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On: 11 August 2015, At: 13:22

Publisher: Routledge

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Philosophical Psychology

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cphp20>

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Published online: 02 Sep 2014.



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To cite this article: Oisín Deery, Taylor Davis & Jasmine Carey (2015) Defending the Free-Will Intuitions Scale: Reply to Stephen Morris, *Philosophical Psychology*, 28:6, 808-814, DOI: [10.1080/09515089.2014.946989](https://doi.org/10.1080/09515089.2014.946989)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09515089.2014.946989>

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Defending the Free-Will Intuitions Scale: Reply to Stephen Morris

Oisín Deery, Taylor Davis and Jasmine Carey

In our paper, “The Free-Will Intuitions Scale and the question of natural compatibilism” (this issue), we seek to advance empirical debates about free will by measuring the relevant folk intuitions using the scale methodology of psychology, as a supplement to standard experimental methods. Stephen Morris (this issue) raises a number of concerns about our paper. Here, we respond to Morris’s concerns.

Keywords: Compatibilism; Experimental Philosophy; Free Will; Intuitions

In his response to our paper, Stephen Morris makes two central objections, one regarding free will and the other regarding determinism. We will respond to these objections in turn.

1. Free Will

Morris’s first objection focuses on the items we used to measure intuitions about the ability to do otherwise (ATDO), items that come in both compatibilist and incompatibilist varieties. Morris suggests that:

It is highly questionable as to whether agreeing wholeheartedly with an ATDO Compatibilism item . . . indicates that one truly harbors compatibilist intuitions. This is because it is entirely reasonable to think that an incompatibilist (specifically, a hard determinist) could wholeheartedly agree with the item in question. ([this issue](#))

As a result, “we cannot infer from the fact that one agrees with one of the ATDO Compatibilist items (or disagrees with one of the ATDO Incompatibilist items) that one, therefore, harbors compatibilist attitudes” ([this issue](#)).

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Notice that Morris's objection isn't that the items in question fail to answer the psychological question whether participants actually do harbor the intuitions that our items were designed to measure. Rather, it is that the intuitions being measured are the wrong ones to be investigating in the first place, because they do not count as exclusively compatibilist or incompatibilist. This is an interesting objection. Although we disagree that the intuitions being measured do not count as compatibilist, we think the objection exposes some important assumptions of our methodology, which we appreciate having the opportunity to clarify further. In particular, the objection exposes assumptions about what it means for an intuition to count as compatibilist.

Morris assumes, naturally enough, that compatibilism is to be defined in terms of the compatibility of determinism and free will, and he rejects our ATDO items because they "do not tie the ATDO to free will in any direct way" ([this issue](#)). However, our items do not need to "tie" the ability to do otherwise to free will, because what makes them philosophically interesting is the fact that many philosophers already take the ability to do otherwise to be (at least partly) *constitutive* of free will. There is no reason for the items themselves to "tie" the ATDO to free will, because the intimate connection between the ATDO and free will has already been built into the assumptions that make these intuitions relevant to philosophical theorizing.

Of course, what our methodological approach does not tell us, as Morris's analysis correctly identifies, is whether a given respondent *also* shares with certain philosophers the additional intuition that the ATDO is (partly) constitutive of free will. So Morris is right that our ATDO items don't establish, by themselves, whether participants are compatibilists or incompatibilists. Yet, it isn't necessary to establish this in order to do what we have designed our scale to do, which is to find out whether participants possess certain intuitions that have played an important role in philosophical theorizing about free will. Against the background of the *independent* fact that many philosophers take the ATDO to be importantly implicated in free will, the intuitions measured by our items are interesting quite apart from whether they establish whether the participants themselves are compatibilists or incompatibilists. What makes the intuitions compatibilist or not, on our approach, has nothing to do with the fact that they establish conclusively whether respondents are compatibilists or incompatibilists. It has to do with the role that the intuitions have played in the philosophical literature: philosophers have relied on them in defending their compatibilist and incompatibilist positions. If a hard determinist were to endorse our ATDO-Compatibilism items, this would simply show that a certain type of incompatibilist happens to share a certain "basic" intuition with a certain type of compatibilist. That, we submit, would be exactly the sort of interesting and subtle empirical fact that experimental philosophy in general is out to identify.

So, Morris's objection illustrates that, in addition to the empirical question that our ATDO items were designed to address, there is also a different empirical question that might be worth investigating: do the folk *also* possess the intuition that the ATDO is implicated in free will? That is an interesting question in its own right, but the significance of our data does not depend on answering it. Indeed, this is exactly the sort of new empirical inquiry that we hoped our scale would stimulate. That our study

does not address this question is not a reason to doubt the validity of our methods for addressing a different empirical question altogether.

In short, our ATDO items express (at least part of) the content of certain theories of free will, by expressing the conditions that these theories propose for the possession of free will, even though the items do not use the term ‘free will’. The items are thus relevant to whether the folk are natural compatibilists or not about free will, even though they don’t establish conclusively whether the particular individuals responding are compatibilists or incompatibilists.

Note that this is a general feature of our methodology, which also applies to the intuitions that we examined concerning sourcehood (SH), which is a different philosophical conception of free will. As with our ATDO items, our SH items come in compatibilist and incompatibilist varieties. Again, however, what makes an SH-Compatibilism item *compatibilist* is that it expresses an intuition that philosophers have used to support compatibilist theories, based on the sourcehood conception of free will. It is because of the role such intuitions play in philosophical theorizing that we dub them ‘compatibilist’, not—as Morris supposes—because the individual judging the item takes it to be logically consistent with determinism. To make an explicit judgment of that sort would be to have what we call a “*decision*” intuition, as opposed to a basic intuition. To have a basic intuition about some item is just to have *some* tendency to (dis)agree with it, even if this tendency may be overridden by contradictory intuitions. Whether an individual participant is a compatibilist isn’t a question that our scale is designed to address. Instead, we aim to study free-will intuitions in a way that separates questions about the status of *individuals*, as compatibilists or incompatibilists, from questions about the basic *intuitions* that those individuals possess—where the status of the intuitions as compatibilist or not is determined independently. That is, we classify the intuitions in question as compatibilist or not in virtue of the role that they play in philosophical theorizing.

In our view, if one’s empirical aim is to determine whether an *individual* is a compatibilist or an incompatibilist, then the Conflict Method is the better method to employ, since it measures reflective, all-things-considered commitments. We caution, however, that the Conflict Method is well-suited to revealing whether individuals are compatibilists (or not) only in relatively precise ways. Our data suggest, for instance, that an individual could be a compatibilist when free will is understood in terms of sourcehood, yet an incompatibilist when it is understood as the ability to do otherwise. Still, with regard to appropriately specific questions about individuals, the Conflict Method remains the most appropriate method to use. The point of employing scale methods is, by contrast, to identify and measure the sort of intuitions that act as *inputs* to such reflective decision-making processes, and one of our primary motivations for adopting this methodology is that we wanted to investigate whether individuals who were compatibilists might also possess incompatibilist intuitions, and vice versa. This can’t be achieved if the prior status of the individual determines whether the intuition in question *counts* as compatibilist or incompatibilist. If an intuition counts as compatibilist only in virtue of the fact that it is possessed by a

compatibilist individual, then the possibility of incompatibilists possessing compatibilist intuitions is ruled out from the start.

In sum, the point of employing scale methodology depends on there being some way to classify intuitions as compatibilist or incompatibilist without settling the question whether the individuals who possess these intuitions are themselves compatibilists or incompatibilists. We do this by appealing to the role that the intuitions play in philosophical theorizing. Given what we mean by ‘compatibilist’, it is possible in principle for all our participants to possess compatibilist intuitions even when no participant is actually a compatibilist. As a result, there remains an important sense in which our data *do* provide evidence for compatibilist intuitions among the folk, even though they do not establish whether any individuals are compatibilists: they identify intuitions that support compatibilist theories of free will.

2. Determinism

Morris’s second objection concerns our appeals to intuitions about determinism. In particular, Morris questions the conclusions we draw from our data on proximal determinism (Proximal-D). Early rounds of data collection on potential items for the FWIS revealed that it makes a difference whether determinism is described in terms of proximal causes, which occur immediately prior to the actions being evaluated, or in terms of more distal causes, which occur long before the action in question. Accordingly, in order to measure agreement with statements of determinism, we developed separate sub-scales describing determinism in each of these two ways. On the basis of data from these sub-scales, we argue in the paper that some of the conclusions drawn from earlier Conflict Method studies may be more limited in scope than their proponents had supposed, because they described determinism only in terms of distal causes without addressing proximal causes. Our data show that for certain questions about the compatibility of determinism and free will—especially those concerning the ability to do otherwise—it is proximal determinism, rather than distal determinism, that is considered as posing a threat to free action.

More specifically, our data reveal a difference between two distinct “clusters” of intuitions, one based on *moral* reasons for feeling that determinism threatens free will, and another based on *modal* reasons for detecting such a threat. When concerns about free will are based on concerns about moral responsibility, we found that freedom tends to be conceived in terms of whether one is the source of one’s actions (SH) rather than as the ability to do otherwise (ATDO), and that the threatening form of determinism is conceived in distal terms. Yet when concerns about free will are based on concerns about ATDO, rather than moral responsibility, the threatening form of determinism is conceived in terms of proximal rather than distal causes. Perhaps proximal causes seem more salient than distal causes as factors that constrain agents’ alternative possibilities. After all, it is plausibly easier to see how the events occurring in a person’s brain at the moment of action might constrain his or

her possibilities for acting than it is to understand how the Big Bang constrains such possibilities. Whether or not this hypothesis is correct, when questions about compatibilism are about agents' ability to do otherwise, our findings show that proximal causes of action influence basic intuitions about compatibilism more strongly than distal causes do.

Morris objects that intuitions about Proximal-D are irrelevant to the question of natural compatibilism, because they are more likely than intuitions about Distal-D to be misinterpreted by the folk. To know whether individuals are compatibilists in the philosophically relevant sense, Morris claims, the folk must understand determinism in the proper manner, which he calls "D-Proper."¹ Folk intuitions about Distal-D are, he suggests, more likely to be similar to those about "D-Proper" than are intuitions about Proximal-D. Morris claims that:

[A]sking subjects to discuss their attitudes about these issues in relation to Distal-D as opposed to Proximal-D is more likely to produce data that resembles what we would get if we asked them to discuss their attitudes about free will and moral responsibility given D-Proper. ([this issue](#))

We take this to imply that Proximal-D items are more susceptible to misinterpretation, or to interpretation in a philosophically irrelevant manner, than are Distal-D items. Morris describes two consequences of this claim that call into question our conclusions.

First, Morris thinks that our criticisms of the studies conducted by Nahmias and Murray (2011) and Nichols and Knobe (2007) are illegitimate, since the fact that these studies present determinism only in terms of Distal-D demonstrates merely that these researchers chose the better of two different methodological options. That is, even if it makes a psychological difference whether determinism is presented in terms of Proximal-D or Distal-D, judgments about Proximal-D are more likely than judgments about Distal-D to miss the philosophical point.

Second, Morris argues that our SH-Compatibilism items end up facing the same fate as that befalling our ATDO-Compatibilism items: the intuitions that they measure are not genuinely compatibilist, and thus they do not provide evidence that folk intuitions are compatibilist in the relevant sense. This is because our data show that compatibilists about sourcehood turn out to be compatibilists only about *Proximal-D*. It was specifically Proximal-D items, not Distal-D items, that our respondents endorsed in proportion to the extent to which they also endorsed SH-Compatibilism items. Accordingly, if these Proximal-D intuitions are likely to be based on a misinterpretation of determinism, then agreement with our SH-Compatibilism items no longer counts as agreement with the proper, philosophically relevant formulation of compatibilism.

Yet Morris's argument has a major shortcoming. His claim that participants' intuitions about Distal-D are more likely to be similar to intuitions about D-Proper than intuitions about Proximal-D are is an empirical hypothesis—one for which Morris provides no empirical support. Immediately after making this claim, as quoted above, Morris continues to explain:

This is because Distal-D better captures one of the main threats to free will and moral responsibility posed by D-Proper; namely, that our actions are the inevitable results of events that occurred long before we were born. The threat of determinism seems less acute if we limit the determining causes to events that immediately precede our decisions or actions. ([this issue](#))

We agree that “Distal-D better captures one of the main threats to free will and moral responsibility posed by D-Proper,” but not for the reason Morris provides, which is just that the threat to free will appears less acute *to Morris himself* when determinism is described in proximal terms. Yet the whole enterprise of experimental philosophy is built on the assumption that how things seem to particular philosophers is poor evidence for drawing conclusions about folk intuitions. We agree that Distal-D captures one of the main threats to free will because our *data* show this: Distal-D intuitions interact with the other intuitions of the moral cluster, but Proximal-D intuitions don’t. Yet while Distal-D better captures *one* threat to free will—the threat to moral responsibility—there is *another* threat to free will—the threat to the ability to do otherwise. Our data (rather than our own intuitions) show that the latter threat to free will is better captured by descriptions of determinism citing proximal causes. Accordingly, we reject the assumption, implicit in Morris’s objection, that one or the other form of determinism represents the *better* way of describing determinism to participants.

As a result, we also disagree with Morris’s more fundamental objection, that our data contain no evidence for compatibilist intuitions. We have already explained why we disagree with his reasons for denying that our ATDO-Compatibilism items provide evidence for compatibilism, but we are now in a position to explain why we deny his reasons for rejecting the evidence provided by our SH-Compatibilism items as well. As we have seen, there is no reason to privilege Distal-D over Proximal-D in the manner that Morris proposes. As a result, we continue to maintain that studies describing determinism only in distal terms are limited in scope, since they leave open the possibility that participants’ judgments might be different if determinism were presented in proximal terms instead. Of course, we grant that Distal-D items seem more important for questions about moral responsibility, whereas Proximal-D items are more important for questions about the ability to do otherwise. Thus, in *certain* experimental contexts it may be better to focus on Distal-D over Proximal-D. Yet, in other contexts, it may be better to do the opposite. This is all we mean when we claim that the conclusions drawn from existing studies may be more limited than their proponents assumed.

Further, we disagree that our SH-Compatibilism items fail to show evidence for compatibilist folk intuitions. Morris’s objection here is based on the claim that, if Proximal-D intuitions are more likely to lead to a misinterpretation of determinism, then the SH-Compatibilism intuitions that we identify no longer count as genuinely compatibilist. Since we reject his reasons for thinking that intuitions about Proximal-D items reflect any kind of misinterpretation, we also reject his claim that SH-Compatibilism intuitions are likely to be based on a misinterpretation.

In closing, we would like to say how pleased we are that Morris supports our use of the scale methodology in general, and we appreciate his distinguishing between the particular empirical conclusions we draw and the general methods by which we draw them. Of the two, it is the Free-Will Intuitions Scale itself that we are more interested in promoting and defending. Our empirical claims were offered primarily as a way of illustrating, by example, what kinds of new findings scale methods can provide about philosophical intuitions. We hope that the empirical controversy they have created will drive further discoveries of this kind.

Note

- 1 Morris defines D-Proper as follows: “given the state of affairs at any time t_1 , one could, in principle, infer on the basis of this state of affairs—and the laws of nature—the state of affairs at any subsequent time t_{1+n} .” Notice, however, that this characterization is incorrect as it stands. That is because deterministic physical laws are *bi-directionally* deterministic—that is, they entail not only what happens after, but also before, t_1 . As a result, D-Proper should instead be defined as: “given the state of affairs at any time t , one could, in principle, infer on the basis of this state of affairs—and the laws of nature—the state of affairs at *all times other than t* .”

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