The Manipulator and I
On The Possibility of a Softer Hard Compatibilism

Abstract:
In this paper, I introduce the possibility of a softer hard compatibilism, in order to defend compatibilist theories of free will from a well known objection, ‘the manipulation argument’. The objection roughly says: if an agent is manipulated by implantation of a certain psychological mechanism on the basis of which she subsequently acts, compatibilist commitments imply that the agent is just as responsible as she would have been if the mechanism had been acquired through ‘normal’ causes; since this seems counterintuitive, compatibilist standards of free and responsible agency are inadequate. Traditionally, compatibilism has gone either soft—somehow accounting for the intuitive lack of responsibility in manipulation cases—or hard—maintaining that manipulation does not undermine the agent’s responsibility, and hence accused of ‘biting the bullet’.

Acknowledging the possibility of a softer hard compatibilism serves to respect the intuition that something is discomforting in manipulation cases, as compared to ‘normal’ cases, while staying true to robust compatibilist commitments. The significant difference from the normal case is that, when someone manipulates me into acting in a certain way, the manipulator and I share responsibility for my actions. If viewed as a case concerning shared responsibility, the idea of ethical dilutionism surfaces. That is, it is possible to argue that the responsibility for an action gets diluted by the involvement of other agents. Interestingly, this perspective grants hard compatibilism with the opportunity to admit that the responsibility incurred when manipulated may be lessened, mitigated, or diluted by the significant involvement of the manipulator, while maintaining that manipulation per se does not undermine responsibility. Furthermore, a continuum of different positions—more or less ‘soft’—emerges within hard compatibilism, parallel to the different forms of ethical dilutionism.

Paul Russell has defended a form of hard compatibilism, with the same aim in mind as that of the present paper: acknowledging the alleged discomfort in manipulation cases, while respecting robust compatibilist commitments. However, while Russell’s explanation solely concerns the legitimacy of holding the manipulated agent responsible, I consider the possibility of there being something different about responsibility as such. In this way, my account shows much more promise in trying to respect the intuitive discomfort cases of manipulation supposedly provoke.

Russell argues that in manipulation cases, the legitimacy of blaming the manipulated agent on behalf of the manipulator is undermined. While I regard his amendment to the (hard) compatibilist position an important one, I argue (i) that Russell’s explanation of the manipulator’s lost standing to blame the manipulated agent—in terms of ‘insufficient causal distance’—is unclear, and I suggest that this may be more straightforwardly explained in terms of hypocrisy, or self-deception. Moreover, I contend (ii) that he is unsuccessful in accounting for the source of discomfort in cases of manipulation, since, so I argue, the possibility of my manipulator blaming me is not particularly discomforting. Both arguments gain support from the insight that manipulation cases are cases of shared responsibility.