the confederate.

The Schachner-Singer experiments have widely been used to argue that *the way* we experience our emotions relies not only on factors like heart rate, sweat, and other physiological factors, but also heavily on subtle cues that systems beneath our conscious control assess. Our beliefs about how we should experience our emotions can often be subject to factors external to our control, our control and awareness. What is essential to take away from the Schachner-Singer experiments is that even some of our most intimate intuitions about what motivates our behaviors may rely heavily on subtle priming effects. While these experiments may not show we are never free, they do cast doubt on the capacity of Frankfurt's model to determine when we are acting freely and when we are not. So long as there is ambiguity, the authenticity of our sense of freedom may be called into question, which is unsatisfactory for a theory whose very purpose is to preserve the authenticity of this particular intuition.

In conclusion, a traditional Compatibilist, even one who successfully argues that Determinism does not undermine the authenticity of our sense of ownership over our actions, may still have more work to do before they can say that this ownership is as authentic as they would prefer. The cause of one's sense of ownership to be undermined appears to be the complexity and opaqueness of our own motivations, some of which, because we are unaware of them or find them repugnant, are not ones we would point to self-reflectively when explaining why we made certain choices. Frankfurtian Compatibilists are better equipped to tackle the PERP than classical Compatibilists like Perry, but because our motives are often opaque, even to ourselves, the standards by which we may determine whether we made a choice for reasons we identify with or not must be better developed. As of yet, neither traditional Compatibilists like Perry nor more nuanced Compatibilists like Frankfurt appear to have generated such nuanced

standards. Until they do so, the authenticity of our sense of freedom may be called into question by the PERP.

References:

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