

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.”

I. 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 PREFERRING 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

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

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