Outline of “Nihil Obstat: An Analysis of Ability”*

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ABSTRACT

This outline for a paper, which develops a compatibilist analysis of abilities, was completed by David Lewis during his sabbatical in the Fall semester of 2000 and is dated 20 January 2001. Starting from the claim that it’s a “Moorean fact” that we are often able to do otherwise, Lewis provides a “simple proof of compatibilism.” He then presents his own account of abilities: S is able to A if and only if there are no obstacles to their A-ing, where an obstacle is a “robust preventer”: something that would (or does) cause S not to A, and which “wouldn’t go away if things were just a little different.”

1. A SIMPLE PROOF OF COMPATIBILISM

It’s a Moorean fact that we often have a choice what to do
- We’re able to do what we do
- Also what we don’t do
But whether determinism holds is an unsettled question
- It depends on whether a collapse hypothesis is true physics
- Collapse hypotheses have theoretical advantages and drawbacks
- Probably the best of them is GRW
So having a free choice is epistemically compatible with determinism
And with indeterminism
So it’s compatible simpliciter
- Are there impossible epistemic possibilities?
  - Alleged precedents are irrelevant to this case
    - Mathematical or logical ignorance
    - The geography of the pluriverse
    - Necessity a posteriori
So we need a compatibilist analysis of ability

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2. THE CONDITIONAL ANALYSIS IS UNSATISFACTORY

I would have if I had chosen to
Alternatively: if I had tried, if I had wanted to
Same difficulties will arise
Not, pace Austin, could have if I had chosen
What’s conditional on choice is not one’s ability
But whether that ability is worth mentioning
Cf. biscuits on the sideboard if you want some

Objection: finkish dispositions to succeed
If you tried, you’d lose your previous ability
E.g. to overcoming [sic] a stammer, don’t try too hard
Best chance of success is to say something spontaneously

Objection: finkish dispositions not to succeed
If you tried, you’d gain an ability you now lack
E.g. the victim of Frankfurt’s neuroscientist

Objection: success sometimes takes luck as well as ability
Lloyd can kick goals if anyone can (109 last season)
But even he doesn’t always succeed (60 behinds)
His ability does not desert him when he’s unlucky
That’s a possible hypothesis, but unlikely
Somebody might have the ability even if chance of success is low
If others’ chance was much lower still
Even I have some minute chance of kicking a goal
But I’m not able to do it

Objection: some obstacles to success are obstacles to choosing to
E.g. posthypnotic suggestion, compulsion
Maybe also decisive coercion

3. FRESH START: ABILITY IFF NO OBSTACLES

For the case of basic actions
The case of ‘generated’ actions is derivative
You’re able to ? iff, for some basic action
(1) Doing it would be ?ing
E.g. doing it would be causing so-and-so
E.g. doing it would be breaking your promise
(2) No obstacle to doing it
Must you know which basic action that is?
Ambivalence: sometimes we think yes
Inability to open a combination lock
Sometimes we think no
The secrets could be even safer
If not only didn’t you know the combination
But also you were unable to open the lock
Say, because it’s on a timer
4. WHAT’S AN OBSTACLE?

An obstacle is a preventer

A preventer would cause you not to do something
Incompatible nomologically (or simpliciter) with your doing it?
Not necessary: what of a chancy preventer?
Not sufficient: that covers a reliable trace of the action
Or a reliable trace of a genuine preventer
Also covers the future-tensed fact that you won’t do it

Many preventers are obstacles
Shackles are
Paralysis is
Being dead is
Lacking the strength is
Not being on the spot is
Not having the tools for the job is
Lacking sufficient funds is
Post-hypnotic suggestion is
Compulsion—e.g. phobia—is
Depression is
Being interfered with is

Some preventers are not obstacles
Being unlucky isn’t
Not if it’s chancy
Not even when minute details predetermine that you’ll fail
Predeterminers of preventers that aren’t obstacles aren’t

Hypothesis: an obstacle is a robust preventer
One that wouldn’t go away if things were just a little different

5. REMOVABLE OBSTACLES

Something is an obstacle so long as it persists
But I’m able to remove it
There’s no obstacle to some action that would cause it to vanish
Must I know what action that is?—Ambivalent, as usual
I’m not able to do the thing right away
But I’m able to remove the obstacle and then do it
Lacking a skill I’m able to acquire is a removable obstacle
So we’re ambivalent about whether lack of skill is an obstacle
E.g. can I shed my accent?
Yes, but only after long practice
Likewise lack of strength
E.g. can I lift a certain weight?
Yes, but only after a course of exercise
Likewise insufficient funds
E.g. can I buy this?
Yes, but only after saving up for it
6. IS PREFERING NOT TO AN OBSTACLE?

Sometimes no: I'm able to order lager though I prefer bitter
   Not if psychophysical causation is chancy
   And not even if it's deterministic
   Being predetermined to prefer not to also isn’t

Sometimes yes
   \textit{Hier stehe ich, ich kann kein anders}
   I can’t, I’ve promised not to
   I can’t, he’s holding a gun on me
   I can’t, I’d go to jail
   I can’t, I’d lose my job
   I can’t, it would bankrupt me

But sometimes no, despite the same considerations
   \textit{Ich kann anders} if God Himself commands me to
   I can break my promise to obey if I’m ordered to shoot hostages
   I can face death rather than shoot hostages
   Or jail, or unemployment, or bankruptcy

Preferring not to is at any rate a preventer

Whether it’s an obstacle depends on the balance of pros and cons
   When it’s overwhelmingly con, preferring not to is an obstacle
   When it’s delicate, not
      How delicate is delicate?—Indeterminate

This is what the robustness hypothesis predicts
   An overwhelming balance is a robust preventer
   A delicate balance isn’t

Complication: we sometimes flatter ourselves
   We pretend we’re less predictable than we are
   Hence that balances are more delicate than they are
   E.g. my balance for bitter over lager may be overwhelming
      And hence a robust preventer of ordering lager
   But I (or others) may pretend otherwise