Research Article

Unfettered Compatibilism

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In this paper, I offer a contemporary spin on a theory of free will that originates with the Stoics, which I call *unfettered compatibilism*. The freedom associated with this view is *self-rule*. It is inspired by a quote from Mahatma Gandhi:

Man is the maker of his own destiny in the sense that he has freedom of choice as to the manner in which he uses his freedom. But he is no controller of results (1971: 16).

Philosophers often support incompatibilism by showing that if determinism is true, then we lack regulative control over worldly events – where having regulative control requires having the *specific ability to do otherwise*. The belief is that if the "results" are fixed, our lack of freedom of choice immediately follows. Given determinism, there is no leeway free will and we are left with a source view or no free will at all. In the above passage, Gandhi seems to deny this inference, for we have the power of choice without having the specific ability to do otherwise. Putting this all together provides a new addition to the current scene, a view of compatibilism logically situated between *classical compatibilism* – which maintains the compatibility between determinism and the specific ability to do otherwise – and the *source view* – which denies choice is essential to free will. I show that self-rule is worthy as a kind of free will for it is a fundamental power that is absolute. I show that unfettered compatibilism earns its name since it is immune from worries and criticisms that plague classical compatibilism, such as the *basic argument* and *Frankfurt cases*.

1. Introduction[1]

In this paper, I offer a contemporary spin on a theory of free will that originates with the Stoics, which I call *unfettered compatibilism*. It is inspired by a quote from Mahatma Gandhi:

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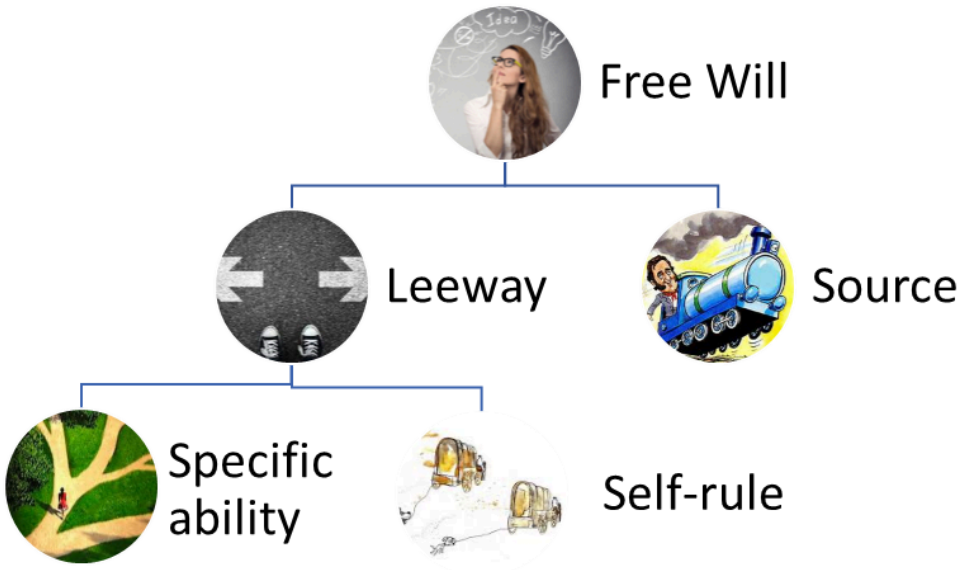
Philosophers often support *incompatibilism* about free will by showing that if determinism is true, then we lack regulative control over worldly events – where having regulative control requires having the *specific ability to do otherwise*. The belief is that if the "results" are fixed, our lack of freedom of choice immediately follows. Given determinism, there is no leeway free will and we are left with a source view or no free will at all. In the above passage, Gandhi seems to deny this inference, for we have the power of choice without having the specific ability to do otherwise. Putting this all together provides a new addition to the current scene, a view of compatibilism logically situated between *classical compatibilism* – which maintains the compatibility between determinism and the specific ability to do otherwise – and the *source view* – which denies choice is essential to free will.

Unfettered compatibilism is a *semi-compatibilism* (Fischer 1994). It claims free will requires the power of choosing. Technically, it is a leeway view, for it does not eschew choice. Rather it deems choice as necessary to free will. However, like many source theorists, the unfettered compatibilist is an incompatibilist about determinism and the specific ability to do otherwise. In honor of Gandhi, I call the freedom associated with unfettered compatibilism *self-rule*, though in this paper I am not doing Gandhi exegesis. *Self-rule*, as I use the concept, is merely the power of choosing. Gandhi's term *swarāj* means "home-rule," and "Real home-rule is self-rule or self-control" (Gandhi 1909: 116). At the very least it connotes the power to *choose well*, not just the power of choosing. Though it falls short of flourishing, self-rule – the power of choosing – is fundamental and deserving of the name 'free will.' This chart situates self-rule and unfettered compatibilism among other free will views.



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I begin with a discussion of the main theories of free will, explaining self-rule's place among the other contemporary views (§ 2). I then provide a positive defense of free will as self-rule, or the power of choosing, by first arguing that this power is *absolute*, whereby I mean that except in rare cases adult humans retain the power of choosing in their actions (§ 3). Martin Luther (1525) notes that the power of choosing is merely the freedom to follow one's desires. It seems more of a burden than a gift. As noted, we want not just the power of choosing but the power of choosing well. This involves complex knowledge and levels of understanding. It points to a higher level of freedom, one aimed at *flourishing*. Though it appears shallow, ultimately the merits of free will as self-rule should be flouted for it becomes a candidate for what Philip Pettit (2001) calls an "ideal of freedom," a bridge from free will – a power shared by all – to political liberty and ultimately human flourishing – a goal. This goal is more the proper aim of a book than a paper. Instead, I close by showing that unfettered compatibilism earns its name since it is immune from worries and criticisms that plague classical compatibilism, such as the *basic argument* and *Frankfurt cases* (§ 4).

2. Theories of Free Will

What is free will? Contrast the woman who jumps into the pool with the woman who is pushed. *Prima facie*, in the first case the act is up to her and willfully done, whereas in the second case, entering the pool is not up to her, not willfully done, not an act at all. Following this example, a person has *free will* provided some of her acts are up to her, that is, some of her behavior is willful.

From this outlook, all theories of free will have a *sourcehood* component since all free actions are up to us. *Source views* of free will hold that up-to-usness, or sourcehood, properly understood is sufficient for free will. *Leeway views* add that sourcehood requires the *power of choosing* (cf. Pereboom 2003). Leeway theories are often committed to *classical free will*, where choices come in the form of the *specific ability* to do otherwise, or rather the *dual-ability* to perform either of two actions at a particular time, which includes the specific ability to do otherwise (Campbell 2013). There is a contemporary preference for discussing free action as opposed to free choice or free will, so it is customary to hold that the specific ability to do otherwise is essential to the power of choosing, suggesting that all leeway views are classical views. *Regulative control* is the kind of control we have over events whenever we have leeway free will (Fischer and Ravizza 1998).

The theory defended in this paper – *unfettered compatibilism* – is absent from the contemporary scene though it shares similarities with classical compatibilism (Campbell 1998; 2005; 2011) and source

views (Fischer 1994). Unfettered compatibilism is a *semi-compatibilism*: some freedoms are incompatible with determinism, but some are not. Unfettered compatibilists also join many source theorists in holding that the specific ability to do otherwise in incompatible with determinism yet free will is not. For source theorists, the incompatibility of determinism and the specific ability to do otherwise is unimportant since the ability to do otherwise is not necessary for moral responsibility, and moral responsibility grounds any freedom worth caring about (Frankfurt 1969). This issue is investigated in detail below (§ 4).

Although it is not committed to classical free will, unfettered compatibilism remains a leeway view since it holds that the power of choosing is essential to free will. The relevant choice, however, is not between contrary actions, so free will does not require the specific ability to do otherwise. Unfettered compatibilism is inspired by a quote from Gandhi, but he was inspired by the Stoics, though Richard Sorabji (2012) reports Gandhi's primary influence was indirect: Frederic W. Farrar's *Seekers After God* (1882), covering the philosophies of Seneca, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius. Again, beyond his influence, I don't claim to be doing Gandian exegesis in this paper. It is more about bringing to life a perhaps buried form of Stoic compatibilism.

According to the Stoics (Frede 2011), the ability that is fundamental to free will is the power to assent to, or to resist, an impulsive impression to act. We are influenced to act in various ways – there is fear and other emotions, our natural inclinations to eat, urges to have intimate relations, and societal and situational pressures to give some examples. We may follow these impulses to act, or we may resist. This is the power of *self-rule*, which offers the very basic power of choosing. Filling out the quote with which we began, Gandhi continues:

> But this free will we enjoy is less than that of a passenger on a crowded deck. Man is the maker of his own destiny in the sense that he has freedom of choice as to the manner in which he uses his freedom. But he is no controller of results. The moment he thinks he is, he comes to grief. (1971: 16)

Our free will is "less than that of a passenger on a crowded deck." We lack fork freedom as we are "no controller of results." Choice comes in the "manner we use" our freedom. On this view, our free will rests in the power to choose between willful participation or resistance, which includes the freedom to avoid blameworthy action.

Like source free will, self-rule does not require the specific ability to do otherwise, but unlike the source view, self-rule requires the power of choosing. Gandhi writes:

> Man has reason, discrimination, and free will such as it is. The brute has no such thing. It is not a free agent and knows no distinction between virtue and vice, good and evil. Man, being a free agent, knows these distinctions and when he follows his higher nature, shows himself far superior to the brute, but when he follows his baser nature, can show himself lower than the brute. (1971: 16)

Over the course of our lives, we make choices between virtue and vice, good and evil, our higher nature and our lower nature. We therefore have the power of choosing, even if it is merely manifested as the ability to follow our own desires. I argue that the power of choosing is the fundamental power underlying our individual freedoms and, thus, is worthy of the name 'free will.' This gives the compatibilist a *basic* freedom, something to compete with *agential settling* of libertarianism (Steward 2012) or *non-domination* source-inspired views (Pettit 2001).

3. Free Will as Choosing & Free Will as Flourishing

'Free will' is historically ambiguous in a way related to the aforementioned ambiguity of 'self-rule.' I use both 'free will' and 'self-rule' to designate a basic power, fundamental to other individual freedoms: the *power of choosing*. John Locke (1689) notes the will is free by definition, as it were, for it is a power, and to have a power is to have freedom. Many regard this observation as a criticism but the point is not that 'free will' is a contradiction, but that it is redundant. To have a will is to have a free will. This guaranteed freedom, however, is just the power to follow our desires, or to resist them. As Luther (1525) warns, we need a more robust freedom, something that provides rational action, something aimed toward flourishing and well-being. Freedom, in this elevated sense, is more than merely following desire even if we desire to live a simple life according to our own conception of the good. It requires not just the power of choosing but the power to choosing well.

Luther's (1525) distinguishes between the *power of choosing* and the *power of discernment*. Desiderius Erasmus (1524) identifies free will with the former, but it is the latter that is important, Luther contends. Choice without discernment is more of a burden than a gift for it guarantees nothing other than being a slave to your desires. All of this is readily acknowledged, but what is important for my purposes is that Luther – who is a free will denier by contemporary lights – agrees with Erasmus

when it comes to the power of choice. Directly after claiming "if God foreknew that Judas would be a traitor, Judas became a traitor of necessity," Luther declares Judas "did what he did willingly, not by compulsion; for that willing of his was his own work; which God, by the motion of his Omnipotence, moved on into action, as he does everything else" (1525: 99). This very point of the absolute power of the will – the fundamentality of free will – is defended by Locke (1689) and emphasized later by Jonathan Edwards (1754) and Thomas Hill Green (1879).

We should agree that 'free will' is ambiguous. In one sense, it is a basic power of choosing to be motivated by, or to resist, the various impulses that drive our actions, but the power of choosing, though fundamental, is no gift. We strive for something more. Green writes:

> It is one thing when the object in which self-satisfaction is sought is such as to prevent that self-satisfaction being found, because interfering with the realisation of the seeker's possibilities or his progress towards perfection: it is another thing when it contributes to this end. In the former case the man is a free agent in the act, because through his identification of himself with a certain desired object—through his adoption of it as his good—he makes the motive which determines the act, and is accordingly conscious of himself as its author. But in another sense he is not free, because the objects to which his actions are directed are objects in which, according to the law of his being, satisfaction of himself is not to be found. His will to arrive at self-satisfaction not being adjusted to the law which determines where this self-satisfaction is to be found, he may be considered in the condition of a bondsman who is carrying out the will of another, not his own. (1879: 2)

If we think of desire as the "object in which self-satisfaction is sought," Green notes that it is one thing when desire leads to self-satisfaction – when it genuinely leads to one's flourishing or well-being – but it is another when one's desire interferes with one's well-being. Like Luther and Green, we might suppose that the power to choose not just what one desires but to choose instead what eventually leads to well-being is far superior than the mere power of choosing, and for this reason one might designate this higher-order power as free will, which Luther does.

Free will as choosing and free will as flourishing have always been linked. Michael Frede (2011) maintains the concept of *having a free will* was introduced by Epictetus, based on Cicero's work, and developed further by early Christians philosophers, culminating in important respects in the views of

St. Augustine. This is distinct from accounts that credit St. Augustine with the origin of the concept. The concept *free will* requires two parts: the notions of a *will* and of *freedom*. Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics had these, as well as the concept of *choice*, but they didn't combine them together in the right way. "These notions of a will and of freedom must be such that it makes sense to say that we have a will which is free" (Frede 2011: 7).

Cicero's term, '*prohairesis*,' is not merely a disposition "to choose to act in a certain way," which you have in Aristotle. *Prohariesis* is "a disposition to choose to deal with our impressions in a certain way, most crucially to choose how to assent to impulsive impressions" (Frede 2011: 46). For some ancient philosophers we act on nonrational desire without choice (31). For others, our will is responsible for some but not all choices (158). The Stoics held that "any desire of a grown-up human is a willing," and therefore a desire of reason (420). "The notion of a will, then, is the notion of our ability to make such choices or decisions which makes us act in the way we do" (8).

It is tempting to say that leeway free will involves not just the general ability to choose, but also a particular ability to choose otherwise "construed in a narrow or strong sense" (Frede 2011: 29). This is the specific ability to do otherwise (Campbell 2011). Frede provides an example to help us understand the Stoics: "it is up to us to give, or refuse to give, assent to the impulsive impression to cross the street" but "it is not up to us to cross the street" (Frede 2011: 45). The reason why is that, according to the Stoics, luck is pervasive. We may be hit by a car or otherwise prevented by factors beyond our control. Using a metaphor from Richard Sorabji, our choice lies in taking aim; whether we hit the target is strictly speaking outside of our control (Sorabji 2014: 194). The only choice we have is to willfully assent to, or to resist, an impulsive impression to act (Frede 2011: 47). That one has the power of choosing does not entail that one has the specific ability to act otherwise.

Leo Tolstoy borrows an example from the Stoic founder, Zeno of Citium, to assist in understanding the choices we have, and the ones we don't have.

> A horse harnessed with others to a cart is not free to refrain from moving the cart. If he does not move forward the cart will knock him down and go on dragging him with it, whether he will or not. But the horse is free to drag the cart himself or to be dragged with it. And so it is with man. (1894: 182)

The cart represents necessity, the inevitable preordering of the universe. The horse has the choice to run as a manifestation of her freedom, willfully pulling the cart along with the team. Otherwise, the

horse is pulled against her will, and goes where the cart goes anyway. This is not the specific ability to do otherwise: the choice to run with the cart, or to graze in the field. This is self-rule: the choice to accept, or to resist, an impulsive impression to act – in this case, the literal force of the other horses pulling the cart.

Some interpret Tolstoy as telling a tale of specific ability. Under that reading the horse has the specific ability to run along with the cart *or* to be dragged instead. Tolstoy is clear that "all the acts which seem to be his are the work of a higher power, and he is not the creator of his own life, but the slave of it" (1894: 182). This choice may seem paltry, but he concludes that "it is the only freedom that really exists" (183). Events are divinely predetermined, according to Tolstoy. We are left to know how and why. "There is one thing, and only one thing, in which it is granted to you to be free in life, all else being beyond your power: that is to recognize and profess the truth" (188).

What was the goal of a theory of free will, given the concerns of the Stoics, Pagans, and Christians of antiquity? They did not worry about *causal luck*. They all accepted that events were more or less beyond their causal control. The concern was about *constitutive* and *circumstantial luck*: the "troubling fact that human beings are born with very different endowments, or natural constitutions, and that they are born into very different circumstances" (Frede 2011: 115; see also Hartman 2017). Nor was the worry about external rewards but about the reward of flourishing – attaining *eudaimonia*, well-being, the good life, heaven – being able to achieve whatever life goals you deem to be essential to your happiness and fulfillment. Given the diversity of human capacities, aren't some of us better equipped than others when it comes to flourishing? This is not the problem of determinism, or even the problem of evil. It is Descartes' (1641) *problem of error* (Campbell 1999): How could and why would an all-powerful, benevolent God create persons who consistently fail? Why isn't error in humans avoidable if not impossible? In a rationally ordered universe, flourishing should be within the reach of every human being.

In apology of the divine, there is a response: "God must set things up in such a way that neither human nature nor our individual nature nor the circumstances into which we are born, either separately or jointly, prevent us from becoming wise and free" (Frede 2011: 84). Thus, Origen held that "God created all human beings entirely equal, with entirely equal abilities and possibilities" (115). In the case of willful action, "there is nothing in the world, no force or power in the world outside us which can prevent us in virtue of this ability from making the choices or decisions we need to make to attain a good life" (175).

Free will was intended to solve a set of worries about pervasive luck, to provide assurance that we each have the power to achieve human flourishing even if the world conspires against us, even if we have no choice over the results because they are fixed in their positions like the passengers on a crowded deck. The concept guiding this power is self-rule, our fundamental ability to willfully partake in the inevitable happenings of the world, or to resist, and let no evil be the result of our own action. This is not the secret to human flourishing, such that once it is realized, flourishing ensues. This is just the beginning, and the point is that the beginning, and every step along the way, is under our control – at least for most of us on most occasions.

We are left with a choice about 'free will' given this ambiguity. Is it the power of choosing or some superior power, a power of choosing well? Though the power of choosing is pedestrian it is preferred for two main reasons. Of primary importance is that it is a guaranteed power. If free will is the power of choosing, there can be little doubt that we have such a power, even though it is only a necessary condition for flourishing. Of near equal importance, however, is that the power of choosing is indeed a human power though the same cannot be said of flourishing. Flourishing is an aim, a goal to strive toward, not a property had by any living creature. If we identify free will with the power of choosing, it applies to everyone. If we identify free will with flourishing, it applies to no one. In the end, it is hardly a choice at all to go with free will as the power of choosing.

4. Unfettered Compatibilism

Though the roots of unfettered compatibilism lie in antiquity, it is unique among present-day philosophies. Like some source theories, self-rule allows for semi-compatibilism (Fischer 1994): fork freedom is incompatible with determinism, but self-rule is not. In contrast with source views and like leeway views, self-rule is identified with the power of choosing. I illustrate the effectiveness of unfettered compatibilism in the contemporary landscape by considering its reaction to two traditional problems for its main competitor: classical compatibilism. The problems are the basic argument for incompatibilism and Frankfurt cases.

The consequence argument suggests that the specific ability to do otherwise requires the absence of determinism. Here is a non-formal version from Peter van Inwagen.

> If determinism is true, then our acts are the consequences of the laws of nature and events in the remote past. But it is not up to us what went on before we were born, and

> neither is it up to us what the laws of nature are. Therefore, the consequences of these things (including our present acts) are not up to us (1983: 16).

John Martin Fischer's basic argument (1994) is a formal version of the consequence argument that depends on the following principle.

> **Extension**: Person *S* is able to do action *X* at time *t* only if that *S* does *X* at *t* is consistent with the conjunction of propositions about the past (relative to *t*) together with the laws of nature (cf. Fischer 1994: 88; Haji 2009: 53).

Supposing extension were true, it is easy to see that determinism and free will conflict. A proposition is *physically possible* provided that it is consistent with the laws of nature, whereas a proposition is a *physically possible extension of the past* (at t) if and only if it is consistent with the laws of nature and every set of propositions about the past. Extension holds that possibilities must be physically possible extensions of the past. If determinism is true, the only propositions that are physically possible extensions of the past are the true propositions. Thus, if possibilities are restricted to physically possible extensions of the past, determinism entails that no one has the specific ability to do otherwise. The basic argument appears beyond repute.

According to the basic argument, the specific ability to do otherwise is incompatible with determinism. This is detrimental to classical compatibilism. Unfettered compatibilism, however, concedes the soundness of this argument and its conclusion. Recall that self-rule "is less than that of a passenger on a crowded deck" (1971: 16) – which is another way of saying our specific abilities to do otherwise are non-existent. Our freedom lies in "the manner" in which we act. If we think of free will as the specific ability to do otherwise, we endeavor to control "results," which are outside of our control, and that leads to "grief." We lack the specific ability to do otherwise, but self-rule does not require that ability. This is one way that self-rule leads to an *unfettered* compatibilism.

The debate between leeway and source compatibilists began largely as a debate about a principle governing the relationship between free will and moral responsibility. Prior to Harry Frankfurt's influential paper (1969), most theorists were committed to:

The Principle of Alternative Possibilities (PAP): A person is morally responsible (e.g., blameworthy) for an action only if she could have done otherwise.

Leeway theorists believe that PAP provides an important link between moral responsibility and free will. On the other hand, source theorists usually reject PAP since it is subject to counterexamples

formulated by Frankfurt and others.

Contemporary *Frankfurt cases* are sophisticated but here is a persuasive example offered by Derk Pereboom.

> Joe is considering whether to claim a tax deduction for the substantial local registration fee that he paid when he bought a house. ... Crucially, his psychology is such that the only way that in this situation he could fail to choose to evade taxes is for moral reasons. ... But to ensure that he choose to evade taxes, a neuroscientist now implants a device which, were it to sense a moral reason occurring with the specified force, would electronically stimulate his brain so that he would choose to evade taxes. In actual fact, he does not attain this level of attentiveness, and he chooses to evade taxes while the device remains idle. (2003: 193).

Joe seems unable to do otherwise yet he is blameworthy and morally responsible for his tax evasion since it was willfully done, up to him. This appears to be a counterexample to PAP. In the example, Joe lacks the specific ability to do otherwise, for that he evades taxes is inevitable. Pereboom's counterexample is convincing. There are only two physical possibilities. Either Joe willfully chooses to evade taxes, or Joe engages in moral reasoning, a device activates, and Joe evades taxes anyway. Either way the result – Joe's tax evasion – is the same, and Joe is unable to do otherwise.

Pereboom claims "failing to choose to evade taxes is meant to encompass not choosing to evade taxes and choosing not to evade taxes." However, the outcomes of Joe's choices are not the same when it comes to our *moral responsibility judgments* – especially our judgments the blameworthiness of agents. There is willful agency in the actual case scenario where Joe evades taxes, in contrast to his "not choosing to evade taxes" in the counterfactual scenario. Our moral judgment about Joe differs in the two scenarios. One's choice in the manner in which something comes about significant to one's moral responsibility. In this case, whether Joe willfully evades his taxes, or whether he resists and is compelled to evade them anyway evasion, arguably matters to his blameworthiness for in the counterfactual scenario Joe's evasion appears to be mitigated by the activation of the device. This suggests a slight reworking of PAP.

The Principle of Alternative Choices (PAP): A person is morally responsible (e.g., blameworthy) for an action only if she retains the power of choosing – the power to assent or resist impulsive impressions to action.

The power of choosing is not missing in Frankfurt cases. What is missing is the specific ability to do otherwise.

Sorabji implies that self-rule has "nothing to do with determinism" (2012: 65). This is not simply the claim that advocates hold a different belief about the compatibility of free will and determinism, that they are compatibilists and perhaps some of us are not. Self-rule by its nature and design offers a compatibilist free will. For this reason, one cannot use an argument like the basic argument to show that self-rule does not exist. The unfettered compatibilist already admits that the events of the world are set, and we are mere passengers. It is the inference from this acceptance to the claim that we lack the power of choice where there is disagreement. Unfettered compatibilism differs from classical free will compatibilists like G. E. Moore (1912) who explain away the appearance of inevitability by redefining words like 'can' and 'able.' Unfettered compatibilism avoids these linguistic gymnastics. The basic argument is not so much unsound as it is incomplete. It is question begging in light of unfettered compatibilism to assume we lack free will merely because events are inevitable, and we lack the specific ability to do otherwise (cf. Sellars 1965).

Self-rule as the power of choosing is not the ability to choose one action over another. It is the ability to willfully assent to or to resist an impulse to act. This is a choice about the manner in which events occur – whether or not the events are also willful actions. Agents in Frankfurt cases have this much leeway. Were Joe to properly understand his situation – that there is a device rendering the tax evasion inevitable – Joe could have used his self-rule and actively resisted, being dragged to his destiny like Tolstoy's horse. Unfettered compatibilism is similar to contemporary free will denialism in its acceptance of the inevitable. Yet like Sisyphus (Camus 1942), Joe still has a choice in the manner in which he confronts his fate. Joe cannot avoid tax evasion, but he can avoid being blameworthy for avoiding taxes.

5. Concluding Remarks

Self-rule offers an unfettered compatibilism, immunized from standard incompatibilist objections. In the opening quote, Gandhi explicitly rejects the inference from lack of control over events to lack of freedom of choice, for the choice is not directly a choice about the events. In order to show there is no power of choosing given unfettered compatibilism, one must show that there is no willful participation in the world. For in at least some cases our willful participation comes with the power to resist. Unfettered compatibilism offers unique, contemporary solutions to a set of old problems.

Footnotes

[1] Thanks to Victor Caston for the name 'unfettered compatibilism.' Versions of this paper were presented at the 2021 Rocky Mountain Ethics Conference, the 2021 Northwest Philosophy Conference, and several events hosted by Lady Keane College. In addition, some of these ideas were presented in Goyal & Campbell 2022. I thank members of those audiences. In addition, I thank Daniel Carr, Andrew Eshleman, James Gibson, Nick Gier, Atina Knowles, Kristin Mickelson, Stephen Morris, Mike Myers, Saji Varghese, Alan White, and especially J.M. Fritzman and Samiksha Goyal for comments on earlier drafts of this paper. The project shares some similarities with Knowles 2022, and I encourage readers to explore that work, as well.

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