7 Free Contrastivism

Walter Sinnott-Armstrong

1 CONTRASTIVISM

Many central issues in philosophy concern reasons. Epistemology is about reasons to believe (or disbelieve) certain propositions. Ethics is about reasons to do (or not do) certain actions. Metaphysics and philosophy of science often focus on causation and explanation, which involve reasons why certain events do (or don’t) happen.

All of these investigations can benefit from contrastivism. A contrastivist view of a concept holds that all or some claims using that concept are best understood with an extra logical place for a contrast class. As a universal theory of reasons, contrastivism about reasons claims that a reason for something is always a reason for that thing as opposed to some contrast. The point is not that there is a reason for a contrastive proposition (“one thing rather than another”) but, instead, that the reason favors one thing and disfavors others. It is the reason, not the proposition, that introduces the contrast.

This abstract view applies to various kinds of reasons, including epistemic reasons to believe. In the classic case from Dretske (1970), a father takes his daughter to the zoo, and, when she asks him what kind of animal is in a certain cage, he answers, “That’s a zebra.” Does he know (or is he justified in believing that) it is a zebra? An epistemological contrastivist would respond that the father knows that it is a zebra in contrast with an aardvark, bear, camel, duck, elephant, and so on for other normal animals. Still, the father does not know that it is a zebra as opposed to a mule painted to look just like a zebra, a robot with zebra fur on top of metallic parts, a perfect holographic image of a zebra, or an image in “The Matrix.” Why not? Because the father’s visual experience enables him to distinguish zebras from aardvarks and all other members of the first contrast class (so he can rule out those other animals), but he still cannot distinguish zebras from (or rule out) members of the second contrast class. The need for such contrasts in epistemology is supported forcefully by Dretske (1970, 1972), Schaffer (2004a, 2004b, 2005a, 2008), and Karjalainen and Morton (2003, 2008). Sinnott-Armstrong (2006) extends this approach into moral epistemology.

Other philosophers apply contrastivism to explanation, which involves reasons why things happen. Humidity explains why it rains instead of not precipitating at all, but temperature explains why it rains instead of snows. Van Fraassen (1980) and Lipton (1991) show how to build such contrasts into an illuminating and fruitful theory of explanation in general. This approach is extended from causal explanations to causation by Schaffer (2005b).

The same point applies to reasons for action. My reason to cook a cake on my son’s birthday as opposed to the day after his birthday is that his party is on his birthday, whereas my reason to cook a cake instead of a pie on his birthday is that cake is traditional on birthdays, and he likes cake. There are different reasons for different contrasts, as before. Nobody has yet developed a contrastivist theory of practical reasons to act, but it seems natural (see Sinnott-Armstrong 2006, 112–117).

Why adopt such a convoluted and complicated view? Contrastivism is justified by its ability to illuminate examples, as in the cases cited, and to resolve or avoid puzzles and paradoxes.

One prominent puzzle in epistemology is the challenge of skepticism. Do I know that I have hands? Philosophers have argued for a long time about how to answer this simple question, because it is hard to explain how I can know that I have hands when I cannot rule out incompatible skeptical hypotheses, such as that I am a disembodied brain stimulated to see images of hands. Contrastivists can say that I know that I have hands in contrast with claws or wings, but I do not know that I have hands in contrast with images of hands created by stimulation of my disembodied brain in a vat. If contrastivists also deny that either contrast is the one that determines whether or not I just plain know that I have hands, then they can refuse to answer the simple traditional question of whether I just plain know that I have hands. In that way, they can resolve the skeptical paradox and avoid ancient disputes (see Sinnott-Armstrong 2004, 2008).

Contrastivism can also help to resolve other puzzles in the philosophy of science, such as Goodman’s grue paradox (Goodman 1955). Do our past visual experiences of emeralds give us evidence that emeralds are green even though those experiences are also compatible with the contrary hypothesis that emeralds are grue? This question is puzzling because it asks simply whether past experiences are evidence that emeralds are green. The puzzle dissolves (or is reduced) when we add contrast classes; past experiences give us evidence that emeralds are green as opposed to blue, but those experiences do not give us any evidence that emeralds are green as opposed to grue.

A metaphysical puzzle where contrastivism helps is mental causation. Mental states or events seem to have physical effects, such as when our intentions or choices seem to cause our bodies to move. How can such “downward causation” work? The answer lies in multiple realizability. Suppose that a mental state (M1) could be realized in any of several different brain states (B1, B2, B3, and so on), but it happens to be realized in B1 on a particular occasion. Now suppose that a physical state (P1) results and would have
resulted even if \( M_1 \) had been realized in any of the contrasting brain states (\( B_2, B_3, \) and so on) instead of \( B_1 \), but \( P \) would not have resulted if a contrasting mental state \( M_2 \) had occurred instead of \( M_1 \). In this case, the occurrence of the mental state \( M_1 \), as opposed to mental state \( M_2 \), is what causes \( P \) rather than contrasting physical state \( P_1 \). It would be inaccurate to respond that the occurrence of the brain state \( B_1 \), as opposed to \( B_2 \), causes \( P_1 \) rather than \( P_2 \), because \( P_1 \) would occur even with \( B_2 \) instead of \( B_1 \), so the requisite counterfactuals do not hold for "\( B_1 \) as opposed to \( B_2 \) causes \( P_1 \) as opposed to \( P_2 \)" as they do for "\( M_1 \) as opposed to \( M_2 \) causes \( P_1 \) as opposed to \( P_2 \)."

The point is that the mental kind description rather than the neural kind description can capture the relevant level of generality for causal laws as well as explanations. For example, if fear (as opposed to joy) causes increased (as opposed to baseline) blood flow in the amygdala as well as movement away (rather than toward) a snake, regardless of which brain state among several possibilities happens to realize that fear, then fear rather than the particular brain state that realizes fear on an occasion is what causes the movement away from the snake on that occasion (see also Craver 2007, 202-211, 223-224). In something like this way, contrastivist accounts of causation can illuminate apparent causal relations from mind to body and might also help to defend a qualified version of the commonsense view that our choices affect what we do. And this account works even if all mental events are completely constituted by physical events on every particular occasion.

Next, consider moral dilemmas. When Sophie is taken to a Nazi concentration camp with her two children, the guard tells her that she must choose one child to die and one to live in the camp, and both will be killed if she refuses to choose. Does she have a reason to choose her daughter? This question is puzzling without contrasts, but a contrastivist can say that Sophie has a reason to choose her daughter instead of neither child even if she has no reason at all to choose her daughter instead of her son. This account does not make her choice any easier, of course, but it avoids contradiction and clarifies what she does and does not have reason to do. Thus, contrastivism would have helped me in Sinnott-Armstrong (1988).

In all of these cases, puzzles arise when philosophers pose questions (or make claims) about reasons without specifying any contrast class. They argue about the reason for X without specifying what contrasts with X. The puzzles can be avoided or solved by insisting on filling out the contrast classes at least when the need arises.

Traditionalists often respond that these philosophical issues survive for unqualified claims about reasons independently of any contrast class. Such claims about reasons can be understood as presupposing that a certain contrast class is the relevant one for determining whether someone really and truly has a reason to believe or do something. The assumption that one contrast class is the relevant one can then be seen as the source of the trouble. The trouble can be avoided by rejecting that assumption along with questions about who really and truly has a reason without qualification.

Instead of taking sides, contrastivists can then suspend belief about which unqualified reason claims are true. This kind of contrastivism can be called Pyrrhonian because Pyrrhonian skeptics suspend belief about irresolvable philosophical quarrels. This position is admittedly more theory-laden than most Pyrrhonians would like, but it shares their doubts about many of the questions that baffle traditional philosophers. The benefits of this version of contrastivism come not from picking sides but from clarifying issues and showing how to avoid ancient disputes. Contrastivists of this sort dissolve rather than solve traditional philosophical issues.

We should expect this general pattern to recur in accounts of freedom. After all, whether one acts or wills freely depends on the reasons that explain or cause one's act or will. These reasons, explanations, and causes depend on contrast classes. As a result, freedom also depends on contrast classes. Indeed, freedom is contrastive in more ways than one. When someone asks whether an agent is free, we need to ask at least two questions about contrasts: Free from what? Free to do what?

2 FREE FROM WHAT? CONTRASTING CONSTRAINTS

Most traditional views of freedom in philosophy are reactions to the classic problem of determinism. This argument poses that problem simply:

1. Every act is (fully) determined by preceding causes.
2. If any act is (fully) determined, then its agent is not free (at all).
3. If any agent is not free (at all), then that agent is not responsible (at all).
4. If any agent is not responsible (at all), then that agent should not be punished (at all).
5. If any agent is punished who should not be punished (at all), then the punisher owes that agent an apology and compensation.
6. Therefore, we owe an apology and compensation to every rapist and murderer whom we ever punished.

Almost nobody wants to accept this conclusion, of course. The problem is that the argument is valid, so the conclusion cannot consistently be avoided without denying a premise, and it is not clear which premise to deny.

Libertarians who allow contra-causal freedom deny premise 1. Compatibilists about freedom deny premise 2. Compatibilists about responsibility but not about freedom deny premise 3. Hard determinists and hard incompatibilists deny premise 4 or premise 5. I have always felt torn between compatibilism and hard determinism. Contrastivism provides a way to have it both ways at once.

The key to the contrastivist solution is to insert a place for a variable into the account of freedom. Specifically, freedom is always freedom from a certain range of constraints. When someone asks whether an act or person
is free, instead of answering the question directly, we often need to ask, “Free from what?”

This simple thesis is not new. Many philosophers throughout history have made roughly the same point in different ways. Here are some of my favorites:

David Hume: “Few are capable of distinguishing betwixt the liberty of spontaneity, as it is call’d in the schools, and the liberty of indifference; betwixt that which is opposed to violence and that which means a negation of necessity and causes.” (1739–1740, 407; last two emphases added to indicate contrasts)

J.L. Austin: “While it has been the tradition to present this [‘freedom’] as the positive term requiring elucidation, there is little doubt that to say we acted ‘freely’ (in the philosopher’s use, which is only faintly related to the everyday use) is to say only that we acted not un-freely, in one or another of the many heterogeneous ways of so acting (under duress or what not). Like ‘real’, ‘free’ is only used to rule out the suggestion of some or all of its recognized antitheses.” (1961, 180)

Joel Feinberg: “It is useful to interpret these singular judgments [that he is free] in terms of a single analytic pattern with three blanks in it: ____ is free from ____ to do (or omit, to be, or have) ____.” (1973, 3–4)

Peter Unger: “Under what conditions is a person free to do a certain thing? He must be free from a plenitude of factors, say, ‘constraining,’ ‘binding,’ ‘preventing’ factors.” (1984, 57)

Thus, contrastivism about freedom is at least not too idiosyncratic.

Some critics object that only negative freedom is freedom from constraints, whereas positive freedom is freedom to do something rather than freedom from anything. This distinction, however, is best understood as a distinction between different kinds of constraints (as shown by Feinberg 1973, 5–7). A pauper is not free from legal constraints against stealing a yacht but is free from legal constraints against buying a yacht. Nonetheless, he is still not free from financial constraints against buying a yacht, because he has no money. This pauper, then, is said to have negative but not positive freedom to buy a yacht. But why does he lack positive freedom? Because the pauper is constrained by law against a conjunctive act: taking the yacht without paying for it. Even apart from law, the seller would stop the pauper from taking the yacht without paying. Thus, the pauper is constrained by his lack of money. Now suppose that this constraint disappears, because the pauper wins a lottery, but he is still terrified of water, so he cannot bring himself to buy a yacht. Then he is constrained by hydrophobia, but not by his bank account or the law. He has negative freedom from some constraints (both legal and financial), but he still lacks positive freedom because of other constraints (psychological). There is, thus, a distinction between positive freedom and negative freedom, but both kinds of freedom are freedom from some range of constraints. The distinction lies in the different kinds of constraints, and all such constraints can replace the variable in contrastivist accounts of freedom from.

Why accept this contrastivism? Part of the purpose of a theory of freedom is to help us understand common language and common concepts. Accordingly, one argument for contrastivism is that freedom appeals to common language:

“Those mints are free. Take one if you want.”
“I am free to see you now. Come right in.”
“That table by the window is free. Let me seat you there.”
“You are free to join us if you want.”
“Amerita is a free country.”

The contrastivist account can easily explain why we naturally use the word “free” in these expressions. To say that the mints are free is to say that they are free from financial cost, so you are not constrained from taking one even if you do not have any money. To say that I am free to see you now is to say that I am free from conflicting obligations and not constrained by previous commitments. To say that the table by the window is free, similarly, to say that no reservation constrains you from sitting there or the waiter from seating you there. To say that you are free to join us is to say that your joining us is free from any constraint of etiquette, such as the rule that you should not join a group when the group does not want you to join it. To call America a free country is to say that its citizens are not constrained by law or government in many of the ways that people in other countries are constrained.

Non-contrastive accounts of freedom have no good way to deal with such common expressions. What do free mints, free tables, free countries, and so on have to do with whether anyone’s actions are or are not determined by a prior cause (as on libertarian accounts of freedom) or with whether or not anyone’s reasons-responsive (as on some compatibilist accounts of freedom)? Such non-contrastive accounts must dismiss this common language as deviant or multiply ambiguous. These dodges introduce complexities in linguistic theory, so they should be avoided for the sake of simplicity if possible. Contrastive accounts show how to avoid such unconstrained ambiguity. Hence, a contrastive account has definite advantages from a linguistic point of view.

Opponents might respond that free mints, tables, and countries are beside the point, because our main concern here is freedom of action and will. But contrastive accounts of freedom also have advantages for understanding freedom of action and will. In particular, they resolve or avoid the
kinds of constraint, compulsion, ignorance, coercion, and prohibition are defined to include only those kinds that excuse in the broad sense that removes responsibility. Hence, anyone who is not free from excuse has an excuse and, hence, is not responsible. But if premise 2 refers to freedom from causation and premise 3 refers to freedom from excuse, then the argument equivocates and is invalid.

To avoid equivocation, premise 3 must refer to the same kind of freedom as premise 2. If premise 2 refers to freedom from causation, then so must premise 3. But premise 3 is eminently questionable if it refers to freedom from causation. Then it claims that any agent whose act is not free from causation is also not responsible. That claim again begs the question against compatibilists. Because it is controversial, it needs to be supported by an independent argument, but no such independent argument has been given yet.

Thus, the contrastivist account of freedom shows that the argument from determinism commits the fallacy of equivocation. Of course, that is not the end of the discussion. Several responses are available.

Incompatibilists (including libertarians and hard determinists) might simply deny that they equivocate, because they refer to freedom from causation throughout, and premise 3 is true because all causes are excuses and do remove responsibility. Even if this is true, however, it is controversial and not at all obvious. Indeed, it conflicts with extremely widespread beliefs and practices, such as when juries believe criminals are responsible and hold them responsible. Moreover, it is a strong, abstract, universal, modal claim. Such premises cannot simply be taken for granted. For these reasons, the burden of proof lies with incompatibilists to show why all (or at least all deterministic) forms of causation always remove responsibility.

Most incompatibilists accept this burden of proof and provide support for their premises. One common argument runs like this:

1. If any act is (fully) determined, then its agent cannot do otherwise.
2. If any act is (fully) determined, then its agent is not free (at all).

This argument is supposed to refer to freedom from excuse in both premise 2 and conclusion 2. If so, this new argument would avoid the equivocation above. However, instead of escaping equivocation altogether, this argument merely introduces a new equivocation. To say that an agent cannot do otherwise might be to say either that the agent is prevented by some cause or that the agent is prevented by some condition that excuses him. Consider a student who says, “I can’t go to the party tonight, because I have homework to do.” This student is saying that he has an excuse (or justification) for not going to the party. He is not saying that he is prevented by some determining cause. But then what does “cannot do otherwise” mean.
in the argument above? If “the agent cannot do otherwise” refers to being prevented by some cause, then premise 2* is trivial and true by definition, but premise 2** is controversial and begs the question, assuming that it refers to freedom from excuse. On the other hand, if “the agent cannot do otherwise” refers to being prevented by some excusing condition, then premise 2** is trivial and true by definition, but premise 2* is controversial and begs the question. Hence, this argument again depends on an equivocation that is revealed by specifying contrast classes, just like the original argument that posed the problem of determinism.

Of course, incompatibilists have given many more arguments for the crucial premises, but these arguments all have forceful critics. I cannot go through all of these variations here (see Kane 2011). All I can do in this brief chapter is register my claim that none of these arguments succeeds completely, and many of their flaws are revealed by analyzing them in light of contrastivism along the lines illustrated above.

Apart from formal deductive arguments, the central question in this debate is why excuses excuse. We normally excuse people when their bodies cause damage if they were pushed or had a seizure. These kinds of causes excuse, but why? A natural answer is that the harmful movement was determined so that the person could not do otherwise. If that explains why these excuses remove responsibility, then that explanation would seem to generalize to all causes of action.

The problem with this inference to the best explanation is that this explanation fails in other cases and another explanation does better. First, consider coercion. When a robber credibly threatens, “Your money or your life,” then you are not responsible for handing over the money even if you are free from causation and not determined. Because coercion can excuse without determining the agent’s compliance, determination and freedom from causation are not what explains why this excuse excuses (or why this defense is a defense, if coercion counts as a justification rather than an excuse).

Similarly, reasonable mistakes can also excuse without determining. Suppose that you reasonably believe that the white granules in the sugar bowl are sugar, and your friend asks for sugar in her coffee, so you put some of the granules in her coffee. Unfortunately, the granules are poison, and she dies as a result. You are not responsible, and your excuse is complete, even if you are not determined to put anything in her coffee. Hence, determination cannot explain why this excuse excuses.

Again, imagine that an aggressor pushes you down onto an unseen stranger, and the impact breaks her leg. Suppose that the push was not so hard that you were totally incapable of resisting, but it would have been extremely difficult. If the aggressor had pushed you this hard a hundred times in similar circumstances, you would have fallen ninety-nine times; but once you would have managed somehow to avoid falling on the stranger’s leg. Nonetheless, you do not seem responsible for the accident or the broken leg, because it would have been so difficult for you to achieve the contrary result. Examples like these suggest that determination cannot explain even the central cases of physical force that motivate incompatibilism.

What then does explain why excuses excuse? I would tentatively suggest roughly that excuses depend on what it is reasonable to expect of other people. It is not reasonable to expect someone to refuse to hand over money in response to a credible deadly threat. (Notice that it is reasonable to expect people to refuse to commit murder in response to a credible deadly threat, and the difference between murder and money has nothing to do with determinism.) It is also not reasonable to expect people to make mistakes that all or most other reasonable people would also make. (Notice that the difference between reasonable and unreasonable mistakes also has nothing to do with determinism, but does affect which mistakes excuse.) Finally, it does not seem reasonable to expect people to resist pushes (or compulsions or addictions) that are extremely difficult to resist, even if they are not completely irresistible. When we survey the range of actual excuses, then the real rationale for excuses concerns what it is reasonable to expect. That has nothing to do with determinism. This result leaves no basis for the premises needed for the argument that posed the problem of determinism. Because the burden is on those who assert those premises, the problem of determinism has been avoided with the help of contrastivism.

So far I have written as if the debate is between incompatibilists and contrastivists. This way of framing the discussion can mislead, because contrastivists are no more compatibilists than they are incompatibilists. Contrastivists hold that freedom from excuse is compatible with determinism, but they also hold that freedom from causation is incompatible with determinism, and both kinds of freedom are legitimate notions. Contrastivists are, then, both compatibilists (about freedom from excuse) and incompatibilists (about freedom from causation) as well as neither compatibilists (about freedom from causation) nor incompatibilists (about freedom from excuse). If someone asks a contrastivist whether he is a compatibilist or an incompatibilist, then he should reject this simple question and ask, “Contrastivist about what? Which kind of freedom are you asking about?”

Some critics get impatient and insist, “But which kind of freedom matters? In the end, are people really just plain free or not?” To say that some person or act is just plain free, presumably, to say that they are free from the relevant constraints. The relevant constraints are then simply the ones, whichever they are, that determine whether a person or act is just plain free. This is obviously circular, but the point is that those who call a person or act just plain free without explicitly mentioning any set of constraints still presuppose that a certain set of constraints is the important or relevant one.

I refuse to play that language game. I see no point in arguing about whether any person or act is or is not just plain free without reference to any contrast class of constraints. That is because I see no basis for claiming that either freedom from cause or freedom from excuse is the one relevant contrast class for determining whether or not an agent is really and truly
just plain free. Hence, I suspend belief about which contrast class is really relevant for freedom; about which acts and agents, if any, are just plain free; and about compatibilism or incompatibilism regarding unqualified kinds of freedom. This feature makes my position Pyrrhonian and enables it to avoid futile disputes that plague traditional discussions.

3 FREE TO DO WHAT? CONTRASTING OPTIONS

It is not enough to specify what a person is free from. We also need to cite contrast classes in order to specify what a person is free to do, as Feinberg said in the quotation above.

This new dimension of contrasts can be illustrated by Al the alcoholic. Al drinks heavily almost every evening but rarely at work. He knows that his drinking causes him personal and health problems, and he does not like or enjoy drinking any more, but he still wants to drink, and he would suffer withdrawal if he quit. He thinks a lot about drinking and spends a lot of time seeking drinks. In the lingo, Al is a heavy drinker, an abuser, dependent, and an addict.

Al needs money. If you offer him $20 to carry a ten-kilo bag of dog food for you, he will carry it for the money. But if you offer him $100 or $500 to carry a fifty-kilo bag of coal for you, then he will want to do it and try to do it, but he will fail. If you then credibly threaten to punch or kill him if he does not lift the fifty-kilo bag of coal, then he still won’t do it. This shows that he cannot lift that much. He is not strong enough physically.

Similarly, Al’s ability to control his drinking is shown by how he reacts to various incentives not to drink. If you offer Al $100 a day to stop drinking whisky, he will switch to wine and take the cash. If you offer Al $100 a day to stop drinking alcohol of any kind, then he will want to do so, he will try hard, and he will usually abstain all morning and afternoon and for a few hours into the evening. Despite great efforts, he will almost never make it the whole day without drinking any alcohol, so he won’t succeed in collecting the money.

Is Al free? That question is hard to answer until we add contrast classes. Al is free to stop drinking whisky in contrast with wine, but he is not free to drink only soft drinks in contrast with alcohol. He is free to stop drinking for an hour as opposed to only thirty minutes, but he is not free to stop drinking for a day or a week in contrast with only an hour. We need to specify the relevant contrast class in order to describe precisely what Al is free to do and what he is not free to do.

The same point applies to individual acts. One day Al drinks a shot of whisky at 9:00 p.m. Was that particular act of drinking free? This act of drinking a shot of whisky at 9:00 was free in contrast with drinking wine at 9:00 and also in contrast with waiting until 9:15 or 10:00 to drink anything but not in contrast with drinking nothing but soft drinks until tomorrow. Again, we need to specify the relevant contrast class in order to describe precisely how an act is free and how free it is.

Indeed, much more precision is needed. For one thing, Al might respond more to stronger incentives. Suppose that for $1000 Al will stop drinking alcohol for one day but still not for two days. And suppose Al responds more to negative incentives than to positive incentives. If his boss threatens to fire him if he drinks on a weekend retreat, then Al will go without a drink for the weekend; but if the retreat lasts a whole week, then Al will try hard to abstain but will end up sneaking away for a drink before the week is over, despite the risk to his livelihood. And if Al takes Amabuse (Disulfiram), so he knows that he will get nauseous if he drinks alcohol, then he will usually abstain from drinking for a week, but still not for a month. He honestly tries hard to go longer without drinking, and he feels regret when he fails, but he does fail.

Circumstances also matter. Maybe for $100 Al will abstain for ten hours if he is at home with a supportive friend but not even for one hour if he is at a bar with others who are drinking. Personal tragedies might also lead him to drink within ten minutes even if he could save his job by waiting an hour.

Another complication is that, instead of always succeeding or always failing when they try, most people succeed at variable rates. Suppose Al expects no payment for not drinking and no sickness from drinking, but he does want to abstain, so he tries hard to abstain. Then he might often (70% of the time) succeed in abstaining for one hour, sometimes (20% of the time) abstain for two hours, but almost never (1%) abstain for three hours.

I have described this case in some detail, because real cases are often at least this complex. Indeed, much more detail could be added. Addicts never have no control at all in any circumstances. Hence, we need to stop asking whether a person is free or in control and, instead, start asking how much control a person has or how free he and his acts are. The answer then needs to introduce contrasts, because most people are free to choose out of some contrast classes but not out of others.

But aren’t some drinkers completely free from compulsion for any contrasting acts of drinking? Maybe, but their freedom still needs to be described in terms of contrast classes in order to specify the kinds of freedom that they share with alcoholics and the ways in which they differ from alcoholics.

Critics might become impatient and insist, “Stop it with all of the contrasts. Is Al just plain free? Is his act free period?” What do such questions mean? We already specified that Al is free out of some contrast classes but not others, so the questions seem to be about which contrast class is important or relevant. The problem is that different contrasts are relevant to different purposes. The kind of freedom that is necessary for blaming Al might be very different from the kind of freedom whose lack shows that Al needs his friends to stop offering him alcohol or drinking in front of him or that Al needs to start attending Alcoholics Anonymous. There is no way to determine whether a contrast is or is not relevant without picking
a particular purpose and asking whether AI's kind of freedom is adequate for that purpose. However, a philosopher needs to avoid privileging one purpose over others if he wants a general theory that is neutral among purposes and merely describes the ways in which AI is and is not free.

As a result, I doubt that any contrast among options is the relevant one for determining whether or not an act or an act is really and truly free. That doubt makes me a meta-skeptic about the real relevance of contrast classes.

To claim or deny that some agent or act is just plain free without mentioning any contrast class presupposes that some unmentioned contrast class is the relevant one. Hence, a meta-skeptic about real relevance should refuse to claim or deny that anyone or any act is just plain free. For this reason, I suspend belief about all such unqualified claims and denials. That makes me Pyrrhonian. When someone asks whether an act or agent is free or not, I refuse to answer directly and, instead, answer with a question: free to do what as opposed to what? Other philosophers should join me in this position or else show why one contrast class is the one that is really relevant.

4 INTERACTIONS

The two dimensions of contrast in freedom interact. Each constraint that I am free from is associated with its own contrast class of what I am free to do. Sometimes these classes overlap, but not always.

Suppose that a robber threatens, "Your money or your life." In addition to my wallet, I have a cell phone in my pocket. All the robber wants is money, but I also hand over my cell phone, because I have a compulsion to obey authority figures (or maybe my fear drives me to be unnecessarily cautious). In this case, how free am I? I am free from coercion to hand over my money but keep my cell phone in contrast with handing over both. But I am not free from compulsion (or fear) to hand over only my money in contrast with both my money and my cell phone.

Again, suppose that, while walking, I trip and stumble in such a way that I know I will fall soon, but I can manage to fall either to the left or to the right. To the left is a valuable vase, and to the right is a cheap imitation, and I will break the vase in the direction of my fall. I do not know which vase is valuable. Only experts could tell, and I am no expert. In that case, how free am I? I am not free from physical force (the force that tipped me) not to fall at all in contrast with falling. Nonetheless, I am free from physical force to fall either to the left or to the right, so I am also free from physical force to break the cheap imitation in contrast with the valuable vase. And yet I am not free from ignorance to break the cheap imitation rather than the valuable vase, because I do not know which is which, so my ignorance prevents me from making that choice.

It is difficult to combine all of these factors into a unified analysis of freedom of action. But here is a tentative rough suggestion:

5 DEGREES

One lesson of this contrastivism is that freedom comes in degrees. Some agents and some acts are more free than others. This point might seem obvious, but it is often overlooked.

One reason for this oversight might be that determinism and freedom from causation seem dichotomous. It seems that either an act is fully determined or it is not fully determined.

Reality is not so simple, however, because causes can limit the available options to a set without reducing options to only one single act (cf. Schaffer 2005b). An agent might be determined to do some act within a certain class in contrast with any act outside of that class, and yet not be determined to do any particular act within that class as opposed to other acts within that class. For example, even if Tony has freedom from causation to choose lasagna in contrast with manicotti (or vice versa), Tony still might be determined to choose pasta rather than curry if Tony is in an Italian restaurant that does not offer curry. Or Tony’s love of lasagna might determine that Tony will order some kind of lasagna, but Tony still might have freedom from causation to choose vegetarian or meat lasagna, white or tomato-based lasagna, and so on. Determinists usually think that Tony is determined to choose one particular dish instead of any other, but it is possible that causation could limit available options to a contrast class without completely determining one particular act within that contrast class. If so, humans might have some freedom from causation but only within a limited contrast class. The classes of options can vary in size, and agents seem to have more freedom when they choose out of a larger class of options. Thus, even freedom from causation might come in degrees of a sort.

Nonetheless, almost all discussions of contra-causal freedom assume that freedom from causation is dichotomous: you've either got it or you
locked in his home or under house arrest. All of them have less freedom than someone who is not legally allowed to leave a certain country but may roam freely within that country. That person has less freedom than a normal citizen who is allowed to go abroad at will.

Because freedom comes in so many degrees, we often should not ask simply whether a certain agent or act is free from coercion, mistake, compulsion, physical force, or legal prohibition. Instead, we need to ask how free this agent or act is from each of these constraints. The answer will, of course, vary from occasion to occasion.

The same points apply to what an agent is free to do. Degrees can vary, first, with respect to the type of action: a person who can drink wine instead of whisky has more freedom than a person who cannot avoid drinking whisky. Degrees of freedom can also vary within a single type of action with respect to the number of acts: a person who can stop after two drinks has more freedom than a person who cannot stop before five drinks. What an agent is free to do can also vary with time: a person who can go a day without drinking has more freedom than a person who cannot go an hour without drinking. Another dimension of variation is location or circumstances: A person who can avoid drinking for an hour in a bar or at home has more freedom than a person who can avoid drinking for an hour at home but cannot go that long without a drink in a bar.

In general, people have more freedom when they are free with respect to more options. Additional degrees and contrasts arise because people vary in the probability that they will drink in the various cases above.

What has more or less freedom to act might seem to be agents rather than acts. Suppose that Al has to drink some alcohol within an hour, but nothing limits his choice between red wine and white wine other than his preference. His particular act of drinking red wine now rather than waiting an hour or choosing white wine instead of red might seem totally free from all constraints. He as an agent has more freedom than some and less than others, but this particular act seems free completely and not just free to a degree. This appearance is misleading, however. This act of drinking red wine at 9:00 p.m. is free in contrast with drinking red wine at 9:15 or in contrast with drinking white wine at 9:00. It is not free, however, in contrast with drinking only water or waiting until 11:00 for the first drink. This act is, therefore, less free in this way than a similar act done by an agent who could wait until 11:00 for the first drink. The comparative degrees of freedom of the agent, thus, lead to comparative degrees of freedom in particular acts as well.

6 APPLICATIONS

The best way to test a theory is often to apply it to cases to see whether it helps to illuminate or resolve issues. We can test contrastivism about freedom by applying it to an example that puzzled Aristotle:
Those things, then, are thought involuntary which take place under compulsion or owing to ignorance. . . . But with regard to the things that are done from fear of greater evils or for some noble object (i.e. if a tyrant were to order one to do something base, having one’s parent and children in his power, and if one did the action they were saved, but otherwise would be put to death) it may be debated whether such actions are involuntary or voluntary. Something of the sort happens also with regard to the throwing of goods overboard in a storm; for in the abstract no one throws goods away voluntarily, but on condition of its securing the safety of himself and his crew any sensible man does so. Such actions, then, are mixed, but are more like voluntary actions; for they are worthy of choice at the time when they are done, and the end of an action is relative to the occasion. (Aristotle 1941, 1110a)

Aristotle seems unsure whether to classify the act (presumably by the ship captain) of throwing the goods overboard as voluntary. Modern philosophers might be just as unsure whether to call the ship captain or his choice or act free.

Contrastivism clarifies this case. Although it is not clear whether to call the captain just plain free overall, it is much easier to determine whether the captain was free out of specified contrast classes. The captain was free from mistake and delusion, because he knew exactly what he was doing and why. The captain was also free from physical force, for it was not as if a wave hit him and made him drop the goods overboard by accident. He was also free from compulsion, because he had no volitional or emotional mental illness that led him to do what he did. And he was free from coercion by any other person, because the storm that created the danger was an impersonal force, not a robber. Still, the captain was not free from duress (or necessity, as some call it), because the circumstances created extreme dangers if he had not thrown the goods overboard. So he was free from some constraints but not others. We can tell where he stands on this dimension of freedom—freedom from—by specifying what he is free from and what he is not free from.

Next, what is he free to do? Here, again, we need to specify different contrast classes. The captain did not freely (choose to) throw cargo overboard as opposed to returning the cargo safely in his ship, for he never would have returned the cargo regardless of how much incentive he had and how hard he tried. Nonetheless, the captain did have other kinds of freedom to (where what he is free from is excuse). The captain did freely (will to) throw the cargo overboard as opposed to letting the ship sink. He also freely threw (and willed to throw) certain items rather than others (if he threw only part of the goods) or all instead of only part (if he threw it all). And, of course, he freely willed to throw the cargo at this time rather than somewhat earlier or later. The risk grew slowly, and he always could have waited and taken a little more risk. So he was free to do some things but not others, and he did what he did freely under some descriptions but not under others. This new way of thinking about the problem illuminates the issues and enables us to ask more precise questions about where this agent is located in the multidimensional space of possible degrees of freedom.

A more recent case where contrastivism about freedom helps is the trial of John Hinckley. Hinckley shot President Reagan in 1981, while Reagan was leaving a hotel. Hinckley’s goal was reportedly partly to impress Jody Foster, the actress. Some of Hinckley’s beliefs were true: shooting Reagan did get Foster’s attention and did show her how much he loved her. Still, other of his beliefs were false: Hinckley’s act would not create any real chance that Foster would reciprocate his love. So he was free from ignorance of some kinds but not others. In addition, Hinckley stalked Carter before Reagan, so there was reason to believe that Hinckley would have shot another politician instead of Reagan, if he had not shot Reagan. If so, he was free not to shoot Reagan, but he was not free not to shoot a politician (or at least he was not free not to shoot some famous person), because that was essential to his compulsive plan to impress Foster.

The issue of timing even made it into Hinckley’s trial. Here is a bit of the transcript:

Q: [by Mr. Adelman, Prosecutor]. Let me ask you to focus on the moment when President Reagan leaves the limousine and walks into the hotel. Okay?
A: [by Dr. Carpenter, Defense Witness]. Yes.
Q: Mr. Hinckley was there with the gun, right?
A: Yes.
Q: And he could have shot him if he wanted to, right?
A: Yes.
Q: But he elected not to shoot him because he didn’t have a good shot, right?
A: No, he did not act on that impulse at that moment.
Q: Well, if the impulse was overwhelming, why didn’t he shoot him when he first saw him at 1:45 when he walked into the hotel?
A: It was the same sort of thing why he didn’t shoot himself at the Dakota, why he didn’t shoot Reagan early in December and why he didn’t shoot Carter. This whole drive of balance and impulse and the thing that makes one hesitate—I think the ability to hesitate has become sharply eroded and I think that personalized experience as Mr. Reagan comes out of the limousine is a further erosion in that, but he did not pull the gun out and fire at that time.
Q: If the ability to hesitate was eroded when the President got out and waved, why didn’t Mr. Hinckley with the ability to hesitate eroded shoots him then?
A: Because it is not one way or the other and this is a balancing of many factors and there is no way to give you a precise, emphatic answer to why he didn’t shoot then, and shot when he came out. (Low, Jeffries, and Bonnie 1986, 73–74)
Here, prosecutors suggest that Hinckley must have been free not to shoot Reagan on the way out, because he did not shoot Reagan on the way in.

That argument impressed many people at the time, but contrastivism shows why it is specious. Just as a smoking addict can avoid smoking for a few minutes until he gets out of the building but cannot go a whole day without smoking at some point, so Hinckley might have been able to avoid shooting on a particular occasion or over a period of time, even if it was true that he would inevitably shoot some politician eventually and could not stop himself over the long run. The facts of the case are, of course, in dispute, but the point is that the observation that Hinckley did not shoot Reagan on the way into the hotel does not imply that Hinckley was in control or free to conform to law for longer periods of time. Contrasts help us to see through this fallacy.

The prosecutor is likely to retort, “Quit playing around. Answer the question: Was Hinckley free? Did he act freely?” (Or was he able to do otherwise? Or did he have the capacity to conform to law?) Contrastivists hold that such questions should be rejected and replaced by more precise questions with explicit contrast classes on at least the two dimensions discussed above: freedom from and freedom to.

A major advantage of adding contrast classes here is that, even if we disagree about whether someone is just plain free, we still might be able to agree that he is free to avoid misbehaving in a certain way rather than in another way or that he is free to avoid misbehaving at all for ten hours but not for ten hours or ten days. This precise agreement can then guide our discussion of which kind and degree of freedom is necessary and sufficient for responsibility or for some other purpose. Contrastivists might still reach different conclusions on these issues, but the new questions at least make the issues more precise, enable agreement on some issues, and make it clear where the remaining disagreement lies.

7 CONCLUSION

My goal has been to show that contrastivism about freedom is coherent, plausible, and fruitful. Its main negative benefits are to avoid questions that are too imprecise to admit of definite answers and, thereby, to avoid needless disputes. Its main positive benefits are to point the way toward more precise questions that enable more agreement and illuminate what is and is not at stake. That would be progress. I do not claim to have made much progress here. All I hope is to have suggested some reasons why it might be useful to rethink old debates about freedom in terms of contrasts and degrees.¹

NOTES

¹ I am grateful for helpful comments from many members of audiences at Oxford University, Washington University in St. Louis, Duke University, Dartmouth College, and the Central States Philosophy Association.
Contrastivism in Philosophy

Edited by Martijn Blaauw