Reasons reactivity and incompatibilist intuitions

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REASONS REACTIVITY AND INCOMPATIBILIST INTUITIONS

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I

John Martin Fischer and Mark Ravizza (1998) advance an innovative form of compatibilism between free will and determinism. They characterize the relevant freedom as the control condition necessary for moral responsibility (1998, 13). Fischer and Ravizza distinguish between two types of control, guidance and regulative. Guidance control consists in the power to perform an action freely; regulative control consists in the dual power both to perform an action freely, and to freely act otherwise (1998, 31). It is Fischer and Ravizza’s contention that regulative control is not necessary for moral responsibility but guidance control is. They rest this view on the plausibility of Frankfurt examples such as the following:

The brilliant neurologist and mad prankster Ryan wants his sometimes sinister sister Rachel to stick her finger in their Great Grandmother Mimi’s birthday cake. Ryan would much prefer that Rachel stick her finger in Mimi’s cake on her own, but he fears that Rachel will change her mind at the last moment and decide not to ruin Mimi’s cake. So Ryan secretly implants a device in Rachel’s brain allowing him to monitor Rachel’s deliberations and intentions, thereby reliably predicting her subsequent actions. Should Rachel waver in her course of action and show any sign that she will do other than stick her finger in Mimi’s cake, Ryan will make use of his gizmo and cause Rachel to follow through with this dastardly course of action. But as it happens, Rachel acts on her own just as Ryan had hoped. Ryan does nothing and makes no use of his device. Rachel would have acted as she did act had Ryan’s presence been subtracted from the situation.

Call this example Birthday Cake. Granting Fischer and Ravizza the possibility of such examples, Birthday Cake provides a case in which an agent, Rachel, is morally responsible for what she does even though she could not have done otherwise. Due to Ryan’s presence she could not do other than stick her finger in the birthday cake. Thus, Rachel lacks regulative control over the pertinent action, but, Fischer and Ravizza contend, she does possess guidance control. So, they conclude, regulative control is not necessary for moral responsibility (1998, 29–30). It is Rachel’s possession of guidance control that is sufficient to satisfy the control condition necessary for her moral responsibility.

Fischer and Ravizza concede that regulative control is not compatible with determinism (1998, 33–34). (As they see it, regulative control requires the ability to do otherwise and
determinism rules this out.) But, they argue, guidance control is compatible with determinism. They make their compatibilist case by offering an analysis of guidance control in terms of reasons-responsiveness. Reasons-responsiveness locates the control required for morally responsible agency in sensitivity to reasons, that is, in the capacity to respond to reasons for action.

Can guidance control be analyzed in terms of reasons-responsiveness? Here is a preliminary difficulty: reflect upon the case of Rachel in *Birthday Cake*. Rachel—the agent—is not reasons-responsive. Had Rachel been offered reasons to act otherwise she would not have been able to do so. Due to Ryan’s presence, she would have stuck her finger in the cake come what may. According to Fischer and Ravizza, this does not mean that guidance control is not to be analyzed in terms of reasons-responsiveness. Instead, they advise focusing upon the particular mechanism operative in the *actual causal sequence of events in which an agent acts* (1998, 36–38). In *Birthday Cake*, one must focus upon the causal mechanism operative in Rachel’s sticking her finger in Mimi’s cake. The crucial question concerns whether that mechanism of Rachel’s is reasons-responsive. Factoring out elements that might place constraints upon Rachel the agent (such as Ryan’s presence), and focusing upon the dispositional properties of Rachel’s mechanism of action (operative in the actual sequence of her sticking her finger in the cake), Fischer and Ravizza can press the question: Had reasons to act otherwise been offered to Rachel and had that mechanism been operative, would Rachel have responded appropriately (1998, 38–39)?

Fischer and Ravizza offer a mechanism-based, actual-sequence analysis of reasons-responsive control. An agent exhibits guidance control in performing an action, on Fischer and Ravizza’s view, if and only if, in the actual causal sequence of events in which the agent acts, her action satisfies two conditions: first, it issues from a reasons-responsive mechanism, and second it is her own. They proceed to give a further analysis of the pertinent mechanism by specifying the nature and the range of reasons to which such mechanisms must be responsive.

There is a great deal at stake in Fischer and Ravizza’s defense of compatibilism. I believe that theirs is the best case for compatibilism to date. If they can offer a convincing account of guidance control in terms of reasons-responsiveness, an account that does not require the ability to do otherwise, then they will be able to avoid one of the most powerful motivations for incompatibilism: that determinism rules out the freedom to do otherwise, and the inability to do otherwise rules out moral responsibility. In previously published work, I have presented difficulties for the mechanism individuation component of Fischer and Ravizza’s account of reasons-responsiveness (McKenna 2001). My contention was that Fischer and Ravizza relied upon assumptions regarding mechanism individuation that incompatibilists would have good reason to reject. In what follows, by focusing upon another component of Fischer and Ravizza’s analysis of reasons-responsiveness, the reactivity component, I will show that, on this point as well, their defense of an actual-sequence model is threatened on plausible incompatibilist grounds. However, after setting out this particular challenge, I will then attempt to defend their position by suggesting a way that their account might be suitably amended. Although I will not follow through on my suggestion in this paper, it is my hope that the amendments I shall offer Fischer and Ravizza regarding reasons reactivity will help to point in the direction of overcoming the difficulties I have raised regarding the issue of mechanism individuation.
In order to capture the responsiveness required for guidance control, Fischer and Ravizza begin with two extremes, strong and weak reasons-responsiveness. According to them, each is too extreme. A mechanism K issuing in action in the actual world is strongly reasons-responsive if and only if, if any sufficient reason for acting otherwise were presented to the agent in the closest possible world (or set of worlds) in which K were to operate, the agent would act otherwise by virtue of K (Fischer and Ravizza 1998, 41). Clearly, making guidance control depend upon strong reasons-responsiveness is too stringent a demand. It would require that an agent is free in the sense required for moral responsibility only if she acts on the basis of a mechanism which perfectly contours with the scope of reasons. But from this it would follow that no one is blameworthy who knowingly does moral wrong (while believing that what morality proscribes is the best thing to do) (Fischer and Ravizza 1998, 43). In earlier work Fischer (1994) offered the considerably less demanding condition of a weakly reasons-responsive mechanism as an adequate basis for guidance control. A mechanism K issuing in action in the actual world is weakly reasons-responsive if and only if there exists some possible world in which K operates, there is sufficient reason for the agent to do otherwise, and the agent does do otherwise by virtue of K. To illustrate: suppose that Edwina elects to spend time in her study when she knows that she should be tending to her poor, sick and ailing mate, Edward, who is down with the blues. She realizes that she has a sufficient reason not to work in her study but she does so regardless. Clearly Edwina does not tend to her studies from a strongly reasons-responsive mechanism. She does have a sufficient reason to do otherwise than work in her study, yet she does not act accordingly. But suppose instead that in some other possible world Edward had just lopped off his toe working selflessly to build Edwina some bookshelves. In that world, Edwina, by way of the pertinent mechanism, would have ceased her studying and taken to mending her injured Edward. Thus, when Edwina does study in the actual world and does not tend to Edward, down with the blues, Edwina acts from a weakly reasons-responsive mechanism. Is this adequate to show that Edwina exhibits guidance control in her selfishly studying while poor Edward suffers from the blues?

A weakly reasons-responsive mechanism is too weak as a condition of guidance control. It allows insane persons to satisfy the control condition for moral responsibility (1998, 65–66). Suppose, for instance, that Edwina would stop her studying and tend to Edward only in a world in which Edward had lopped off his toe while wearing a Yankee’s ball cap. Were he to have lopped off his toe in a world in which he was not wearing a Yankee’s ball cap, Edwina would have been totally unconcerned and would have continued with her studies. Weak reasons-responsiveness is too weak. This problem led critics of Fischer and Ravizza’s earlier work to reject a reasons-responsive analysis of guidance control. It was simply inadequate to satisfy the control condition for moral responsibility.

In Responsibility and Control, Fischer and Ravizza attempt to specify the appropriate degree and nature of responsiveness so as to avoid the stringent requirements of a strongly reasons-responsive mechanism and yet fortify the impoverished scope of a weakly reasons-responsive mechanism. Thus they develop the notion of a moderately reasons-responsive mechanism. They begin by distinguishing two stages of a responsive mechanism, the stage of receptivity to reasons and the stage of reactivity to reasons (Fischer and Ravizza...
The stage of receptivity to reasons is the stage at which any reasons-responsive mechanism (strongly-, weakly-, or moderately-responsive) recognizes sufficient reasons to do otherwise. The stage of reactivity involves two processes: the process by which a reasons-responsive mechanism chooses to act on the basis of a sufficient reason to do otherwise, combined with the executive process by which the agent translates her choice into action. Fischer and Ravizza argue for a striking asymmetry thesis in which the scope of receptivity to reasons must be broader and satisfy greater constraints than the scope of reactivity to reasons.

Fischer and Ravizza seek a moderately reasons-receptive mechanism which need not be as strong as what would be required to satisfy a strongly reasons-responsive mechanism. An agent acting from a moderately reasons-receptive mechanism need not recognize any and all sufficient reasons to do otherwise, but the reasons which she recognizes via the appropriate mechanism must exhibit a pattern that captures intuitively plausible conditions of rationality. So, for instance, there is a natural assumption that reasons have weights that reside on a continuum such that if an agent recognizes one sufficient reason for acting otherwise, then she would also recognize similar types of reason that have the same or greater weight on the continuum (Fischer and Ravizza 1998, 69–70).

Reflect back on the example involving Edward and Edwina. Suppose that, though Edwina would have acted otherwise and stopped tending to her studies had she learned that Edward had lopped off his toe, she would not have taken as a sufficient reason to cease her studying that Edward had lopped off his hand, suffered a stroke, or caught his hand in the lawn mower. Suppose that Edwina would recognize a reason to act otherwise only if Edward had lopped off his toe. Thus, for Edwina to have acted from an appropriately reasons-receptive mechanism, it must be the case that in worlds in which she would recognize Edward’s lopping off his toe as a reason to act otherwise, she would recognize similar reasons to act otherwise as well. These reasons must display a pattern of rationality which exhibits that Edwina sees how it is that reasons hang together. Finally, Fischer and Ravizza supplement this scope of receptivity to include some (but not necessarily all) moral reasons. This would eliminate inclusion of psychopaths, small children and animals who might be capable of recognizing a rational pattern of reasons for action, but are incapable of recognizing moral reasons for action (1998, 69–71).

In contrast to reasons receptivity, Fischer and Ravizza theorize that a moderately reasons-responsive mechanism need only be weakly reactive to reasons (1998, 73). There need be only a very small class of worlds in which the agent both recognizes sufficient reasons to do otherwise and then actually does otherwise in virtue of recognizing those reasons. In this respect, the authors permit a highly idiosyncratic type of morally responsible agent (1998, 74–76). To illustrate, consider the case of Edward and Edwina and suppose that Edwina studies from a mechanism that is moderately receptive to reasons: she would see as a sufficient reason for acting otherwise and not studying that Edward had lopped off his toe, or had lopped off his hand, suffered a stroke, gotten his hand caught in the lawn mower, etc. But on Fischer and Ravizza’s account, in order for Edwina to act with the guidance control sufficient for moral responsibility, it need only be the case that she would actually react to but one reason, perhaps Edward’s lopping off his toe. Just so long as she would see that in the other range of cases she would have sufficient reason to act otherwise, it need not be the case that in those worlds she acts upon those reasons.
There are problems here. Fischer and Ravizza’s asymmetry thesis, as it stands, cannot be correct. The case of the moderately receptive but only weakly reactive Edwina brings this out. Given the case there is overwhelming evidence that Edwina acts from a defective mechanism. She suffers from some disorder which impairs her ability to perform the executive functions associated with free action. Such high idiosyncrasy would be best explained by assuming that in this one limited world, the world in which Edwina reacts to Edward’s lopping off his toe, Edward lucks out and Edwina’s actional disorder is on holiday. Also, the case calls into question Edwina’s understanding of the weight of moral reasons. Fischer and Ravizza want their account to show that the agent reacts otherwise on the basis of recognizing the pertinent reason (1998, 63–64). But in the case of Edwina, it is unclear, in the world in which Edwina does stop to render aid to Edward because he has lopped off his toe, that she really does so in virtue of her appreciating the import of that reason. Were she to do so one would think that she would respond to like reasons by acting differently in a like range of cases.

Fischer and Ravizza must expand the scope of reactivity in their account of a moderately reasons-responsive mechanism. Without this concession they admit agents with questionable actional capacities and dubious appreciation of moral reasons. To understand their motive for their asymmetry thesis, notice that the range of worlds in which a person recognizes sufficient reasons to do otherwise must be larger than the range of worlds in which the person does otherwise. If not, Fischer and Ravizza could not account for morally blameworthy behavior in which an agent knows that she is doing moral wrong. They need a class of worlds in which the agent does recognize sufficient reason to do otherwise but she does not act otherwise. (This is also required if they want to explain moral responsibility for akratic action.) Hence, they need the asymmetry, but what they should settle for is moderate reasons receptivity and weaker reactivity, but instead moderate reasons receptivity and weaker reactivity. With this amendment it seems that Fischer and Ravizza have offered an account of reasons-responsiveness that provides the right judgments in cases like those involving agents who are only responsive to insane patterns of reasons.

Despite Fischer and Ravizza’s success in fortifying their previous account of weak reasons-responsiveness, the stalwart incompatibilist will remain unpersuaded. Fischer and Ravizza explain that the reason that mere weak reactivity is adequate is because, as they put it, ‘reactivity is all of a piece’ (1998, 73). They claim that, if an agent reacts differently to a sufficient reason to do otherwise in one possible world, this proves that she has the general capacity to react differently in any possible world in which the pertinent mechanism operates. As the authors anticipate, the incompatibilist might be inclined to object that the fact that the agent acts otherwise on the basis of recognizing some other sufficient reason to do otherwise in some other possible world is little solace to a person who does moral wrong at a deterministic world. For in that world she cannot do otherwise and act differently given the presence of the actual sufficient reasons which she did have for acting otherwise (1998, 73). How could it possibly help to say that we are justified in holding the agent responsible because she would have reacted differently to a different reason in some other possible world? Should not her reasons-responsiveness turn on her ability to react differently to the reasons at stake in the particular moral situation she was in?
I have already offered reasons why Fischer and Ravizza should increase the scope of the requisite reactivity to reasons. But it seems that they cannot increase the scope further so as to accommodate the above incompatibilist worry without allowing the freedom to do otherwise to creep back into their analysis. To increase the scope as needed would require that the agent can respond differently to the very reasons present in the actual world. Yet in the nearest possible world in which that reason obtains—the actual world—the agent does not have the ability to act differently. Given the nature of determinism, there is no possible world which shares the same facts with the actual world at a time and the same laws but in which an agent acts differently than she does in the actual world.

It appears that Fischer and Ravizza’s reply to the above incompatibilist’s objection must be that what matters for assessments of moral responsibility is the general capacity to react to reasons, and not the particular ability of an agent to react differently to a certain sort of reason. And this is, indeed, what Fischer and Ravizza say, based on precisely the previous sort of consideration (1998, 73–75). Unfortunately, they offer little argument for this crucial contention. They maintain that it is plausible to reply to the incompatibilist that an agent’s general capacity to react to different reasons to do otherwise in other possible worlds shows that an agent ‘could in fact have reacted’ (i.e., possesses the general capacity to react differently) to her actual reasons for doing otherwise (1998, 74). But the plausibility of Fischer and Ravizza’s reply will be lost on the incompatibilist. No doubt, the incompatibilist will acknowledge that the pertinent worlds do demonstrate that such an agent does possess the general capacity at issue. But Fischer and Ravizza will need to say more about why the possession of such a general capacity should satisfy the incompatibilist at this point. Why exactly does shifting to properties of the mechanism (or general abilities of the agent) help here? In the absence of an answer to this question, the apparent, long-standing philosophical stalemate remains.

IV

What can be said on Fischer and Ravizza’s behalf? Quite a bit. To begin, it is easy to lose sight of the most salient point regarding their reasons-responsive account of guidance control. The possible worlds analysis involving receptivity and reactivity is meant to capture what it is for a mechanism to issue in the action of a morally responsible agent in a fashion that is properly reasons-responsive. True to the spirit of the moral they draw from Frankfurt examples, the most important purpose such an analysis should serve is in calling attention to what actually does happen. Hence, the most important question about the reactivity piece of their account of reasons-responsiveness is whether the mechanism that the agent acted upon was itself a response to some sort of reason. Even granting the incompatibilist objection leveled above, that with the good reason to do otherwise bearing on the agent in the actual world, the agent could not react to it, it is nevertheless open to Fischer and Ravizza to consider the reason that did issue in the agent’s action (say the sort that reveals the agent as morally culpable). Running a different range of counterfactuals, Fischer and Ravizza can ask if the agent, by way of the relevant mechanism, would have acted as she did had those reasons not been present. And this counterfactual is certainly one to which they are entitled. Hence, they are not without resources to show that the agent possessed a certain sort of reactive sensitivity to the very reasons present in the actual situation she was in. Naturally, this will not entirely silence the incompatibilist objection raised above, but it does help to put the lie on it; it’s a worry, but it’s to be measured
against a demonstration of the morally objectionable reasons on which the agent did act, reasons to which she was reactive.

True, Fischer and Ravizza grant that the agent in the actual world acts upon a mechanism that cannot be characterized as reactive to the very reason to do otherwise that is present in the actual world. Their basis for making this concession is perfectly reasonable: assuming determinism, in the nearest possible world in which that very same reason to do otherwise is present, the agent does not act otherwise. But what is meant here by the ‘same reason’? I suspect that Fischer and Ravizza are unnecessarily playing into the incompatibilists’ hands by assuming a hyper-restricted sense of sameness of reason. If sameness of reason requires specification down to the micro-details of the factors constituting an agent’s reasons (say certain brain states), then, no doubt, in the relevant range of nearest possible worlds, the agent would not react to such reasons. But if restrictions on sameness of reasons are loosened, then it is at least disputable whether Fischer and Ravizza are forced to say that there are no appropriately near worlds in which the agent reacts differently to the same reasons.

Let’s explore this suggestion. Return to the case of Edward and Edwina. In the actual world Edwina does not stop work in her study and tend to Edward who is down with the blues. Grant that she is receptive to a range of reasons to do otherwise that are moderately varied just as Fischer and Ravizza require. Suppose also that in this case Edwina is receptive to Edward’s being down with the blues as a good reason to stop her work and tend to him. But she does not react to this reason. Instead, she does react to her reason to continue working, namely the deadline that has so preoccupied her as of late. Now, what is the reason present in the actual world to which Edwina, via her mechanism, does not respond? Notice that there are different true ways to describe this reason. Whether these different descriptions pick out the same reason is a difficult question in this context. But let’s begin with a lean assessment of Edwina’s reasons: Edward’s mental anguish. Let us also allow ourselves the (at this point) undefended presumption that we can make do with a looser notion of ‘sameness of reasons’ (looser than one that would involve a hyper-restricted requirement of sameness down to micro-details of an agent’s brain). Suppose that there are no determined worlds with the same laws of nature as the actual world in which, a, Edwina acts from the mechanism that operates in the actual world, b, Edwina recognizes Edward’s mental anguish as a reason to help Edward, and c, Edwina reacts to this reason and does help him. Suppose, however, that there are a rich range of worlds in which a and b obtain, but not c. Under this supposition, there is reason to believe that Edwina is unable to act on this sort of reason at all. It might be characterized as a kind of aversion; Edwina is not in control of her behavior when it comes to reacting to other’s (or maybe just Edward’s) psychological pain.

If this conclusion seems specious, keep in mind that we are imaging that there are no such worlds in which a, b, and c obtain, while there are many in which a and b obtain but not c. To see how terribly defective the reactivity component of Edwina’s mechanism must be, note that, since we are helping ourselves to a loose notion of sameness of reasons, the worlds in which b obtains will include worlds in which Edwina does not have any competing reason to attend to her work due to a deadline, or even to attend to any work at all. Indeed, such worlds could include worlds in which Edwina has nothing to do, cares greatly for Edward, and is bored out of her mind. We could even imagine worlds in which there are further incentives to help people who are depressed. Maybe in one, she will get $10,000.00 or a new car. Let us call this range of worlds b worlds. Even in the b
worlds considered here (which also include a worlds), when she is receptive to the various good reasons to help Edward, she does not act on any of them. This strongly suggests that, indeed, she has a sort of aversion to helping others (or maybe just Edward) in matters involving psychic suffering. She is not, by way of the mechanism of action at issue, in any way reactive to an important sort of reason to which she is receptive. Now it seems perfectly reasonable in this sort of case for Fischer and Ravizza to find that Edwina does not act with guidance control in remaining in her study and failing to render aid to Edward.

On the other hand, suppose that, when acting on the relevant mechanism, Edwina is able to react to Edward in some relevant range of the b worlds mentioned above. Then Fischer and Ravizza can handily say that Edwina is reactive to the very reason to act otherwise that was present in the actual world when she failed to act on it. Will this do? ‘Foul play!’ the incompatibilist might object, for the looseness regarding sameness of reasons I have introduced here (without argument) distorts the crucial incompatibilist concern: could Edwin have reacted to the very reason present in the actual world when this reason was itself informed by the other considerations figuring into Edwina’s weighing of reasons, most notably, her desire to work and the deadline that was driving her. ‘Sameness of reason,’ the incompatibilist might object, ‘must involve a notion of sameness that preserves the context in which the reason is nested when the agent acts.’ Okay. Let us work with a finer grained description of Edwina’s reason, setting aside the worry as to whether or not this description picks out the same reason. Make Edwina’s reason Edward’s mental anguish in comparison with the demands of Edwina’s work. So let Fischer and Ravizza restrict the b worlds to those in which Edwina has an intense desire to work and an impending deadline. But now, let us include in this narrowing range of b worlds further considerations beyond those that obtained in the actual world. In some of them, Edwin threatens to sever the relationship if Edwina does not help him out. In others, Edwina is reminded by a close friend of the many times the chips were down for her and Edward came through. In yet other cases, Edwina happens to recall an article that warns that failure to help intimates suffering from depression can harm oneself. In some relevant range of worlds, Edwina reacts to the reason to help Edward who is down with the blues.

What if even here the incompatibilist cries foul play? Imagine the incompatibilist to complain that ‘sameness of reasons’ is still too loose. She means her objection to Fischer and Ravizza to be that in the actual world in which Edwina failed to act on the good reason to do otherwise, in giving an analysis of the reasons reactivity of the actual mechanism issuing in action, that good reason must be restricted so that all considerations bearing on the agent’s deliberative mechanism in the actual world are held exactly fixed and thereby figure into the description of ‘the’ reason. So, as this incompatibilist complaint goes, we are not entitled to imagine that the same mechanism is operative, the same reason is present (to render aid to Edward down with the blues), but Edwina is influenced by any other considerations, such as a threat from Edward to sever the relationship. Any change in deliberative context involves a different reason; sameness of reason requires precisely the same deliberative context.

Naturally, a compatibilist will want to know what the incompatibilist has in mind here by ‘same deliberative context,’ but I think we needn’t develop this further to see what avenues Fischer and Ravizza might explore to defend the reactivity component of their account. Two points speak in their favor here. First, it is far more natural to think of same reasons as reasons that could bear on a variety of like contexts, however ‘like’ is to be handled. Second, an incompatibilist’s insistence that sameness of reasons must
As to the first point, earlier I remarked parenthetically that affording Fischer and Ravizza a looser notion of sameness of reason was undefended. Here is a very brief defense: the hyper-restricted notion is a highly derived one. Generally, we understand reasons bearing on practical conduct as considerations that have some level of application beyond the particular. This is enough to defend the permissibility of thinking of the ‘same reason’ as applicable to a range of contexts.\(^8\)

As to the second point, the demand that sameness of reason be restricted to sameness of deliberative context comes too close to the illicit demand that the agent be able to do otherwise with precisely the same laws and the same past. This is simply to demand that the agent not be determined. And this is not a dialectically fair move for the incompatibilist to make at this point, not if Fischer and Ravizza can give a perfectly credible account of an agent’s ability to react differently to a reason, the very same reason an agent fails to act on in the actual world. One might add here that the unreasonableness of such an incompatibilist demand is compounded by the fact that Fischer and Ravizza mean to introduce their actual-sequence analysis of guidance control only after discharging a Frankfurt-type argument meant to show that the freedom to act otherwise is not required for moral responsibility.\(^9\)

In the closing paragraph of the previous section I asked why exactly Fischer and Ravizza’s move to a discussion of general capacities should satisfy the incompatibilist. Why is this a legitimate way to engage her, especially in light of her concern with reactivity regarding the same reason to do otherwise bearing on a determined agent in the actual world? I believe that Fischer and Ravizza’s reply is a fair one, but only when it is supplemented as I have suggested they should. Calling attention to the general capacity of the pertinent mechanism to react to different reasons to do otherwise from those present in the actual world establishes that the agent was not impaired for a certain sort of reasoning and conduct expected of morally responsible agents. But unaided, this reply relies too heavily on the standard compatibilist move of calling attention to general capacities when incompatibilists want to fix upon specific abilities applied to unique contexts of action. It seems to me that it is only dialectically fair for the compatibilist to try to address the incompatibilist concern with an account of freedom restricted to the contexts unique to the action in question, but the compatibilist should only be willing to grant so much. If the incompatibilist wants to know whether an agent who failed to act upon a good reason to do otherwise (by way of a certain mechanism), could have reacted to that good reason to do otherwise, the compatibilist should answer that demand directly. That demand reflects the dialectically fair incompatibilist complaint that general capacities do not go far enough. But if the compatibilist has a reasonable account of the ability to react to the same reason (via the appropriate mechanism), then it is dialectically unfair for the incompatibilist to insist that the only credible way to satisfy that ability must involve a hyper-restricted notion of sameness of reasons, especially when that notion of sameness of reasons is not at all the intuitive one that most persons have in mind when deliberating about how practical reasons apply to deliberative contexts.

Gathering the results of this and the previous section, incompatibilists are entitled to the complaint that Fischer and Ravizza’s account of reasons reactivity is unsatisfying because it cannot account for the ability to react, via the properly specified mechanism
of action, to the same good reason to do otherwise that a determined agent did face in the actual world. But as I have argued, Fischer and Ravizza have three points they can advance in reply. First, they have the point they have already made; displaying a general capacity to react differently to different reasons to do otherwise proves that the agent is not impaired in ways that would make her insensitive to acting upon such reasons. Second, they can also call attention to the reason in the actual world to which the agent did react, a reason that (in the case of blameworthy behavior) calls attention to the agent’s morally culpable motive. Third, by challenging the incompatibilist’s conception of sameness of reason, they can finally meet the incompatibilist’s complaint head on, showing that there are worlds in which the same mechanism operates and the agent, by way of her mechanism of action, reacts differently to the very reason that is in dispute.

V

John Martin Fischer and Mark Ravizza offer a compelling account of actual-sequence compatibilism. On their view, the best case for compatibilism proceeds by focusing upon the properties manifest in the actual sequence of events leading to action. More traditional compatibilist approaches foundered by worrying about alternative courses of action requiring access to alternative causal sequences. Incompatibilists could then respond to the compatibilist by making use of powerful arguments such as the Consequence Argument. The Consequence Argument is designed to show that, at a deterministic world, an agent does not have access to alternative courses of action as the requisite alternative causal sequences are inaccessible to the agent. By offering a dispositional analysis of the properties present in the actual causal source of an agent’s action, Fischer and Ravizza can render this incompatibilist strategy otiose. All they need do is offer an analysis that captures an intuitively plausible basis for the actual control possessed by the agent in the actual world. Locating the pertinent control in an agent’s sensitivity to reasons (via an actual-sequence mechanism) certainly does that. This is a graceful philosophical maneuver, painstakingly worked out in clear and provocative detail. Their efforts have rightly placed their compatibilist view at the center of contemporary debate.

A crucial element in Fischer and Ravizza’s actual-sequence compatibilism is to specify the degree of reasons-responsiveness a mechanism must have in order to capture adequately the intuitive notion of guidance control. I have argued that, properly modified, their treatment of moderate reasons-responsiveness does evade prior objections regarding the unwanted result that insane persons possess guidance control. Despite this success I also indicated two shortcomings in their defense of reasons reactivity. One of these, I explained, could be rectified by increasing the scope of reasons reactivity. The second, however, raises deeper worries. According to the authors, the possession of a general capacity to react to reasons is adequate for guidance control; the ability to act on different reasons is not required. But, I have argued, this claim is insufficiently motivated and will not convince those with incompatibilist proclivities.

Defending Fischer and Ravizza against this last objection, I have made a compatibilist investment in the notion of sameness of reason, arguing that incompatibilists are not dialectically entitled to presume a hyper-restricted notion of sameness of reason. If they are not, then Fischer and Ravizza are perfectly entitled to show that a determined agent who acts upon a reasons-responsive mechanism is able to react differently to the good reasons.
reason to do otherwise that she failed to act upon in the actual sequence of events in which she did act.

There are, I think, two deeper lessons to be learnt in my defense of Fischer and Ravizza. First, the compatibilist does need some principled basis for thinking in terms of sameness of reasons. Without it, the incompatibilist will have quick recourse to a tighter notion of sameness that will satisfy her position, and we will be left with another dialectical stalemate. I have hinted in the direction of such a principled basis. It is one that is informed by the sorts of standards for practical reasoning that could have any purchase upon us as deliberating agents. Those standards invite us to assess our reasons as considerations that could bear upon some range of cases, cases that themselves help to test the rationality of the reasons as legitimate reasons for action. This is not an arbitrary suggestion, but cuts to the heart of what it is for us to act as rational agents at all. So the compatibilist is certainly on safe ground in thinking about reasons as permitting at least some looseness in what will count as the 'same reasons.'

In the opening section of this paper I remarked that my friendly amendment offered to Fischer and Ravizza regarding reasons reactivity might also suggest a promising reply to criticisms I have put to them regarding sameness of mechanism. In the case of sameness of mechanism, my criticism was similar: Fischer and Ravizza need a principled basis for mechanism individuation. I think that a similar strategy might aid them here. The relevant level of specificity for sameness of mechanism issuing in the action of morally responsible agents should be settled in terms regarding the appropriate standards for moral assessment and deliberation. These standards are not suited for the sort of highly derived notion of sameness involved in the metaphysically pristine cases in which the entire past is held fixed and the laws of nature are held constant. 12

Here is a second deeper lesson that, I believe, can be drawn from the above defense of Fischer and Ravizza’s position. Recall that one of the points used to defend them was that the determined agent did react to some reason in doing what she did (assuming she was blameworthy, it would be a culpable reason). It is so easy to overlook the power of this point when the incompatibilist asks us to consider the good reason to do otherwise that the agent did not act upon. Certainly it would be dialectically unfair of Fischer and Ravizza to ignore the incompatibilist’s concern, but it is also misleading to fix upon this incompatibilist concern to the exclusion of the actual reason to which the agent did react. Fischer and Ravizza’s account is, after all, like Frankfurt’s, an actual-sequence account. What is paramount is what an agent does and her actual reasons for doing it.

In understanding Fischer and Ravizza’s account, there is a temptation to read it as less than it is. By calling attention to possible worlds in which an agent’s mechanism is operative and the agent has good reasons to do otherwise, they mean primarily to show that what the agent actually did was itself a response to a reason. That is the fundamental basis for moral appraisal. By demonstrating in counterfactual terms that the actual reason a morally responsible agent acted upon was via a reasons-responsive mechanism, it is almost as if Fischer and Ravizza give content to that reason and that mechanism only by showing the silhouette of it. 13 They seem to cast light only on how the mechanism would respond with alternative pressures placed on it. But in fairness to Fischer and Ravizza, there is a complete picture of agency to be gleaned from their account, one that is meant to cast light on what the agent does do. So, even supposing that the majority of the defense I offered above is ignored—that is, even supposing that ultimately Fischer and Ravizza cannot advance a convincing case that a determined agent could react...
differently via the appropriate mechanism to the good reason she fails to act on in the actual world—Fischer and Ravizza can set aside the silhouette they cast as regarding the issue of reactivity. Instead, they can shed light on the reason to which the agent does react. That is at the core of their account.

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NOTES
1. I first introduced the challenge for Fischer and Ravizza’s view that I will focus upon in this paper in an earlier publication (see McKenna 2000). In it I did not develop the point, nor did I offer the solution to it that I offer here.
2. As Fischer and Ravizza observe (1998, 67–68), merely increasing the number of sufficient reasons in a larger class of possible worlds will not help. Suppose that the Edwina would not helped Edward only if he was wearing a Yankee’s hat, or had just previously been singing a Beatle’s song, or instead, smelled like garlic at the time. This ‘pattern’ of reasons would be just as perverse as would be the thought that the only reason to help toeless Edward is that he is wearing a Yankee’s ball cap.
3. Fischer himself recognized these problems in Fischer (1994), in which he presents weak reasons-responsiveness as a ‘first approximation’ to a fully adequate account of the sort of reasons-responsiveness involved in moral responsibility (1994, 168, especially footnote 8, the text of which appears on page 243). A critical discussion is presented in Peter Van Inwagen (1997); for Fischer’s reply, see Fischer (1998).
4. Fischer and Ravizza advise an idealized, sane and reasonable third-party interviewer as a modest test to ensure that the pattern is not bizarre but meets objective criterion. This will show that the agent is ‘in tune’ with reality (1998, 71–73).
6. In personal correspondence Fischer has acknowledged this point.
7. As Al Mele has pointed out in conversation, specifying how much weaker the reactivity component must be in relation to the reactivity component is a tall order. Since Fischer and Ravizza mean to give an account of the conditions necessary and sufficient for guidance control, this has to be hammered out. One suggestion for Fischer and Ravizza would be to make the reactivity component strong enough to defeat the sorts of charges brought to light here. However strong that has to be, it can still be weaker than the receptivity component is.
8. Ishtiyaque Haji (1998, 81–83) develops a thoughtful account of reasons-responsiveness similar in many respects to Fischer and Ravizza’s. There, Haji suggests that in assessing the same reason, one could alter background belief contexts. This is very similar to the point I am making here.
9. I am thankful to Ish Haji for drawing my attention to this last point.
10. This point is one Derk Pereboom and I considered over the course of several conversations. I am in his debt for helping me to formulate it.

11. This point is one Al Mele and I considered over the course of several conversations. I am in his debt for helping me to formulate it.

12. In a work in progress, ‘Expressive theories of responsibility and an agent meaning theory,’ I have sketched an account for the proper sorts of standards for sameness of mechanism. I attempt to do this in terms of the sort of interpretive scheme morally competent agents might apply to understanding how their actions and others’ can be understood as exemplifying moral quality of will.

13. My formulation of this point is inspired by a recent conversation with Nomy Arpaly.

REFERENCES

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