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Version: Accepted Version

Article:
Steward, H (2013) Responses. Inquiry: an interdisciplinary journal of philosophy, 56 (6). 681 - 706. ISSN: 0020-174X

https://doi.org/10.1080/0020174X.2013.841055

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Response to Karin Boxer

I want to begin my response to Karin's thought-provoking paper by simply conceding (as I have already conceded to some other authors) that she is quite right to say that there is too much focus in *A Metaphysics* on one particular type of compatibilism, and that I say rather too little about some of the other types that might be conceivable. I think perhaps my concentration on the reductive style of compatibilism which I attempt most directly to undermine – the kind which conceives of the determination of effects by agents as reducible to the determination of those same effects by events and states occurring or obtaining in those agents – was a result of the fact that this seemed to me to be the type of compatibilist thinking about agency that most dominated the literature I was particularly concerned to oppose – a literature in which various familiar forms of physicalism and functionalism are the favoured accounts of mental causation. But of course, Karin is right to say that compatibilism, no less than incompatibilism, comes in many forms, and that I have not said enough about some of the alternatives to the reductive types of view I oppose directly. In this response, then, I shall try to make a few remarks about the sort of compatibilism which Karin herself suggests might replace the reductive form I criticise – and attempt to argue that contra Karin, my argument does indeed have force against this proposed alternative. The second thing I shall try to do is to seize a welcome opportunity to correct a misapprehension about the view of settling to which I am committed – and in particular, to deny Karin's suggestion that, on my account 'settling begins where reasons end' (p. ?).

Karin's favoured form of compatibilism answers the question what it is to have the power to make one's body move in certain ways 'at will' in terms of a power to make one's body move in those ways *as and when one wills to move it* in those ways. To avoid the perils of volitionalism, it is then specified that willing is neither a purely mental phenomenon, nor one that takes place prior to the action itself. Rather, willing is to be explicated in terms of *trying*. When trying is successful, the trying is simply *identical* with the action, rather than being its prior cause. But if willing is to be explicated by means of trying, it is surely permissible and natural to ask what it is to *try?* Trying has now itself become the locus of all the interest that

was originally focused on the concept of agency – indeed, it is an *instance* of the phenomenon, as Karin herself agrees; she says that trying is 'intrinsically active' (p.?). But this seems to mean that we now need to ask the question whether our *tryings* are the sorts of things that could be deterministically produced events, if we want to know whether compatibilism is true – and the compatibilist can hardly reapply her original strategy in order to show that there is no problem about understanding what it is for a trying to be dependent on an agent's will – we can't say, for example, that to have the power to try is to have the power to try as and when one tries to try. For trying is not generally something one can try to do.

This does not show, of course, that a trying could *not* be deterministically produced. But if a trying simply *is* an action – a full-blown physical action, when successful, and something less – perhaps the causing of some incipient muscular or neural motion – when not successful – it would seem as though anything that stood in the way of an action's being determined would likewise stand in the way of a trying's being determined. And so, contra Karin, I believe my original Chapter 2 argument remains relevant. If actions have to be settlings of certain matters at the time of action, then *tryings* have to be settlings of certain matters at the time of action, too. And that means that at least some matters have to be left to be settled by the trying. A wholly deterministic account of their provenance cannot be correct.

Karin might, of course, mean simply to question the premise of this argument – the premise that actions (including tryings) *are* settlings. The fact that she asks the question why compatibilists should attempt to explicate agency in terms of settling at all suggests as much. But I made the claim that actions are settlings as a way of explicating what I took to be a common intuition about agency - that when an agent acts, certain matters are always *up to the agent* at the time of action. If a compatibilist is to reject the idea that this intuition should be explicated in this way, she needs to offer us a different way of understanding this intuition, one which is compatible with determinism of at least a local sort. The most common recourse of the compatibilist at this point is to a reductive account of 'up-to-usness' in terms of causation by mental states. Karin is right to point out that that may not be the only possible alternative. But the strategy she herself offers, it seems to me, will not give us this understanding without leading almost immediately to a dead end, because no way is offered

in terms of which it is possible to understand what it might mean to say that whether or not to *try* to do something is very often up to us – and without it, we are left, effectively, without a viable compatibilism.

The second thing I would like to do in this response is to correct what I think is a mistaken interpretation of my views about what it is that agents are able to settle. Karin seems to believe that it is my view that agents are able *only* to settle details concerning the movements of their own bodies – whether for example, they move their bodies at t rather than at $t + 1$, or whether they move first to the left and then to the right, or vice versa, etc. – and that where reasons and intentions dictate what is done, there is no agential settling. But this is absolutely not my view. Most of the time, I want to say, we are settling *what we will do*, and not merely when or how (in detail) we will do it. I emphasise our capacity to settle the small details only to make clear that *even* in those (rare) cases in which our reasons make a single course of action mandatory, there remain many things which are up to us – in particular, *when* to act – and when even *this* is dictated by our reasons, *how* to act (in detail). But it is extremely rare, in my view, that reasons *will* dictate a single course of action. Most of the time, it seems to me, reasons quite vastly underdetermine what one ought (at this very moment) to do or be doing. I currently have reasons for finishing this response, reasons for going for a swim, reasons for trying to get in touch with my daughter, reasons for reading the paper, reasons for tidying up – and perhaps more radically, reasons to reassess my life entirely, to stop doing philosophy immediately and begin planning a complete change of direction. Perhaps some of these reasons are stronger than others, but why suppose that they can be precisely ordered in such a way that at any given time, one single course of action is at the top of the list, so far as practical rationality is concerned? Any such rational ordering one could supply would in most cases be at best *exceedingly* partial. So it is emphatically *not* my view that settling only begins where reasons end. Settling only begins where reasons fail to dictate a unique course of action – but that, in my view, is nearly everywhere. Settling therefore does indeed have the kind of scope which Karin insists it must have – we settle which actions occur under the descriptions folk psychology would offer up – at least most of the time.

I want, finally, to say something very brief about Karin's suggestion that 'laws of character' in combination with individual circumstances, might conceivably determine what one does. Perhaps there are regularities which might be called 'laws of character' – but they would seem to be related rather differently to me and my actions than the laws of physics, say, might be. For it would seem to be precisely *through* my settlings of things that it is determined what they are. In this respect, they seem different from the laws of physics, where it seems natural to think that they have been as they have for millions of years and that I have no chance whatever of affecting them. I therefore agree with Karin that there is no obstacle to viewing choices as things which are determined by conjunctions of circumstances and laws of character – but that is because it is natural to think of the laws in question as emerging out of my activity in the first place. Were they written in stone in advance of my birth, and were they to dictate what I would do in every circumstance in which I might find myself, I do not see how they would permit me to settle anything at the time of action – and hence, I do not see how they would permit me agency. (I return to these themes in my discussion of Kim Frost's paper).