

Reasons-sensitivity and degrees of free will

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Abstract

Some actions are free and others are not. But free will also comes in degrees. This paper offers a novel account of degrees of free will, taking as its starting point the idea that an action is free to the extent to which the agent was sensitive, in acting, to reasons for or against performing that action. Though lip service is often paid to the idea that reasons-sensitivity comes in degrees, however, the details turn out to be harder to pin down than one might initially have thought. I criticise three recent accounts of degrees of reasons-sensitivity, arguing that none of them succeed in capturing our intuitions about degrees of free will in particular cases. I then defend an alternative approach, which combines a causal account of sensitivity with my own preferred metaphysics of degrees of causal contribution. As well as avoiding the problems faced by its rivals, I'll argue that this account provides a novel response to the situationist threat to free will, arising out of empirical studies purporting to show that 'situational factors' play a larger role in producing actions than we typically assume.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Some actions are free and others are not. But free will also comes in degrees. The kinds of conditions typically thought to undermine an agent's freedom – phobias, compulsive disorders, intoxication, cognitive impairments, and so on – all manifest in symptoms that can be perfectly manageable,

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completely debilitating, or anything in between.¹ Yet despite this, most of the philosophical work on free will has tended to focus on the ‘yes or no’ question of what makes an action free *simpliciter* (and in particular, whether free action is compatible with determinism), neglecting almost completely the question of what might underlie these comparative judgements.

The aim of this paper is therefore to address this lacuna. My starting point is the popular idea that an action was free to the extent to which the agent was sensitive, in acting, to reasons for or against acting that way. Although it’s common to find lip service paid to the idea that sensitivity to reasons comes in degrees,² however, the details turn out to be harder to pin down than one might initially have thought. In §§3-4 of this paper, I’ll consider three extant accounts of degrees of reasons-sensitivity, due to Coates and Swenson (2013), Montminy and Tinney (2018), and Sartorio (2016, 2018), arguing that none of them succeed in capturing our intuitions about degrees of free will in particular cases. Then, in §§5-6, I’ll defend an alternative account which combines a causal approach to sensitivity with my own preferred metaphysics of degrees of causal contribution. On the resulting view, an action’s degree of reasons-sensitivity depends, not on *how many* reasons caused the action, but rather on how much reasons *contributed*, compared to non-reason-conferring factors, to bringing the action about. As well as avoiding many of the problems faced by its rivals, I’ll argue in §7 that this account can help to illuminate the nature of the so-called ‘situationist threat’ to free will, which arises from studies in psychology and social science purporting to show that ‘situational factors’ play a larger role in producing actions than we typically assume.

2 | PRELIMINARIES

The major fault line in the free will literature in recent years has been between *alternative-possibilities* views, which take an agent’s freedom to be grounded, at least in part, in whether they could have acted differently than they actually did, and *actual-sequence* views, which take freedom to be fully grounded in the actual sequence of events issuing in the agent’s behaviour. Actual-sequence theorists are primarily motivated by so-called ‘Frankfurt-style cases’,³ such as the following from Sartorio (2016, 13):

Frank and Furt: Frank is deliberating about whether to shoot Furt. Unbeknownst to him, a neuroscientist has been secretly monitoring Frank’s brain processes. The neuroscientist can reliably predict the choices that Frank is about to make by looking at the activity in his brain, and can also manipulate Frank’s brain in a way that guarantees that Frank will shoot Furt. He plans to intervene if he predicts that Frank will not choose to shoot Furt on his own. As it happens, Frank chooses to shoot Furt on his own, motivated by his own reasons, and without the intervention of the neuroscientist (who correctly predicts that Frank would make that choice on his own).

¹This is reflected, to some extent, in the criminal law, which in many jurisdictions distinguishes between severe psychological conditions that grant defendants a full defence and milder conditions that merely grant them a partial defence; see Brink (forthcoming, ch.15).

²“[R]esponsiveness to reasons comes in degrees” (McKenna 2013, 155); “[R]easons-responsiveness is a matter of degree” (Sartorio 2018, 799); “Reasons-responsiveness can be had in different degrees” (Moya 2006, 119); etc.

³After Frankfurt (1969); though see also Locke (1689, 153).

Intuitively, Frank acted freely in shooting Furt. But given the presence of the neuroscientist, Frank couldn't have acted otherwise. So, actual-sequence theorists conclude, freedom is not grounded in the ability to act otherwise.

Supposing that this argument is successful,⁴ it leaves open what exactly *does* ground freedom. According to one influential response, which I'll be taking as my starting point in this paper, an agent's freedom in acting a certain way is at least partially⁵ grounded in their sensitivity to reasons for and against acting that way. What makes the actions of young children, intoxicated people, or sufferers of certain kinds of mental illnesses less than fully free, on this view, is not that they couldn't have acted otherwise, but rather that they weren't sufficiently sensitive to the reasons for or against their actions.

This raises two important questions: What are reasons? And what is it to be sensitive to them? The reasons-sensitivity literature is surprisingly silent on the first question. This is unfortunate, since as we'll see a lot turns on how certain controversies about the nature of reasons are to be resolved. Let me start, therefore, by making explicit some assumptions about reasons that I'll be relying on throughout this paper. I won't attempt to argue for them, and my exposition will be necessarily brief.⁶

Reasons, as I will be thinking of them, are *facts*, which (in some sense I won't try to articulate any further) *tell in favour* of a particular course of action. That apple crumble is tasty is a reason for me to eat some; that it is unhealthy is a reason for me not to eat some; and that it is typically baked at 180°C is neither. Reasons for S to ϕ can be *overridden* by other, stronger reasons for S not to ϕ ;⁷ I'll say that *p* is a *sufficient* reason for S to ϕ just in case it's a reason for S to ϕ that isn't overridden by the reasons, if any, for S not to ϕ . Note that reasons are *not* desires, beliefs, or any other kind of psychological state, on this view; nor, in general, are they facts about such things. That I believe that apple crumble is unhealthy *might* independently be a reason for me not to eat some, but only if, for example, that belief would make me feel guilty and so ruin my enjoyment of it.

It's important to distinguish the *reasons for S to ϕ* , the *reasons S has to ϕ* , and the *reasons for which S ϕ -ed*. The reasons I *have* to do something are those reasons for me to do it to which I have the appropriate epistemic access, such that it would be legitimate for me to use them as premises in practical reasoning.⁸ That a bomb will go off unless I cut the red wire is a reason for me to cut it, but if I have no idea how the bomb works, it's not a reason I *have* to cut the red wire. The reasons *for which* I did something are the reasons which actually motivated me to do it – the reasons on the basis of which I acted.⁹ I might

⁴For a critical introduction to the various responses to Frankfurt's argument, see Sartorio (2017).

⁵This qualification is important – most proponents of this view only think of reasons-sensitivity as a *necessary* condition on free will. I am open, therefore, to the idea that more goes into determining an agent's degree of free will than just their degree of reasons-sensitivity in acting (see, e.g., Tierney 2019).

⁶But see Alvarez (2018) for a defence of something like the position I am adopting here.

⁷On how to 'weigh' competing reasons against one another, see Lord and Maguire (2016).

⁸There are different views on what kind of 'epistemic access' is required, but see Hawthorne and Magidor (2018) for an argument that *knowledge* is a necessary and sufficient condition for reason-possession.

⁹Some philosophers distinguish between 'normative' reasons and 'motivating' reasons, as if these were fundamentally different sorts of thing. I agree with Dancy (2000, 103), however, that "that in the light of which one acts, must be the sort of thing that is capable of being among the reasons in favour of so acting; it must, in this sense, be possible to act for a good reason". To say that there are two different kinds of reasons, the reasons I had and the reasons for which I acted, seems to me much like saying that there are two different kinds of chair, the chairs I own and the chairs on which I'm sitting.

have had a reason to cut the red wire, without it being the reason *for which* I did it – maybe I did it for a different reason, or for no reason at all.¹⁰

Reasons are closely connected to a certain special kind of *explanation*, one which rationalizes an action, thereby rendering it intelligible. *One* way of rationalizing an action is by citing the reasons for which the agent acted – I went to the hospital because (of the fact that) I broke my arm. But one can also rationalize an action in other ways, such as by citing (facts about) the agent's beliefs – I went to the hospital because I *thought* I'd broken my arm (/because of my belief that I'd broken my arm) – or simply by re-describing the action in other terms – I'm lying on the ground because I'm doing yoga.¹¹ To repeat, however, the fact that beliefs or facts about beliefs can be cited in rationalizing explanations of action should *not* be taken to imply that beliefs or facts about beliefs are themselves reasons to act.

A fact is a reason for S to ϕ only *relative* to a set of ends or values. If Angela is an incorrigible racist who thinks that black people deserve to suffer, then the fact that Bill is black is a reason for Angela to harm him in the *agent-relative* sense – relative, that is, to the ends that Angela herself values – but not, of course, in the *agent-independent* sense – relative, that is, to the ends that are objectively valuable. I won't take a stand here on whether it is sensitivity to agent-independent or agent-relative reasons that matters for free will. Those who think of free will primarily in terms of one's capacity to the *right* thing for the *right* reasons would presumably prefer the former option;¹² those who think of it instead in terms of one's capacity to conform one's behaviour to one's valuational system (or one's 'deep self') would probably be more tempted by the latter.¹³ None of what I have to say here will turn on how this controversy is to be resolved, so I will remain neutral with respect to it.

It's possible of course for S to be wrong, even justifiably wrong, in taking *p* to be a reason for them to ϕ . There are two ways this might happen – *p* might be false, or *p* might be true but not a reason for S to ϕ . As an example of the former, suppose Colin justifiably believes, after watching the weather forecast, that it will rain later today, and takes this to be a reason to take his umbrella with him, but in fact it won't rain today. As an example of the latter, suppose Dona truly believes that it will rain today and takes this fact to be a reason to take her umbrella with her, but in fact her umbrella is broken and cannot protect her from the rain.

When faced with such cases, it's common for philosophers to distinguish between *objective* and *subjective* reasons. Colin for example has no objective reason to take his umbrella with him, but he has a subjective reason – namely, the fact that the weather forecast *said* it would rain.¹⁴ This fact 'tells in favour' of Colin taking his umbrella with him, but in a different sense to the sense in which the fact

¹⁰There are, again, different views on what it is to do something for a reason. The main dividing line is between those who think that doing so requires, or consists in, some kind of causal relation between the reason and the action, and those who deny this. My view, following Sartorio (2016), will ultimately presuppose a causalist approach (see §6).

¹¹This example is Anscombe's (1957, 35).

¹²See, e.g., Wolf (1990); Nelkin (2011).

¹³See, e.g., Watson (1975). I don't mean to suggest of course that any of these authors would accept the particular account of degrees of free will I defend here.

¹⁴Not everyone thinks of subjective reasons this way. Some people think of subjective reasons as things which *would have been* (objective) reasons had they obtained. Others think of subjective reasons as things which one *believes* (or perhaps reasonably believes) to be (objective) reasons. On both these views, that it will rain later can be a subjective reason for Colin to take his umbrella with him, even though it won't rain later. I must confess to finding such views rather mysterious. After all, it's not the *fact* that it will rain that is Colin's subjective reason, since there is no such fact; nor, I think, is it the *proposition* that it will rain, since propositions, being abstract objects, don't 'tell in favour' of anything. Saying that there are two sorts of reasons – real reasons and apparent reasons – "is like saying that there are two sorts of gold...real gold and apparent gold. Appearing to be something is not a way of being that thing" (Williamson 2017, 179). See also Wodak (2019).

that it *won't* rain tells in favour of Colin not bringing his umbrella with him. I don't think I need to take a stand here on whether it is sensitivity to objective or subjective reasons that matters for free will. Those with generally externalist leanings might be happy to grant that ignorance, even excusable ignorance, about what reasons one has can undermine free will; others might not be so sanguine. None of what I want to say turns on what the right answer to this question is, so I will again remain neutral with respect to it.

With this background in place, let us now turn to the question of what it is to be *sensitive*, in acting, to the reasons for and against one's action. It might be tempting to cash this out in counterfactual terms: S is reasons-sensitive in acting just in case, if S had had a sufficient reason to act otherwise, she would have done so (and done so *for* that reason). But unfortunately, this definition goes awry in precisely those cases used to motivate the reasons-sensitivity approach in the first place – namely, Frankfurt-style cases. Frank *doesn't* count as reasons-sensitive in **Frank and Furt** on the counterfactual definition, because if he had had a sufficient reason not to shoot Furt, he would still have done so, courtesy of the neuroscientist's intervention. Yet Frank's action was intuitively perfectly free.

To solve this problem, Fischer and Ravizza (1998) suggest that we should hold fixed the mechanism by which the action was actually brought about: S is reasons-sensitive in acting *via mechanism M* just in case, if S had had a sufficient reason to act otherwise *and M had still operated*, S would have acted otherwise for that reason.¹⁵ This allegedly ensures that Frank does count as reasons-sensitive in **Frank and Furt**, because the closest possible worlds in which Frank has a sufficient reason not to shoot Furt, but Frank's actual action-producing mechanism still operates, are ones in which the neuroscientist doesn't intervene (because his intervention would have constituted a different action-producing mechanism to the one that actually operated).¹⁶

As Fischer and Ravizza recognise, however, relativizing to mechanisms doesn't solve all the problems with the counterfactual definition. Consider an agent who recognises a sufficient reason not to do something but does it anyway. The counterfactual definition implies that such an agent is not reasons-sensitive in acting, since it's trivially false of them that they would have acted otherwise given a sufficient reason to do so. But surely we should allow for the possibility of someone freely doing what they know to be the wrong thing.

To solve *this* problem, Fischer and Ravizza distinguish between *weak* and *strong* reasons-sensitivity,¹⁷ as follows:

S is *strongly reasons-sensitive* in acting via mechanism M just in case, if S had had a sufficient reason to act otherwise and M had still operated, S would have acted otherwise for that reason.

¹⁵In fact, Fischer and Ravizza claim that it is mechanisms *themselves* which are the loci of reasons-sensitivity, and that agents act freely only insofar as their actions were the result of reasons-sensitive mechanisms. This has prompted some critics to complain that on Fischer and Ravizza's view "the intuitive locus of responsibility, the person, drops out of view" (Wallace 1997, 159). But the basic strategy of 'holding fixed' the actual mechanism can easily be deployed without making mechanisms the loci of reasons-sensitivity.

¹⁶It's worth noting that this approach mirrors almost exactly Nozick's (2000) response to a similar problem with his counterfactual analysis of knowledge. Accordingly, Fischer and Ravizza's view faces a version of the 'generality problem', the problem of providing appropriate non-circular conditions for mechanism individuation (see, e.g., McKenna 2013). I won't dwell on this problem here, except to note that my approach makes no similar appeal to mechanisms (see §6, below).

¹⁷They prefer the term 'reasons-reactivity', but I'll stick with 'reasons-sensitivity' throughout.

S is *weakly reasons-sensitive* in acting via M just in case there is *some* possible world (not necessarily the closest such world) in which S has a sufficient reason to act otherwise, M operates, and S acts otherwise for that reason.

While those who do what they have sufficient reason not to do aren't strongly reasons-sensitive, they will usually be weakly reasons-sensitive, since there will usually be at least some possible world in which they act, via the same mechanism that actually produced their action, in accordance with the reasons they have. Accordingly, Fischer and Ravizza suggest that only weak reasons-sensitivity is required for free will.

As several authors have remarked (e.g. McKenna 2005; Mele 2000, 2005), however, weak reasons-sensitivity seems *very* weak as a condition on free action. Even the most severely agoraphobic people who never leave their homes will count as weakly reasons-sensitive, for example, since presumably even they *would* have left their homes, as a result of the same deliberative mechanism they actually used, if, say, their houses had been on fire. Fischer and Ravizza (1998, 73) insist that reasons-sensitivity is "all of a piece" – if there is *some* possible world in which the agent responds to *some* sufficient reason to do otherwise, then they have the general capacity to respond to reasons which grounds freedom and responsibility. But the problem is precisely that reasons-sensitivity does *not* seem to be 'all of a piece', in this sense: some agents are less sensitive to reasons, and thereby less free, than others.¹⁸

3 | MODAL ACCOUNTS

More recently, some authors have tried to extend Fischer and Ravizza's account to accommodate degrees of reasons-sensitivity. According to one such view, due to Coates and Swenson (2013, 629), "the degree to which an agent is reasons-[sensitive] depends on the nearest possible world in which given sufficient reason to do otherwise, she does so". The idea, I take it, is something like this. Suppose S performs some action via mechanism M. Let D_{reason} be the distance from actuality of the closest possible world in which M operates and S has a sufficient reason to act otherwise than she actually did, and let $D_{\text{reason+act}}$ be the distance from actuality of the closest possible world in which M operates, S has a sufficient reason to act otherwise, and S acts otherwise for that reason.¹⁹ Then:

CLOSENESS: S's degree of reasons-sensitivity in acting is equal to the ratio $\frac{D_{\text{reason}}}{D_{\text{reason+act}}}$.²⁰

¹⁸Fischer partially concedes this point in later work (Fischer 2012, 191-2). There he expresses sympathy with a view on which only agents who meet a certain *threshold* degree of reasons-sensitivity should count as free (though he does not elaborate on how degrees of reasons-sensitivity are to be understood). Such a view is actually neutral on the question of whether free will itself comes in degrees – I count as tall if and only if I meet some threshold height, and I count as a Bachelor of Philosophy if and only if I meet some threshold mark on my exams, but whereas one can be more or less tall, one cannot be more or less of a Bachelor of Philosophy. Nevertheless, Fischer's view appears to be that free will and moral responsibility are 'threshold concepts' of the latter kind, i.e. not themselves gradable.

¹⁹Of course, I'm assuming here that there is some cardinal measure of distance between possible worlds, which is certainly not guaranteed. I'll pass over this issue here, except to note that my preferred account of degrees of reasons-sensitivity makes no reference to distance between possible worlds (see §6, below).

²⁰Something like CLOSENESS is also suggested by Mele's concept of 'moderate reasons-reactivity', where to be moderately reasons-reactive in acting is for there to be "some *not too distant* possible worlds" in which one reacts to a sufficient reason to do otherwise (Mele 2006, 195; my emphasis).

According to CLOSENESS, then, S's degree of reasons-sensitivity is maximised when $D_{\text{reason}} = D_{\text{reason+act}}$ – i.e. when S is strongly reasons-sensitive in acting – and diminishes the further away from actuality one must go to find a world in which S acts otherwise in response to a sufficient reason to do so. (If S wasn't even weakly reasons-sensitive in acting, her degree of reasons-sensitivity is undefined by CLOSENESS.)

To illustrate, suppose Eva is severely agoraphobic, whereas Felix has a milder version of the condition. Neither left their homes today, though neither had a reason to do so. Felix would have left home if, say, he had had a very important work meeting, or if his daughter had needed picking up from school, but Eva would still have stayed home in such situations. Although there are *some* possible worlds in which Eva responds, via her actually operative deliberative mechanism, to a sufficient reason to leave home – worlds in which her house is on fire, for example – these worlds are plausibly much further away from actuality than the worlds in which Felix leaves home. It's in virtue of this that Eva's failure to leave home is less free than Felix's, according to Coates and Swenson.

Though this might seem like the right result, there are also cases in which CLOSENESS looks much less plausible. The worlds in which Eva's house is on fire might well be far away from actuality in the example above, but this seems like a contingent feature of the case. Suppose for example that unbeknownst to Eva, Greg had been planning on setting her house on fire, but at the last moment decided against it. Then it seems that if there had been a sufficient reason for Eva to leave home, it would have been the fact that her house was on fire. Since we're assuming that Eva would have left her home in such circumstances, she counts as maximally reasons-sensitive (and indeed, just as reasons-sensitive as Felix would have been in the same situation), according to CLOSENESS. But this is the wrong result – it doesn't seem like someone whose severe agoraphobia causes them to stay home should count as having acted freely merely in virtue of someone having come close to setting her house on fire but eventually deciding against it.^{21,22}

In light of these kinds of problems with CLOSENESS, Montminy and Tinney (2018) suggest an alternative approach:

[W]e should appeal to whole rafts of possibilities instead of single ones in order to establish the strength of a reasons-reactive mechanism...the strength of a mechanism is revealed not by the distance of the closest possibility in which the mechanism performs adequately, but rather by the proportion of nearby possibilities in which the mechanism performs adequately (Montminy and Tinney 2018, 276).

²¹One might dispute the claim that the worlds in which Eva's house is on fire are close to actuality, even in the case where Greg was planning on setting it on fire and decided against it at the last minute. This will depend, ultimately, on one's account of closeness. But at least some prominent accounts seem to yield this result. According to Lewis (1979), for example, the closest possible worlds are those which minimize large widespread violations of law and maximize regions of exact match with actual matters of fact; and it's not at all implausible to suppose that the world in which Eva has a sufficient reason to leave home which does best on this metric is one which matches the actual world exactly until a few seconds ago, at which point a small 'miracle' occurs in Greg's brain (a few neurons firing slightly differently to how they actually did, perhaps), after which the world evolves under the actual laws of nature into one in which Greg sets Eva's house on fire.

²²Nelkin (2016) rejects CLOSENESS on similar grounds. Instead she suggests an account of degrees of praiseworthiness and blameworthiness in terms of how *difficult* it was for the agent to do the right thing. On the face of it, though, such a view is just as susceptible to Frankfurt-style cases as the modal accounts considered in this section. Nelkin explicitly acknowledges that how difficult something is "can depend on environmental factors" (Nelkin 2016, 367). But a factor in one's environment can make it difficult for one to do the right thing without actually playing any causal role in bringing one's action about, and hence without making any difference, intuitively, to how free the action was. (For Nelkin's response to Frankfurt-style cases, see Nelkin (2011, ch.3)).

Suppose again that S performs some action via mechanism M. Let N_{reason} be the fraction of nearby worlds in which M operates and S has a sufficient reason to act otherwise, and $N_{\text{reason+act}}$ be the fraction of nearby worlds in which M operates, S has a sufficient reason to act otherwise, and S acts otherwise for that reason.²³ Then Montminy's and Tinney's view can be stated as follows:

FRACTION: S's degree of reasons-sensitivity in acting is equal to the ratio $\frac{N_{\text{reason+act}}}{N_{\text{reason}}}$.²⁴

Unlike CLOSENESS, FRACTION doesn't imply that Eva is maximally reasons-sensitive in the case where Greg came close to setting her house on fire, because although Eva acts otherwise in the *closest* possible worlds in which she has a sufficient reason to do so in this case, there are many other slightly less close, but still nearby, worlds in which she has a sufficient reason to leave home but doesn't. Moreover, Eva still counts as less reasons-sensitive than Felix, according to FRACTION: even though they act in the same way in the closest possible worlds in which they have sufficient reason to act otherwise, Eva acts otherwise in a much smaller fraction of the nearby worlds in which she has sufficient reason to do so (and her actual deliberative mechanism is operating).

Still, though, FRACTION provides only a partial fix to the problems with CLOSENESS. Suppose for example that Henry, exasperated with Eva's repeated failures to attend social events, has resolved to set Eva's house on fire if, but only if, she has a sufficient reason to leave home. In fact there is no such reason, so Henry does nothing. Suppose also that Henry is both very determined and very competent – he couldn't easily have failed in, or been made to abandon, his endeavour. Then it seems plausible that in most of the nearby worlds in which Eva has a sufficient reason to leave home, her house is on fire, and so she leaves home.²⁵ According to FRACTION, therefore, Eva acts with a high degree of reasons-sensitivity when her severe agoraphobia causes her to stay home. But this again is the wrong result.

What happens in some nearby worlds, then, seems irrelevant to an agent's degree of freedom. But it's worth noting that the opposite also seems true: what happens in some very far-away worlds *does* seem relevant to an agent's degree of freedom. Suppose that Iain is even more agoraphobic than Eva is – he wouldn't even have left home if his house had been on fire. But suppose also that the closest worlds in which Iain's and Eva's houses are on fire are very far away (there are no Gregs or Henrys on the scene). Then Iain and Eva would count as equally reasons-sensitive according to FRACTION, even though Iain's phobia is more severe, because this difference in severity is only manifested in far-away worlds.

In summary, not all nearby worlds matter for degrees of reasons-sensitivity, and not all the worlds that matter are nearby. The challenge for any view like FRACTION, then, is to specify the set of *relevant* worlds over which degrees of reasons-sensitivity should be defined, in a way that lines up with our intuitions in particular cases. While I have no doubt that this could be done in principle, it's not clear how informative such an account would be, since it's not clear that we have any *independent* grasp of which possible worlds are the relevant ones; independent, that is, of the very concept being analysed.²⁶

²³Of course, any talk of 'fractions' of possible worlds presupposes the existence of a natural measure over the (presumably infinite) set of worlds. Again, I'll pass over these complications here.

²⁴It's interesting to note that CLOSENESS and FRACTION mirror almost exactly the two measures of degrees of *possibility* discussed in Vetter (2015, ch.3.2).

²⁵If you're not convinced of this, feel free to replace Henry with some other extremely robust, extremely reliable mechanism.

²⁶Sartorio (2018) comes to the same conclusion. I argue in §4 however that Sartorio's account faces a similar challenge.

To further illustrate the challenge here, consider the following pair of cases:

Pre-Empted Agoraphobia: Jane is invited to a friend's birthday party. But it's raining outside, the football is on, and this particular friend is not the best host. On the basis of these reasons, Jane decides to stay home. Had these reasons not been present, Jane's agoraphobia would have caused her to stay home regardless; but her agoraphobia in fact played no causal role in bringing her action about.

Effective Agoraphobia: Exactly as in **Pre-Empted Agoraphobia**, except that this time Jane's agoraphobia pre-empts her reasons in causing her failure to attend the party, rather than the other way around. Had Jane not been agoraphobic, she would have stayed home regardless, on the basis of the reasons she had to do so; but these reasons in fact played no causal role in bringing about her action, which was entirely caused by her agoraphobia.

Intuitively, Jane's action is free in **Pre-Empted Agoraphobia**, but not in **Effective Agoraphobia**. After all, **Pre-Empted Agoraphobia** is just a Frankfurt-style case, albeit one where the pre-empted would-be cause is 'internal' to the agent, rather than some external mechanism (like the neuroscientist in **Frank and Furt**).²⁷ Yet the only relevant difference between the two cases seems to be in what caused Jane's action. A modal approach to reasons-sensitivity *could* try to capture the difference in our intuitions about the two cases by making what counts as a 'relevant' possible world dependent on the actual causal facts – for example, by 'holding fixed' Jane's agoraphobia if, but only if, it played some actual causal role in bringing her action about.²⁸ But once the challenge is stated in this way, it's hard to avoid the suspicion that what really *grounds* facts about degrees of reasons-sensitivity is the causal facts used to determine what should count as a 'relevant' possible world in the first place, rather than facts about what happens in those worlds. This is what I take to be the crucial insight of Frankfurt's original paper: how free a person was in acting has more to do with what *actually caused* her action than what she would or wouldn't have done had things been different.²⁹

Let me end this section with one final problem for CLOSENESS and FRACTION, and, I think, for any modal account of degrees of reasons-sensitivity. Recall what motivated Fischer and Ravizza to distinguish between weak and strong reasons-sensitivity in the first place: they didn't want to count all those agents who recognise a sufficient reason not to act, but do so anyway, as reasons-insensitive, and therefore not free. But it's not clear that CLOSENESS and FRACTION really deal with this problem, insofar as both imply that such people are *not maximally* reasons-sensitive, and hence *less than fully free* (in the case of CLOSENESS, because it's trivially false that they would have acted otherwise had there been a sufficient reason to do so, and in the case of FRACTION, because it's trivially false that they act otherwise in every nearby world in which they have a sufficient reason to do so). This seems like an undesirable consequence. Surely we want to allow for the conceptual possibility of someone making a fully free choice to do the wrong thing. Put another way, it doesn't seem like someone should count as less free *merely in virtue* of failing to do what they had most reason to do. The point is especially vivid in light of the plausible connection between degrees of free will and degrees of moral responsibility and

²⁷On this point, see also Cohen and Handfield (2007).

²⁸This is effectively the strategy Campbell (1997) adopts in response to Frankfurt-style cases. It also seems to be what Fischer and Ravizza are trying to achieve by means of the strategy of holding fixed the actual action-producing mechanism. But talk of 'mechanisms' is somewhat obscure in this context – in particular, it's not clear that Jane's action isn't the result of the same deliberative mechanism in both cases, albeit one that operates more effectively in the former case than in the latter.

²⁹For further discussion and defence of this point, see Kaiserman (forthcoming).

blameworthiness – FRACTION and CLOSENESS seem in danger of implying that those who do the wrong thing are partially *excusable* for their actions precisely in virtue of their failure to actually respond to the reasons to do otherwise. Any satisfactory account of degrees of free will in terms of reasons-sensitivity should avoid this implausible result.

4 | CAUSAL ACCOUNTS

Carolina Sartorio (2016) has recently defended a quite different reasons-sensitivity condition on free will. According to Sartorio, whether an action is free is fully grounded in its causal history. The reason why the presence of the neuroscientist makes no difference to whether Frank's action was free in **Frank and Furt**, for example, is that it actually played no causal role in bringing Frank's action about. What actually caused Frank's action was, among other things, his reasons for shooting Furt. Of course, the action would still have occurred, courtesy of the neuroscientist's intervention, had those reasons not been present; but counterfactual dependence is not necessary for causation, a fact that is well-established in the causation literature on the basis – tellingly – of cases with exactly the same structure as **Frank and Furt** itself.³⁰

Sartorio's view might appear to have a problem explaining the difference between pairs of cases like the following:³¹

Urge: Kevin feels an urge to slap Luke, which he does. In a range of possible scenarios where there were sufficient reasons against doing this, such as those where a police officer is around, where Kevin is with his friends who will disapprove, and so on, Kevin would not slap Luke. But no such reasons are present.

Intoxicated Urge: Kevin is intoxicated. He feels an urge to slap Luke, just like in **Urge**. However, due to his intoxication he would still have done this in the relevant range of scenarios where there were sufficient reasons against doing this. Again, however, no such reasons are present.

Intuitively, Kevin acts freely in **Urge**, but not in **Intoxicated Urge**. Yet on the face of it, the *actual* causal history of Kevin's action is the same in both cases; they seem to differ only in how Kevin *would* act in non-actual scenarios.

In response, Sartorio insists that, contrary to first appearances, there is indeed an important difference in the causal histories of Kevin's action in **Urge** and **Intoxicated Urge**. Among the causes of his action in **Urge** are various *absences*, like the absence of a police officer, the absence of disapproving friends, and so on; but these absences are *not* among the causes of Kevin's action in **Intoxicated Urge**. *That's* why Kevin acts freely in **Urge** but not in **Intoxicated Urge**, according to Sartorio.

Sartorio generalises this idea into the following causal account of reasons-sensitivity:

An agent is reasons-sensitive in acting in a certain way when the agent acts on the basis of, perhaps in addition to the *presence* of reasons to act in the relevant way, the *absence*

³⁰**Frank and Furt** is an example of what are known as 'early pre-emption' cases in the causation literature; see Lewis (1986).

³¹I borrow these cases from V. Tadros, 'Responsibility Without Responsiveness' (unpublished manuscript).

of sufficient reasons to refrain from acting in that way, for an appropriately wide range of such reasons. (Sartorio 2016, 132).

Note that Sartorio is presupposing a causal theory of agency here: for S to have acted ‘on the basis of’, or ‘in light of’, X is for X to have caused S’s action *in a certain kind of way*. The italicized qualification is needed to avoid agents counting as free in virtue of ‘deviant’ causal chains between their reasons and actions (see Chisholm 1966; Davidson 2001). Sartorio has no novel characterisation of the difference between ‘deviant’ and ‘non-deviant’ causal chains to offer, though she does suggest that “any plausible theory of reasons-sensitivity will have to appeal to such a distinction” (Sartorio 2016, 136).

The final clause of Sartorio’s definition is suggestive, given our purposes. Although she doesn’t explicitly defend an account of degrees of reasons-sensitivity, Sartorio nevertheless finds it “natural to suggest that reasons-sensitivity will be a function of something like the ratio or proportion of the reasons to which the agent is...sensitive to the total number of reasons that the agent has or could have” (Sartorio 2016, 142). Let $C^{(+)}$ be the set of reasons an agent S had to ϕ on a given occasion, and let $C^{(-)}$ be the set of sufficient reasons S could have had not to ϕ . Let’s also say that S is *causally sensitive*, in acting, to a (perhaps merely possible) reason if and only if either the presence or the absence of that reason was a cause of her action. Then:

CAUSES: S’s degree of reasons-sensitivity in ϕ -ing is equal to the fraction of elements of $C^{(+)} \cup C^{(-)}$ to which she was causally sensitive in ϕ -ing.³²

CAUSES certainly seems to get the right results in some of the cases we’ve considered so far. Eva’s failure to leave home turns out to be less free than Felix’s, for example, because there are lots of absences of sufficient reasons to leave home – the absence of an important meeting, for example – which are part of the causal history of Felix’s action but not part of the causal history of Eva’s. Moreover, this is true *regardless* of how close or far away the worlds in which such reasons are present are to actuality. The introduction of Greg, for example, who came close to setting Eva’s house on fire but eventually decided not to, makes no difference to Eva’s degree of reasons-sensitivity, according to CAUSES, because it makes no difference to what actually caused her action. Finally, CAUSES correctly implies that Jane is less free in **Effective Agoraphobia** than she is in **Pre-Empted Agoraphobia**, because the reasons to stay home on the basis of which Jane acted in the latter case had no causal effect on Jane in the former.

Nevertheless, there are several serious issues with CAUSES. Note first that unlike CLOSENESS and FRACTION, which speak only *de dicto* of the possibility of sufficient reasons to act otherwise, CAUSES requires us to make sense of the notion of a *merely possible sufficient reason* to act otherwise. It’s not at all clear, however, what these things are supposed to be. A reason, after all, is sufficient only *relative* to other reasons – a fact that is a sufficient reason for S to ϕ in one possible world might not be sufficient in a different world where there are stronger reasons not to ϕ . If a ‘possible sufficient reason to act otherwise’ is just something which *could have been* a sufficient reason to act otherwise, then presumably *every* possible reason to act otherwise is a possible sufficient reason to act otherwise, because it could have been present without any overriding reasons being present. (Talk of a merely possible sufficient reason is much like talk of a merely possible tallest person – *every* possible person is a possible tallest person, because everything that could have been a person could have been the tallest person.) But Sartorio needs some kind of restriction on the set of possible reasons to act otherwise for her account to work. To see this, suppose I am offered £100 to eat a tasty apple. Delighted, I

³²Again, there is an issue here with talk of ‘fractions’ of reasons given that, on a suitably fine-grained metaphysics of facts, there are an infinite number of reasons; but again, I won’t dwell on this issue any further here.

accept the offer and eat the apple. The absence of someone offering me £50 not to eat the apple is not, presumably, a cause of my eating the apple in this case (after all, I would still have eaten the apple, in exchange for the £100, even if someone had also offered me £50 not to eat it). But we wouldn't want my action to count as any less free as a result. The problem is that we can't rule out the merely possible fact that someone offers me £50 not to eat the apple on the grounds that it isn't a possible *sufficient* reason not to eat the apple, because there is certainly *some* possible world in which it *is* a sufficient reason not to eat the apple (one, presumably, in which I am not also offered £100 to eat it).

Sartorio might alternatively try to cash out the notion in counterfactual terms: a merely possible sufficient reason to act otherwise is something which *would* have been a sufficient reason to act otherwise had it been present. But this is prone to exactly the kinds of difficulties that led Sartorio to dismiss the counterfactual definition of reasons-sensitivity in the first place. Presumably on Sartorio's view I *should* count as less free if the absence of anyone offering me £200 not to eat the apple wasn't a cause of my action in this case. But suppose that if someone had offered me £200 not to eat the apple, the first person would have raised their offer to eat the apple from £100 to £300. Then the merely possible fact that someone offers me £200 not to eat the apple would not count as a possible sufficient reason to act otherwise, so-defined.

So there seems to be a conceptual problem with CAUSES as stated. Sartorio doesn't dwell on this issue, so it's not clear what she would say about it. But in any case, a proponent of CAUSES owes us some alternative account of which possible reasons to act otherwise are the 'relevant' ones – the ones sensitivity to which ought to count towards an agent's degree of free will. And again, it's not clear that we have any *independent* grasp of which reasons are relevant and which aren't – independent, that is, of the very concept being analysed.

Even setting aside this conceptual problem, there are also several apparent counterexamples to CAUSES. Note first that, just like CLOSENESS and FRACTION, CAUSES seems incompatible with the possibility of someone performing a fully free action which they had sufficient reason not to perform. After all, if S does something despite having a sufficient reason not to do it, then presumably neither that reason nor (of course) its absence was a cause of the action. As argued above (§3), however, it's implausible that an agent should count as less free (and maybe thereby less morally responsible) merely in virtue of not having done what they had most reason to do.

Second, note that it follows from CAUSES that an agent's action is fully free only if they acted on the basis of *all* the reasons they had to do so. But this seems implausibly strong. Suppose that Mark and Nina both have two individually sufficient reasons to eat an apple: firstly, apples are tasty; and secondly, apples are healthy. Both eat an apple. But whereas Mark ate his apple *both* on the basis of the fact that apples are tasty *and* on the basis of the fact that apples are healthy (his action was causally overdetermined), Nina only acted on the basis of the fact that apples are tasty. In all other respects, Mark and Nina are exactly the same. It seems to me that Mark and Nina are equally free. Yet according to CAUSES, Mark's action was more free than Nina's, because he was causally sensitive to more reasons.

Sartorio might suggest that what really matters for degrees of freedom is one's sensitivity to possible reasons *not* to act. In other words:

CAUSES⁽⁻⁾: S's degree of reasons-sensitivity in ϕ -ing is equal to the fraction of elements of $\mathbf{C}^{(-)}$ to which she was causally sensitive in ϕ -ing.

CAUSES⁽⁻⁾ still implies that Eva (who is severely agoraphobic) is less free than Felix (who is only mildly so), and yet it doesn't imply that Mark is more free than Nina in the example above, as desired. But now we have a further problem. Sartorio grants that there could be "an act for which there is *no* potentially

sufficient reason to refrain from acting in that way...[c]onsider, as a possible example, [Olga's] act of pushing a button that will prevent the torture of [her] infant child, or that will save humanity from destruction" (Sartorio 2016, 142). In such cases, the fraction to which $\text{CAUSES}^{(-)}$ appeals is undefined, since $\text{C}^{(-)}$ is empty. Yet it seems we can still make sense of the notion of degrees of reasons-sensitivity in such cases. Olga may have had a compulsion to push buttons, for example, which made her button-pushing less free, to an extent dependent on the severity of the compulsion. How free Olga was in such a case seems to depend, not on *how many* reasons she was sensitive to, but rather on *how sensitive she was* to the one big reason she had to press the button. But Sartorio's account seems to lack the resources to make sense of this, since for her, sensitivity to a reason is all-or-nothing – either that reason is part of the causal history of an action or it isn't.

In summary, CAUSES fails as an account of degrees of reasons-sensitivity. In §6, I will sketch an alternative causal account, according to which an agent's degree of reasons-sensitivity in acting depends, not on *how many* reasons caused their action, but rather on *how much those reasons contributed* to bringing the action about. To understand this view, however, we first need an account of degrees of causal contribution.³³ The aim of the next section is to introduce such an account.

5 | DEGREES OF CAUSAL CONTRIBUTION

It's often natural to describe one event as *more of a cause* of some effect than another event. But this locution has a number of importantly distinct meanings, which should be carefully distinguished. One simple way to be 'more of a cause' of an effect is to cause a 'larger part' of that effect. If I steal £100 from Peter and you steal £400 from Peter, there's a clear sense in which your action was 'more of a cause' of Peter's total loss than my action, for example, because it caused a larger part of the loss.

Another way to be 'more of a cause' of an effect is to *make a larger difference* to the effect. Suppose a plant grows to 80cm after exposure to sunlight and regular watering. *But for* the exposure to sunlight, the plant would only have grown to 30cm; *but for* the regular watering, however, it wouldn't have grown at all. We can't 'divide up' the height of the plant into parts such that the exposure to sunlight caused one part and the watering caused another; but we can say that the watering made more of a difference, because what would have happened but for the sunlight is closer to actuality, in some salient sense, than what would have happened but for the watering.³⁴

In many cases, however, causes don't make any difference at all to their effects. Donald Trump's election victory was caused by the actions of the people who voted for him, for example, but no individual vote made any difference to whether, or to how, he was elected. Insofar as there is a sense in which some votes were 'larger' causes of Trump's victory than others, then – because those voters were more influential, perhaps, or because they voted in smaller states with disproportionately many electoral college representatives per resident – it cannot be accounted for in terms of difference-making.

In previous work, I have defended an account of degrees of causal contribution that can handle these kinds of cases. My starting point is a familiar account of causation inspired by Mackie's (1965) and Wright's (1985) analyses of causes as 'INUS' and 'NESS' conditions, respectively. Let's say that a plurality of states of affairs X_1, \dots, X_n were *minimally jointly sufficient in the circumstances* for Y if

³³Interestingly, Sartorio (2020) has recently argued (albeit for independent reasons) that causation doesn't come in degrees, so this is not an approach she is likely to endorse herself. I think she's wrong about that, but I won't attempt to rebut her arguments directly here (though see Beebe and Kaiserman (2020, 372)). Nevertheless, I hope to demonstrate that an account of degrees of reasons-sensitivity in terms of degrees of causal contribution has several advantages over extant accounts.

³⁴See Kaiserman (2018) for further discussion of measures of difference-making.

and only if (i) X_1, \dots, X_n were jointly sufficient in the circumstances for Y , and (ii) no proper sub-plurality of X_1, \dots, X_n were jointly sufficient in the circumstances for Y .^{35, 36} Then:

MINIMAL SUFFICIENCY: X_1, \dots, X_n collectively caused Y if and only if X_1, \dots, X_n were minimally jointly sufficient in the circumstances for Y .

To be a *cause* of Y is then just to be one of a plurality of states of affairs that collectively caused Y (just as to be an *author* of a book is to be one of a plurality of people who collectively authored it). No individual vote for Trump *caused* his election, on this view, because no individual vote was individually sufficient for his election. But every vote for Trump *contributed* to a causing (indeed to several causings) of his election, and hence was a *cause* of his election, in virtue of being one of a plurality of votes which were minimally jointly sufficient in the circumstances for his election.

MINIMAL SUFFICIENCY captures an important but neglected distinction between two different senses in which causation might come in degrees. Consider first the relation of *authoring*. This is a non-scalar relation – it makes no sense at all to say that Russell authored the *Principia Mathematica* ‘a lot’, or that he authored it ‘more’ than Whitehead did. But it is nevertheless a relation to which multiple people can *contribute* to different degrees – it makes perfect sense to say that Russell contributed more to the authoring of the *Principia Mathematica* than Whitehead did (perhaps because he authored a larger *part* of it, but perhaps also because he contributed the majority of the ideas, or did the bulk of the research). The same, I think, is true of causation. *Causing* is a non-scalar relation – it makes no sense at all to say that the decline of the Ottoman empire caused the First World War ‘a lot’, or that it caused the First World War ‘more’ than the rise of nationalism in early 20th Century Europe did. But *causing* is nevertheless a relation to which multiple events can contribute to different degrees – it makes perfect sense to say that the decline of the Ottoman empire *contributed* a lot, or contributed more than nationalism in Europe did, to bringing the First World War about. This is nicely captured by MINIMAL SUFFICIENCY. Sufficiency is plausibly all-or-nothing – one event can’t be ‘more’ sufficient for some effect than another. But when two events are *jointly*, though not individually, sufficient for some effect, there may nevertheless be a natural sense in which one of them contributed more to making the pair of them jointly sufficient than did the other.

In previous work I cash out this thought more formally in probabilistic terms, showing how the resulting measure predicts, for example, that more influential voters, or voters in smaller states, can contribute more to causings of an election outcome (Kaiserman 2016, 2017b). Since the details won’t be relevant for our purposes, I won’t rehearse them here. Indeed, it won’t matter for our purposes whether my particular formal rendering of the insight above is correct – any view with the same basic features will do just as well. The important point is just that there is a difference between *causing* an effect and *contributing* to a causing of it; and although one event can’t *cause* an effect to a small or a large degree, it *can* make a small or large degree of contribution to a causing of the effect.

³⁵What do I mean by ‘jointly sufficient in the circumstances’? At a first approximation, something like this: X_1, \dots, X_n are jointly sufficient in the circumstances for Y if and only if the fact that X_1, \dots, X_n all obtained, together with the causal laws and certain facts about the circumstances, jointly metaphysically necessitate the fact that Y obtained. The challenge now, of course, is to explain, first, what the ‘causal laws’ are supposed to be (and in particular, to do so in such a way that ensures that effects don’t end up being sufficient for their causes, or effects of a common cause sufficient for each other); and second, which features of the circumstances are the ones we should hold fixed. I won’t attempt to answer these questions here (though see Kaiserman (2017a); see also §6, below).

³⁶Note that ‘sufficient’ here means something quite different to what it means in my talk of ‘sufficient reasons’, above. It would be better to have avoided this terminological ambiguity, but both uses of the term are now well-entrenched. I trust therefore it will be clear enough from context which sense is meant.

6 | THE CONTRIBUTION ACCOUNT OF DEGREES OF REASONS-SENSITIVITY

Armed with these resources, let us now return to the matter at hand. Consider again the difference between someone who stays home because they're agoraphobic and someone who stays home simply because they want to. Here's a sketch of a different account of why the latter person's action is free but the former's is not. The non-agoraphobic person's failure to leave home is *fully explainable* in terms of the presence of reasons he had to stay home and the absence of reasons to leave. That's not to say that he was causally sensitive to *all* such reasons – he might have stayed home on the basis of only some of the reasons he had to do so. Nor is it even to say that staying home was what he had most reason to do in the circumstances – the reasons on the basis of which he acted might have been outweighed by countervailing reasons to do otherwise, which he ignored. The point is rather that we can tell a *complete causal story* of why he acted as he did that refers only to reasons. His action is *fully rationalizable* in terms of the reasons he had, even if it isn't fully *rational* in light of the reasons he had.

The agoraphobic person's failure to leave home, by contrast, is not fully explainable in terms of the presence of reasons to stay home and the absence of reasons to leave. That's not (merely) to say that she isn't causally sensitive to all such reasons; nor is it to say that staying home wasn't what she had most reason to do. The point is rather that we can't tell a complete causal story of why she acted as she did in terms of reasons alone; any such story would have to also refer to various non-reason-conferring facts about her physiology or her environment. Her action is thus not fully rationalizable in terms of the reasons she had, and hence not fully free. But it might be *partly* rationalizable, because a full causal story (of the right, non-deviant kind) of why she stayed home might make reference to, as well as her agoraphobia, the absence of a fire threatening to burn her house down. *How* free her action was will depend, not on how *many* reasons or absences of reasons were causes of her action, but rather on how *much they contributed*, compared to the non-reason-conferring causes, to this causing of her action.

Here, then, is a preliminary statement of the view I want to defend. An agent is *fully* reasons-sensitive in acting if her action was fully caused, in the right way, by reasons to act and absences of reasons not to act; an agent is *partially* reasons-sensitive in acting if her action was partially caused, in the right way, by reasons to act and absences of reasons not to act; and an agent is *fully* reasons-insensitive otherwise. Either way:

CONTRIBUTION: S's degree of reasons-sensitivity in ϕ -ing is equal to the *maximum* total degree of contribution that reasons to ϕ and absences of reasons not to ϕ made to a causing (of the right kind) of her action.³⁷

³⁷Deery and Nahmias (2017) defend a theory of free will that bears some superficial similarities to CONTRIBUTION. On their view, whether an agent acts freely depends on whether the action has its *causal source* in the agent's 'compatibilist agential structure' (CAS), where to be the causal source of an action is to bear the strongest causal-explanatory relationship to that action. As they point out in a footnote (Deery and Nahmias 2017, 1263), such a view could potentially allow for comparisons of degrees of free will or responsibility in terms of the relative strengths of different causal-explanatory connections. Such a project is not fleshed out in any detail, however. Moreover, there are several important differences between Deery's and Nahmias's approach and my own. First, they cash out causal-explanatory strength in terms of the interventionist notion of *invariance*, rather than in terms of degrees of contribution (for a critical comparison of different measures of causal strength, see Kaiserman (2018)). Second, degrees of reasons-sensitivity on my view depend *only* on the maximum degree of contribution reasons made to bringing the action about, whereas on Deery's and Nahmias's approach degrees of free will would appear to depend on the *relative* claims to sourcehood of the agent's CAS *compared* to other causes.

Some clarifications are in order before we proceed.

Firstly, when I say that an action was *fully caused* by reasons, I don't mean to say that it wasn't also caused by non-reasons. Every event has multiple different minimally sufficient pluralities of causes, going back (presumably) to the start of time. The claim is rather that there is *some* plurality of facts, all of which are reasons to act or absences of reasons not to act, which caused the action (in the right kind of way). More generally, what matters according to CONTRIBUTION is the *maximum* total degree of contribution made by reasons to a causing of the action.

Secondly, note that CONTRIBUTION includes no restriction to *sufficient* reasons to act otherwise. What matters is just the extent to which the presence of reasons to act and absence of reasons not to act contributed to bringing the action about, regardless of whether any of these reasons in fact outweighed, or could have outweighed, any of the others. This means that CONTRIBUTION avoids the problems, noted in §4, with Sartorio's talk of 'merely possible sufficient reasons'.³⁸ But it also means that CONTRIBUTION, unlike the other measures considered thus far, is perfectly consistent with the possibility of someone performing a fully free action that she had sufficient reason not to perform. So long as an agent's action was *fully caused* (in the right way) by reasons to act and absences of reasons not to act, the agent was fully reasons-sensitive, according to CONTRIBUTION, even if what the agent did wasn't what she had most reason to do. The biggest mistake made by all extant accounts of reasons-sensitivity, in my view, is that they fail to cleanly distinguish in this way between the assessment of an agent's *reasons-sensitivity* in acting and the assessment of the *rationality* of their action. All of them imply, albeit for slightly different reasons, that an agent is less reasons-sensitive in virtue of having acted irrationally. On my view, however, an agent's degree of reasons-sensitivity in acting is independent of how rational the action was.

It might be objected that no action will ever count as fully free according to CONTRIBUTION, because reasons and their absences are never fully sufficient by themselves for an action. My drinking coffee this morning was caused in part by reasons to drink coffee and absences of reasons not to; but given only that those facts obtained, I still might not have drunk coffee, because there might not have been any coffee available, my muscles could have seized up as I reached for the cup, I could have had a heart attack before my first sip, and so on. Recall, however, that causes need only be sufficient *in the circumstances* for their effects, according to MINIMAL SUFFICIENCY. There is an important difference between the causes and the background conditions, on this view (between "the real cause [and] that without which the cause would not be able to act as a cause", as Plato once put it (*Phaedo* 99a-b)). Elsewhere (Kaiserman 2017a) I have defended a form of *contextualism* about causal language, according to which these background conditions can vary depending on the context. Thus our objector speaks truly when she says, 'Well *technically* speaking, your reasons for drinking coffee caused your action only *together* with the availability of coffee, your functioning muscles, and many other things besides'; but the utterance also changes the context, to one in which various facts which were being held fixed are no longer held fixed. If that's right, though, a further question arises: relative to *which* context ought the relevant causal claims to be evaluated for the purposes of determining an agent's degree of reasons-sensitivity? More crudely, if there are different 'kinds' of causation, which kind of causation is the one that matters for freedom and responsibility?

This is a difficult question, and I lack the space to answer it properly here. It would clearly be absurd to argue that one's action was less than fully free because it was caused by reasons only together with the presence of oxygen in the atmosphere; presumably, then, the fact that there is oxygen in the

³⁸Moreover, since my account involves no appeal to mechanisms, fractions of reasons, fractions of possible worlds, or distances between possible worlds, I also avoid the technical challenges associated with making sense of these concepts – see notes 16, 19, 23, and 32, above.

atmosphere is just one of the things we ‘hold fixed’ when evaluating the relevant causal claims. It would be nice to have a more general account of the relevant background conditions than this, but I have no such account to offer. It’s worth remembering, however, that every account of reasons-sensitivity we’ve encountered so far faces a similar challenge. A proponent of **CAUSES** has to appeal to an unspecified restriction on the set of possible reasons to act otherwise, for example, and a proponent of **FRACTION** has to appeal to an unspecified restriction on the set of possible worlds. Importantly, however, though we arguably don’t have any *independent* grasp of which possible reasons or possible worlds are the relevant ones for **CAUSES** and **FRACTION**, we arguably *do* have some independent grasp of which facts are the relevant facts to hold fixed for **CONTRIBUTION**: they are, put simply, those facts it seems more appropriate to describe as mere ‘background conditions’, rather than as actual causes of an agent’s action, when considering how free she was in acting. I accept that this isn’t wholly satisfying, but for now it suffices to note that **CONTRIBUTION** is at least no worse off in this respect than its rivals.

Let us now see how **CONTRIBUTION** handles some of the cases considered above. Firstly, **CONTRIBUTION** makes clear that what matters for how free Eva was in her failure to leave home is not how severely agoraphobic she was *per se*, but rather how much her agoraphobia contributed, compared to reasons and their absences, to bringing her action about. Often, the actions of people with severe phobias will be less free than those of people with milder conditions – part of what it is to have a severe phobia, after all, is for non-reason-conferring psychological factors to exert a large causal influence on one’s actions. But this needn’t be the case in general – Jane’s staying home in **Pre-Empted Agoraphobia** is fully free, for example, no matter how severely agoraphobic she is, because it is fully caused by reasons and their absences, which pre-empted her agoraphobia in causing her action.

Secondly, **CONTRIBUTION** does better than **CAUSES** in cases of overdetermination. If Mark’s eating an apple was fully caused (in the circumstances, and in the right way) by the fact that apples are tasty, and Nina’s eating an apple was fully caused (in the circumstances, and in the right way) *both* by the fact that apples are tasty *and* by the fact that apples are healthy, Mark doesn’t count as any more reasons-sensitive than Nina, according to **CONTRIBUTION** – they are both fully reasons-sensitive, since both of their actions were fully caused by reasons. The fact that Mark’s action was caused *twice over* by reasons and Nina’s only once doesn’t make Mark’s action any more free.

Thirdly, **CONTRIBUTION** gives non-trivial results in cases where there couldn’t, in the circumstances, have been a sufficient reason to act otherwise, like where Olga pushes a button to save humanity from destruction. How free this action was will simply depend on how much the reasons to push the button contributed to bringing Olga’s action about. If, like Eva, Olga’s action was partially caused by a compulsive disorder, then she was merely partially reasons-sensitive in acting, notwithstanding the impossibility in the circumstances of a sufficient reason to act otherwise.

Finally, **CONTRIBUTION** also gives a more nuanced account of the difference between **Urge** and **Intoxicated Urge**. In **Urge**, Kevin slaps Luke partly on the basis of the fact that doing so would satisfy his urge to slap Luke. This fact alone was not sufficient for Kevin’s action – it caused the action only together with various absences of reasons not to slap Luke, such as the absence of a police officer or of disapproving friends. But overall, Kevin’s action was fully caused by reasons to act and absences of reasons not to act, so he was fully reasons-sensitive in acting. In **Intoxicated Urge**, by contrast, Kevin’s action was caused partly by the fact that doing so would satisfy his urge and partly by the fact that he was intoxicated. Since the latter fact is not a reason to slap Luke, Kevin was only partially reasons-sensitive in acting. How reasons-sensitive he was will depend on the relative contributions of the reason-conferring and non-reason-conferring causes of his action. At one extreme, Kevin’s action was entirely caused by his intoxicated state – his reasons didn’t figure in the causal history of his action at all. In such circumstances, Kevin is fully reasons-insensitive in acting. At the other extreme, Kevin acted purely on the basis of the fact that slapping Luke would satisfy his urge – his intoxication didn’t

figure in the causal history of his action at all. In such circumstances, Kevin is fully reasons-sensitive, on my view, despite the fact that his action was not caused by any absences of reasons not to slap Luke. There is certainly something rationally amiss with him, since it's irrational to slap someone *purely* on the basis that it would satisfy one's urge, without considering any potential reasons not to. But irrational people aren't necessarily unfree. Kevin's action is fully *rationalizable*; we can tell a full causal story of why he acted as he did that cites only his reasons. He just happened to place an irrational amount of weight on one particular reason at the expense of others.

It might be objected that people who act on urges shouldn't count as free if those urges were beyond their control.³⁹ After all, aren't the actions of addicts or compulsive disorder sufferers the result of urges? And aren't these paradigmatic instances of unfree actions? I think the answers to these questions will depend on the details of the case. Note first that it's not enough to count as reasons-sensitive on my view that one's action was caused by an urge, since urges themselves are not reasons to act (see §2). What's required is that one acts *on the basis of the fact that doing so would satisfy one's urge*, where to act on the basis of a fact is for the fact to cause one's action in the right kind of way. Many compulsive actions are not like this. Some are largely habitual, Pavlovian responses, which even the agents themselves cannot rationalize; not quite ticks, since they wouldn't have been performed had there been strong reasons not to, but still actions largely caused by non-reason-conferring psychological factors rather than on the basis of reasons. Other compulsive actions are the results of delusions or mistaken beliefs, like that one's hands are crawling with harmful bacteria – whether these actions are counted as reasons-sensitive will depend on whether reasons-sensitivity is defined relative to objective or subjective reasons (see §2). But perhaps there are some addicts or compulsive disorder sufferers who really do act purely on the basis of the fact that doing so would satisfy an urge. My view would classify such people as reasons-sensitive. But I'm not convinced this isn't the right result. The actions of such people are fully rationalizable in terms of the reasons they have; they just happen to have reasons that force them to choose between highly undesirable alternatives. Whether they count as *free* will depend on whether there are other necessary conditions on free will; in particular, it will depend on whether acting freely depends on the *source* of one's reasons, as well as one's sensitivity to them.⁴⁰ Even if such actions do count as free, whether the agents are to *blame* for them will depend on the strength of the urge, and whether anyone could reasonably be expected to have resisted it. One conclusion from the recent psychology of addiction is that non-addicts tend to radically underestimate just how strong the cravings of addicts really are.⁴¹ Taking drugs on the basis of the fact that doing so would satisfy such a craving may well in fact be the rational course of action for such an agent, given the reasons they have, despite the risks; what they need is not help to become *more sensitive* to their reasons, but help to *change* their reasons, or to make alternative courses of action available to them which are better, in light of their reasons, than those currently available to them (e.g. by providing less risky means of satisfying the craving).

7 | THE SITUATIONIST THREAT

In this final section, I want to further illustrate the advantages of the contribution account of degrees of reasons-sensitivity by showing how it handles the so-called 'situationist threat' to free will. The threat

³⁹I'm grateful to an anonymous referee for pressing me on this point.

⁴⁰For a prominent example of a 'history-sensitive' approach to free will, see Mele (2006, 2019).

⁴¹See, e.g., de Kenessey and Holton (2014).

arises from a series of studies in psychology and social science which purport to show that ‘situational factors’ play a greater role in determining and explaining behaviour than is typically assumed (following Nelkin (2005), I’ll call this the ‘situationist literature’). Studies including Milgram’s ‘shock experiment’ (Milgram 1974) and the ‘Stanford prison experiment’ (Haney, Banks and Zimbardo 1973) demonstrate that people can act in radically different, often grotesque ways when told to do so by people in authority. Other studies suggest that agents are more likely to help someone in need if they find a dime in a phone box beforehand (Isen and Leven 1972), and less likely to help if they see that others aren’t helping (Latané and Rodin 1969) or if they’re in a hurry (even if what they’re hurrying *to* is a lecture on the Good Samaritan!) (Darley and Batson 1973). As several philosophers have noted, “these cases seem troubling, at least in part because they raise the question of whether we are really free and responsible agents” (Nelkin 2005, 188).

Although several proponents of the reasons-sensitivity approach to free will have seriously considered the charge that the situationist literature represents a threat to free will, however, for the most part they’ve remained unconvinced (see Nelkin 2005; Brink 2013; McKenna and Warmke 2017; Sartorio 2018). Indeed, from the perspective of many of the accounts of degrees of reasons-sensitivity considered above, it’s hard to see what all the fuss is about. While the situationist literature might show that situational factors play an unexpected role in determining behaviour, this doesn’t imply that in most cases there isn’t some nearby possible world in which the agent acts otherwise given a sufficient reason to do so; nor does it imply that the agent doesn’t act otherwise in *most* of the nearby worlds in which she has a sufficient reason to do so; and nor does it imply that the action wasn’t caused by a large fraction of the reasons to act and absences of reasons not to act. According to CLOSENESS, FRACTION, and CAUSES, then, the results of the situationist literature are perfectly compatible with agents acting with a high degree of reasons-sensitivity in most cases. This might be considered an advantage of these views. But it also begs the question of why the situationist literature *seems* to pose such a threat to free will in the first place. Suppose I were to find out, for example, that the main determinant of which political party I decide to vote for in an election is whether or not it rained on polling day; wouldn’t I be *right* to conclude that I have less free will in deciding who to vote for than I thought I did?

In contrast with the other accounts, CONTRIBUTION can explain what seems so troubling about the situationist literature. The important point is not *merely* that situational factors play more of a role than we thought in determining behaviour; after all, the fact that our actions were determined by the initial state of the universe doesn’t seem anything like as troubling, at least not in the same way.⁴² Rather, the potentially troubling consequence of the situationist literature is that *reasons* play *less* of a role than we thought in determining behaviour. If it’s true that an agent is more likely to help someone if they find a dime in a phone box beforehand, what that would demonstrate is that even on the occasions when they do stop and help, their doing so wasn’t solely determined by the reasons to help (and absences of reasons not to); rather it was caused by reasons only *together* with fortuitous environmental conditions, and so the agent was only partially, not fully, reasons-sensitive in acting. And if, moreover, it turned out that these environmental conditions are really the *primary* drivers of behaviour, in that they contributed much more than reasons and their absences did to bringing the agent’s action about, then it would straightforwardly follow, given CONTRIBUTION, that the agent acted with only a small degree of reasons-sensitivity. There is thus no mystery, on the contribution account, about how the situationist literature might represent a threat to free will.

Let me end, then, by making a few (all too brief) remarks about how I think we *should* respond to the situationist threat. First, it’s worth noting that at least some of the things described as ‘situational

⁴²See also Nelkin (2005, 193–4) on this point.

factors' in the situationist literature *are* in fact reasons to act in the way the agent acted, albeit not very strong ones. In the 'Good Samaritan' case, for example, the fact that the subject is giving a lecture on the other side of campus in five minutes *is* a reason not to stop and help the victim, even though it's plausibly outweighed by the moral reasons to stop and help. Thus the fact that an agent's stopping and helping is partially caused, on a given occasion, by the absence of an urgent appointment, is not, I think, any threat to their reasons-sensitivity. Similarly, the fact that someone in authority is telling you to continue apparently electrocuting someone *is* a reason to do as they say (if only to avoid confrontation or embarrassment), albeit one outweighed by the moral reasons to stop. Thus the fact that an agent's refusal to electrocute someone on a given occasion is partially caused by the absence of authoritative commands to continue is not a threat to their reasons-sensitivity either. What *these* studies show, I think, is not that we're not free or responsible for our actions, but rather that we don't always do what we have most reason to do. What's troubling about the Milgram experiment, if anything, is the realisation that we would have done the same thing in the subject's position – indeed, that we would have been *fully free in doing so*, and hence fully responsible for our actions. In other words, these cases simply show that we are subject to circumstantial moral luck; that whether we do the right thing depends on the reasons we're exposed to. They don't show that we have less free will than we thought we did. This, I think, accords with intuition: as Nelkin, for example, acknowledges, "one's first thought" upon encountering the Milgram experiments is arguably "not that the subjects were less than completely responsible, but that the rest of us, too, are likely not as good as we hope to be, and would likely do something blameworthy if put in the same situation" (Nelkin 2005, 188).

The subset of the situationist literature that *does* seem to pose a genuine threat to free will, then, is that in which the 'situational factors' being studied are genuinely non-reason-conferring – things like finding a dime in a phone box, the weather, and so on. If it's true, for example, that an agent's stopping and helping someone was caused by the reasons to do so only *together* with the fact that they found a dime earlier, this would, I think, imply that he was only partially reasons-sensitive in acting, and hence not fully credit-worthy for his action, because finding a dime is no reason to help someone. There's an important difference, therefore, between those cases where agents are causally influenced by *weak* reasons and those cases where they are causally influenced by *non*-reasons. And it's worth repeating that this is not a distinction the proponents of CLOSENESS, FRACTION or CAUSES are able to explain, because for them, an agent's doing the wrong thing is incompatible with them being fully free, regardless of how it was caused.

How, then, might a proponent of CONTRIBUTION respond to these more troubling studies? One option, given my comments in §6, might be to claim that the relevant 'situational factors' are in fact mere *background conditions*, not part of the cause of the agent's action. This might work in some cases – the fact that I'm more likely to do something if the world doesn't explode doesn't seem like a threat to my free will, for example, because in the sense that matters, the failure of the world to explode is a mere background condition, not part of the cause of my action. But I don't think it can work in all cases. The fact that I might not have helped a victim if I hadn't found a dime in a phone box earlier *does* seem to make me less than fully reasons-sensitive – in the sense that matters for free will, the presence of the dime does seem to be part of what caused me to act, rather than a mere background condition.

The right response for the proponent of CONTRIBUTION, I think, is to simply grant that in cases like the phone box case, the subjects' actions are less than fully free. Nevertheless, this is consistent with them acting with a *high degree* of reasons-sensitivity. How reasons-sensitive an agent was will depend, of course, on the empirical details of the case. If, given that the subject found a dime in the phone box, they were very likely to stop and help *regardless* of whether there was a reason to do so, and conversely, they were very unlikely to help given only that such reasons were present, then plausibly, reasons contributed only a small amount to bringing about their action, and so they were only

minimally reasons-sensitive, according to CONTRIBUTION. But while one can certainly imagine cases like that, they don't seem particularly realistic. Most of the time, in cases like this, what made the largest contribution were the reasons for helping (and absences of reasons not to). They weren't quite sufficient by themselves for the action – they were sufficient only together with the presence of the dime, for example, and perhaps other things besides – but it was the reasons to help which contributed the most to making that plurality jointly sufficient for the agent's action. If that's right, then while the situationists are correct to point out that we're often a bit less responsible than we might think we are for what we do, they don't succeed in establishing the more radical claim that our very system of praise and blame is fundamentally inappropriate.

8 | CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have sought to articulate an account of degrees of reasons-sensitivity that can capture the intuitive sense in which some actions are more free than others. I started by criticizing two modal accounts of degrees of reasons-sensitivity, arguing that they are susceptible to the very kinds of counterexamples that motivated reasons-sensitivity approaches to free will in the first place – namely, Frankfurt-style cases. The problem is that 'back-up' mechanisms can make a difference to what an agent does in nearby possible worlds without, seemingly, making any difference to how free the agent's action actually was. This suggests instead a *causal* analysis of degrees of reasons-sensitivity, which makes reference only to what actually brought the agent's action about. But rather than think of an agent's degree of reasons-sensitivity in terms of the *fraction* of reasons which causally contributed to their action, as suggested by Sartorio's account, I have argued that we should think of it instead in terms of the *degree of contribution* reasons made to bringing the action about. As well as avoiding the conceptual and normative problems faced by its rivals, such an account can help to illuminate the nature of the threat to free will posed by the situationist literature.

I have tried in this paper to remain as neutral as possible on the important questions of what reasons are, how they 'tell in favour' of acting, and which sorts of reasons are the ones agents must be sensitive to in order to act freely. I also haven't ruled out the possibility that there is more to acting freely than being reasons-sensitive, and hence that there may be other dimensions along which free will can come in degrees. But of course there will always be those who straightforwardly deny that acting freely has *anything* to do with being sensitive to reasons, however 'reasons' and 'sensitivity' are understood. To these people this paper can be seen as amounting to a challenge: to demonstrate how their preferred alternative theory of free will can be extended to accommodate the very natural thought that some actions are more free than others, and more specifically that certain kinds of psychological or environmental conditions can *impair* or *diminish* free will without eliminating it entirely. Any theory of free will is incomplete unless and until it can capture the ways in which it comes in degrees.

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