



## CHAPTER

## 5 Sensitivity to Reasons and Actual Sequences

Carolina Sartorio

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### Abstract

This chapter lays out a view of freedom according to which the following two claims are true: first, acting freely is, at least partly, a matter of being sensitive to reasons; second, acting freely is exclusively a function of having a certain kind of actual causal history. It is notoriously difficult to reconcile claims of this type. For being sensitive to reasons appears to be a modal property of agents, one that agents possess by virtue of their capacity to react to reasons in *other* possible worlds, and this seems to clash with the idea that acting freely is just a function of *actual* causal histories. The chapter argues that the reconciliation can be achieved by focusing on the absences of certain reasons, and the role that those absences play in the actual causal history of the agent's behavior.

**Keywords:** freedom, reasons-sensitivity, reasons, actual sequences, absence causation

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### 5.1 Introduction: The Problem

Imagine that one believes in a view of this kind:

**(Reasons-Sensitivity)** Having the kind of freedom or control required for moral responsibility is, at least in part, a matter of being sensitive to reasons in the right kind of way.

For example, on this view, an important difference between an addict (an extreme addict; someone who is not in control when he takes a drug) and a non-addict (someone who is in control when he takes the same drug) is that, whereas the addict is not suitably sensitive to reasons when he takes the drug, the non-addict is. A natural way of cashing this idea out is to point out that the addict would still have taken the drug in a wide range of scenarios in which there were sufficient reasons for him to refrain and he was aware of those reasons, but the non-addict would not have. For example, the addict would still have taken the drug if he had had reason to believe that the drug would give him a bad headache, or that he should be helping a friend in need, or that his son was watching him at the time, or that he needed to be clear-headed to work on an important project, etc. The non-addict, by contrast, would not have taken the drug in scenarios of that kind.

Now, imagine that, at the same time, one takes Frankfurt cases (the type of scenarios originally introduced by Frankfurt 1969) to show the following:

**(Actual Sequences)** The kind of freedom or control required for moral responsibility is exclusively a function of actual sequences (actual causal histories).

p. 105 In a Frankfurt case, an agent makes a choice completely on his own, based on his antecedent deliberation and careful weighing of reasons, and thus the agent appears to have the relevant kind of freedom or control to be morally responsible for it. However, we are also to imagine that the agent couldn't have made a different choice, for a neuroscientist who was secretly monitoring his thoughts, and who had the resources to manipulate the agent's brain in the relevant ways, would have forced him to make the same choice if

he had been given any reason to believe that the agent wasn't going to make it on his own. Scenarios like this suggest that whether agents have the relevant kind of freedom or control depends exclusively on the way in which they *actually* came to act, or on the *actual causal history* of their behavior, and it doesn't depend, for example, on whether they had the relevant ability to do otherwise at the time when they acted. Thus Frankfurt scenarios motivate the Actual Sequences thesis.

Now imagine that, like some actual-sequence theorists (such as, notably, Fischer and Ravizza 1998; and McKenna 2013), you are drawn to *both* theses: Reasons-Sensitivity and Actual Sequences. Then you face an important puzzle. For the two theses are not obviously compatible; in fact, they seem to be in deep tension with each other. That there is such a conflict should be obvious from the fact that Frankfurt cases, the very same cases that are typically used to motivate actual-sequence views, appear to undermine the Reasons-Sensitivity claim. For, again, agents in Frankfurt cases seem to act freely and have the relevant kind of control or freedom; however, they are not sensitive to reasons in the way that we were imagining the non-addict is. In particular, the presence of the neuroscientist guarantees that those agents would have made exactly *the same* choice in a wide range of different circumstances, including circumstances where they could recognize the existence of sufficient reasons not to make that choice.

I believe that the problem illustrated by Frankfurt cases is just a symptom of a deeper, more fundamental tension between the Reasons-Sensitivity claim and the Actual Sequences claim. The deeper problem arises from the fact that reasons-sensitivity appears to be a paradigmatically *counterfactual* or *dispositional* concept: a concept that is particularly concerned with counterfactual possibilities or other possible worlds, and not (just) the actual world or actual sequences. And this seems to clash with the Actual Sequences claim, according to which freedom or control is exclusively a function of actual sequences.

Notice, in particular, that the Actual Sequences claim seems to entail a supervenience claim about causal histories:

**(Supervenience)** The kind of freedom or control required for moral responsibility supervenes on (the relevant elements of) actual causal histories.<sup>1</sup>

p. 106 The Supervenience principle claims that there cannot be a difference in control without a (relevant) difference in the actual sequence or causal history. In other words, if two acts have (relevantly) the same causal history, then they are equally free or unfree.

Frankfurt himself seemed to endorse something like Supervenience in his reasoning about Frankfurt cases. He noted that the presence of the neuroscientist doesn't make a difference to the causal history of the agent's choice, given that the neuroscientist never intervened. Thus, Frankfurt suggested, since the agent would have been responsible for the choice if the neuroscientist hadn't been present, he must also be responsible for the choice when the neuroscientist is present. This reasoning appeals to the Supervenience claim: the conclusion only follows from the premises if freedom supervenes on actual causal histories.<sup>2</sup>

So Actual Sequences arguably requires a commitment to Supervenience. But, again, Supervenience is not easily reconcilable with Reasons-Sensitivity. Consider, once again, the examples of the addict and the non-addict. If the relevant difference between them is that the former is not sensitive to reasons but the latter is, and if this is mainly a *counterfactual* difference—a difference in the reasons to which they would have reacted in certain counterfactual scenarios—then it seems that such a difference could fail to be reflected anywhere in the causal history of their *actual* behavior (it could instead concern exclusively their counterfactual behavior, and the causal history of their counterfactual behavior). This is so even if, as it seems reasonable to assume, the difference between the addict and the non-addict would have to be reflected in an actual difference of *some* sort, for example, in a difference concerning certain features of the agents' constitutions. For note that, to the extent that such features are not *actually causally operative*, they  
p. 107 won't be reflected in the causal history of their actual behavior. If  $\hookrightarrow$  so, the cases of the addict and the non-addict would illustrate a failure of Supervenience: a difference in freedom or control that is not reflected in a difference in the actual causal history.<sup>3</sup>

So there is a deep tension at the core of any actual-sequence view of freedom that appeals to the Reasons-Sensitivity claim. As I said before, I think that the problem raised by Frankfurt cases is merely a symptom of this more fundamental problem. We can now see why. Assuming that reasons-sensitivity is a counterfactual notion, it seems that one can easily "turn" a free, reasons-sensitive agent into an equally free, but apparently *non*-reasons-sensitive agent simply by altering the surrounding circumstances in such a way that the reasons-sensitivity condition is violated. For, if reasons-sensitivity is a counterfactual notion, we can do this without touching the actual sequence, and thus, according to an actual-sequence view, without undermining the agent's freedom. This is what the presence of the neuroscientist does in a Frankfurt case: it turns an agent who would otherwise have been reasons-sensitive into an apparently *non*-reasons-sensitive agent without touching the actual sequence, and thus without undermining the agent's freedom. As a result, the problem about Frankfurt cases arises.

I believe that the problem is so fundamental that we can't give a satisfying answer to it unless we embrace a radically different conception of reasons-sensitivity: one that understands sensitivity to reasons, not at all in counterfactual terms, but exclusively in terms of actual sequences or causal histories themselves.<sup>4</sup> This is what I intend to do in what follows. I will offer a model of sensitivity to reasons according to which the kind of freedom or control relevant to responsibility is really *just* a function of the actual sequence, in that an agent's sensitivity or insensitivity to reasons is reflected in certain elements of the actual causal history

## 5.2 A Sketch of the View

I will construct the new model of reasons-sensitivity in three main steps, where each step will build on the previous ones.

The first step is to notice the important, but typically overlooked or largely underemphasized, role that *absences* play in actual-sequence views. I submit that the following claim is true:

1. Actual-sequence views must admit some absences as elements of actual sequences.

This shouldn't be a surprise. After all, we tend to think that we can be responsible for and by our omissions, and, arguably, omissions are or involve absences of a certain kind. Thus, at least in principle, it seems that a comprehensive view of freedom and responsibility should allow absences to play an important role.<sup>5</sup> Also, some absences arguably play a role in the causal histories or explanations of (positive) actions and other (positive) events: those causal histories or explanations are not complete unless they include absences of some kind (for example, my raising my arm is partly explained by the absence of physical obstacles to my doing so).

Of course, this raises the question of what we should take absences to be, and how they can fit into the actual sequences of behavior. For the remainder of this paper I will assume that absences are entities in their own right that can enter in causal relations, alongside positive events. This assumption is mainly for simplicity's sake. Philosophers who reject the idea that absences can enter in causal relations (e.g., Beebe 2004; Dowe 2001; and Moore 2009) typically allow for other roles that absences can play and that can ground the responsibility of agents for their omissions. For example, Dowe introduces the concept of "quasi-causation" and suggests that, even if absences cannot be causes, they can be quasi-causes. Quasi-causation is, basically, *counterfactual* or *possible* causation; for example, a doctor who failed to operate on a patient may have quasi-caused the death of his patient in that his operating on him *would have caused* him to survive. This quasi-causal relation between the doctor's omission and the patient's death, Dowe thinks, can make the doctor responsible for the death.<sup>6</sup> If absences cannot enter in causal relations, an actual-sequence view could appeal to the concept of quasi-causation (or to some other similar concept) to allow for responsibility involving omissions and other absences.

p. 109 The claim made by ↪ an actual-sequence view would then be that freedom supervenes on actual sequences, understood as either causal or quasi-causal histories (of actual events and/or absences of events).<sup>7</sup> Again, here, for simplicity's sake, I'll just assume that absences can enter in causal relations, and thus can be part of causal histories.

The second step is to notice the following:

2. When agents act from reasons, they act on the basis of reasons in favor of acting in the relevant way, but, typically, they also act as a result of, or because of, the *absence* of certain reasons: overriding reasons to *refrain from* acting in that way.

For example, imagine that you go to the park to get some fresh air. Then your desire to get some fresh air is part of what accounts for your act of going to the park. However, other things also partly account for your going to the park. For example, presumably, you go to the park partly because no one has offered you a thousand dollars to stay at home. The absence of that reason to stay at home is part of what accounts for your going to the park. This is so even if that thought never even crossed your mind, that is, even if you never thought about what you would do if someone were to offer you a thousand dollars (Why bother? No one is ever going to offer you a thousand dollars just to stay home!). Even if you never thought about it, presumably, it's quite safe to assume that you would have decided to stay home if someone had offered you a thousand dollars just to stay home instead of going to the park. If that's the case, then the absence of that reason is part of what accounts for your going to the park. The same goes for many other reasons that would have motivated you to not go to the park (your receiving an important phone call, your neighbor's knocking on your door requesting your immediate help, etc.): the absence of all those reasons is part of what accounts for your act of going to the park.

p. 110 This means that actual sequences are much richer than they appear to be at first sight; in particular, they contain, in addition to reasons of certain kinds, absences of reasons of other kinds. This is so even if those absences are not part of what Davidson (1963) called the "primary reasons:" the relevant belief/desire complex that in each case moves the agent to act and that, on Davidson's view, is the main cause of the act. When you decide to go to the park, the primary reason that causes your action is the belief/desire ↪ pair consisting in your wanting to get some fresh air and your belief that, by going to the park, you'll get some fresh air. The absence of a thousand-dollar reward for staying at home, or the absence of the belief that there is such a reward (a sufficient reason to stay at home and not go to the park), is not part of that primary reason, on Davidson's view. But, presumably, it is still part of the full causal history or the full causal explanation of the action, in a way that is perfectly consistent with a Davidsonian causal theory of action.<sup>8</sup> Thus it is part of the *actual sequence* issuing in the action, if one takes actual sequences to be actual causal histories.

Moreover, absences of that kind are not just any old absences that are needed to fill in some holes in otherwise incomplete causal explanations of action. They are, unlike other less potentially significant absences (such as the absence of an alien attack that would have immediately ended all life on Earth), an important part of the actual sequence: they are intuitively highly relevant to the agent's exercise of his capacity to act for reasons. They represent the fact that, in acting, the agent is not just responding to the existence of certain reasons but also to the absence of other reasons, and this is, intuitively, a significant aspect of the agent's exercise of the capacity to act for reasons.<sup>9</sup>

These thoughts help motivate a new account of reasons-sensitivity. The key move is the following suggestion (the third and final step in our construction of the new model):

3. Being sensitive to reasons is a matter of the actual sequence containing the relevant *absences of reasons*.

p. 111 Consider, again, our initial example of a reasons-sensitive agent: the non-addict. The suggestion is that the non-addict is sensitive to reasons because the relevant absences of reasons enter the causal history of his act of taking the drug. For example, he takes the drug because he doesn't believe that he would win a thousand-dollar prize by refraining, or that the drug would give him a bad headache, or that a friend needs his immediate help, or that his young son is watching him at the time, or that he needs to be clear-headed to work on an important project, etc. All these absences of reasons are part of the actual sequence in his case. The addict, in contrast, isn't sensitive to these kinds of considerations; as a result, he doesn't act on the basis of the absence of those reasons, and those absences are not part of the actual sequence issuing in his act. In other words, the addict and the non-addict may both take the drug motivated by the same existing reasons to take the drug (say, a desire to get high), but the actual sequence is still significantly *not* the same, because in one case it contains the relevant absences of reasons (reasons to refrain from taking the drug) and in the other case it doesn't.

On reflection, this difference in the role played by the absence of certain reasons can nicely explain the difference in control that we see between, for example, the addict and the non-addict. Imagine that, no matter what incentives had been offered to you to stay at home instead of going to the park, you would still have gone to the park, moved by your desire to get some fresh air. In that case, your act of going to the park wouldn't be caused by the absence of those incentives, but only by the desire to get some fresh air (and the belief that by going to the park you'll get some fresh air). And, intuitively, in that case your act of going to the park wouldn't be free: you'd suffer from a certain kind of compulsion (an irresistible compulsion to get some fresh air) that seriously undermines your freedom. Similarly, the suggestion is that the addict's act of taking the drug isn't free because it's not caused by the relevant absences of reasons to refrain from taking the drug, in other words, because the addict is not sensitive to the absence of those reasons in the right kind of way.

Of course, this is only the basic sketch of the view. But one can already see that this view possesses several important virtues. One main virtue is its simplicity: it provides a simple and elegant account of the nature of reasons-sensitivity, in terms of very few basic elements that are central to the exercise of the capacity of acting for reasons. And, from the perspective of an actual-sequence view of freedom, an important virtue of the account is that, since it only appeals to the elements of actual sequences themselves, it eradicates the fundamental tension that seemed to exist between Reasons-Sensitivity and Actual Sequences, or between Reasons-Sensitivity and the Supervenience claim. On this view, being free consists (at least in part) in being suitably sensitive to reasons, and being suitably sensitive to reasons consists in *actually* responding to, or *actually* being caused to act by, the relevant reasons and/or absences of reasons. Hence, on this view, freedom really is *just* a function of actual sequences.

## p. 112 5.3 What About Frankfurt Cases?

One might worry that Frankfurt cases still create a problem. The presence of the neuroscientist in a Frankfurt case guarantees that the agent would have made the same choice, even if certain counterincentives or sufficient reasons to refrain had been present and salient to the agent. And this means that the absence of those counterincentives or reasons to refrain makes no difference to what choice the agent actually made. Can we still say, then, that the absence of those reasons plays an important role in the actual sequence in those cases? Can we still say, in other words, that the agent in a Frankfurt case is sensitive to reasons in the relevant way?

I believe we can, and it's important to see why. Recall that a key feature of Frankfurt cases is supposed to be that the actual causal history is (relevantly) *the same as* that of a similar scenario where the neuroscientist is not present. Given that the agent in a Frankfurt scenario is not aware of the neuroscientist's presence, and given that the neuroscientist never sees the need to intervene, what actually causes the agent's choice is supposed to be (relevantly) the same as in the neuroscientist-free scenario: he makes the choice motivated by the same kinds of considerations, or as a result of exactly the same reasons.

Now, arguably, this includes *both* the existing reasons to make the relevant choice *and* the absence of the relevant reasons not to make it. To illustrate, consider the following Frankfurt scenario:

**Frank and Furt:** Frank makes the choice to shoot Furt motivated by a desire for revenge. Unbeknownst to Frank, a neuroscientist has been secretly monitoring his thoughts. Had Frank hesitated, the neuroscientist would have intervened by manipulating Frank's brain in such a way that he would have made the same choice to shoot Furt.

What are the causes of Frank's choice in this case? Clearly, the desire for revenge is one of them. Notice that this is so even if, given the presence of the neuroscientist, that desire didn't make a difference to the choice that Frank made. In other words, this is so even if Frank's choice didn't *counterfactually depend* on Frank's having that desire: if Frank hadn't had that desire (or if it hadn't motivated him to decide to shoot Furt in the way it did in the actual world), then Frank would *still* have made the same choice, because the neuroscientist would have intervened by forcing him to make the choice.<sup>10</sup>

p. 113 That there can be causation without counterfactual dependence is a widely recognized fact, even by proponents of so-called "counterfactual theories of causation."<sup>11</sup> In fact, the main reason proponents of counterfactual theories of causation accept that there can be causation without counterfactual dependence is precisely the existence of scenarios that are structurally similar to Frankfurt scenarios: scenarios of "causal preemption," where, despite the failure of counterfactual dependence, an event or process (the "preempting" event or process) manages to have causal influence over an effect, while another event or process (the "preempted" event or process) fails to be causally efficacious and remains as a mere backup. In our Frankfurt scenario, the preempting process would be a series of events involving the agent's deliberation and his reasons to shoot Furt, which is causally efficacious despite the failure of counterfactual dependence, and the preempted causal process would be a series of events involving the neuroscientist, which fails to be causally efficacious and remains as a mere backup.

So Frank's reasons to shoot Furt, including his desire for revenge, arguably cause Frank's choice to shoot Furt, even if the choice doesn't counterfactually depend on those reasons. Similarly, I submit, any absences of reasons to refrain from making the choice that *would* have been causally efficacious if there had been no neuroscientist in the background are still part of the causal history of his choice in the Frankfurt scenario too. Frank still makes the choice as a result of the absence of those reasons, even if the choice doesn't counterfactually depend on that absence, that is to say, even if Frank would still have made the same choice if those reasons had been present. Imagine, for example, that, if there had been no neuroscientist, Frank would have reacted to the following reasons to refrain from shooting Furt. If he had believed that he would get a thousand dollars as a prize for refraining, then he wouldn't have shot Furt; if he had believed that he would get caught and thrown in jail for shooting Furt, then he wouldn't have shot Furt; if he had believed that Furt was the father of five children who depended on him to survive, then he wouldn't have shot Furt; etc. In that case, I submit, all those absences are part of the actual causal history of Frank's choice in the Frankfurt scenario as well. Frank still makes his choice because of his desire for revenge but, also, because of the absence of those reasons to refrain from shooting Furt.

To motivate this some more, let's look at a different example. Imagine that Frankie (the young version of our character Frank) likes to visit the ↪ zoo, but that there are two different things that can make him very sad during a zoo visit. One is looking at the obviously depressed lion in his cage; another is the absence of elephants. Imagine that, for Frankie, elephants "trump" the lion in that seeing an elephant would make him so happy that he'd forget about the depressed lion, and would leave the zoo in a very good mood. Now, on an occasion when he visits, Frankie finds the depressed lion and no elephant, and leaves the zoo feeling quite sad. Clearly, on that occasion, both the presence of the lion *and* the absence of the elephant cause his unhappiness.

Now add the figure of the neuroscientist (imagine that Frank has been unfortunate enough to be secretly monitored by evil neuroscientists all his life!). Imagine that the evil neuroscientist is determined to see Frankie sad. He has been secretly monitoring Frankie's thoughts and can easily intervene by making the relevant neurons in his brain fire in order to trigger the relevant feelings of sadness. Had there been an elephant in the zoo, the neuroscientist would have intervened by making Frankie feel sad; however, in the actual circumstances he doesn't see the need to. What causes Frankie's sadness in this case? Exactly the same things, it seems, in particular, the lion and the absence of an elephant. In the actual scenario, he still becomes sad because he sees the lion and because he doesn't see an elephant (and not because of the neuroscientist, since the neuroscientist never intervened).

Arguably, the same goes for Frank (the adult version of Frankie) in our original Frankfurt case. When Frank makes the choice to shoot Furt, his choice is caused by certain reasons to shoot him, as well as by the absence of certain reasons not to shoot him. All the reasons and absences of reasons that would cause his choice in a neuroscientist-free scenario also cause it in the Frankfurt scenario. So Frank is just as sensitive to reasons as his counterpart in a neuroscientist-free scenario, in that he acts on the basis of the same reasons *and* absences of reasons.

## 5.4 A Purely Actual-Sequence Based Concept of Reasons-Sensitivity

The view I have suggested departs from more traditional counterfactual accounts of reasons-sensitivity and, instead, proposes a new model strictly focused on actual causes. Now, one might worry that the new model is not really a model of *sensitivity to reasons*, because sensitivity to reasons is (as I admitted it at least appears to be) an essentially counterfactual or dispositional concept: one that is not particularly concerned with actual causes or causal histories, but with what goes on in scenarios that are merely counterfactual.

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So let us ask: Is reasons-sensitivity an essentially counterfactual concept? When we say that the non-addict was reasons-sensitive in taking the drug, are we thereby committed to thinking that part of what makes him free is how he acts in certain counterfactual scenarios?

I don't see why we should think this. Once we recognize the relevance of the absence of reasons to do otherwise, and how those absences can be part of the causal history of the actual behavior, it is natural to see the counterfactual facts as not at all explanatorily fundamental. This means that the relevant counterfactual facts can still be true, but on this view they only obtain in virtue of what the actual sequence is, or how it is constituted (in particular, in virtue of the fact that the actual sequence contains certain absences of reasons) and/or in virtue of the grounds of those actual-sequence facts themselves. For example, it's because the non-addict is appropriately responding to reasons in the actual scenario that we judge that, at least in normal circumstances, he *wouldn't* have taken the drug if one of the relevant reasons to refrain *had* been present. Although this counterfactual is true, it is arguably not what *makes* the non-addict free, when he takes the drug in the actual scenario. What makes him free, arguably, is the fact that, in taking the drug, he is *actually* responding to the absence of that reason.

On the model I am suggesting, then, being sensitive to reasons is a matter of actually causally responding to a complex set of causes involving reasons and absences of reasons. It is only when the causes of our acts exhibit this kind of richness or complexity that we can act freely. Notice that, on this view, freedom requires, far from less causation, *more* causation (of the relevant kind). This is in accordance with an attractive compatibilist picture of control according to which the degree of control a being is capable of achieving is partly a function of the complexity of the causal sources of that being's behavior. It is plausible to think, for example, that we can exhibit more of the relevant kind of control over our behavior than other animals because the causal springs of our acts include sources that those of other animals lack (such as moral reasons, higher-order desires, and the like). The introduction of *absences of reasons* in the account of reasons-sensitivity I have offered adds a further, important layer of complexity to that picture. The new and improved picture is one according to which the kind of freedom relevant for responsibility requires, not only a systematic causal role played by reasons as the sources of behavior but, also, an equally systematic and important causal role played by the absences of reasons.

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## 5.5 Concluding Remarks: An Additional Advantage of the Account

I will end by drawing attention to another potential advantage of embracing a non-counterfactual, purely actual-sequence based account of reasons-sensitivity of the kind I have suggested.

As we have seen, reasons-sensitivity accounts understand the reasons-sensitivity of agents in terms of potentially sufficient reasons to refrain from doing what one actually does. In particular, according to reasons-sensitivity views, agents are suitably sensitive to reasons in acting in a certain way when they are sensitive to a wide enough range of reasons to refrain from acting in that way. Now, do *all* potentially sufficient reasons to refrain from acting in the relevant way count toward the reasons-sensitivity of an agent?

Of course, most addicts are sensitive to at least *some* reasons to refrain from taking the drug that they're addicted to. For example, many addicts may be sensitive to reasons such as the belief that the drug is so potent that it will kill them, and thus they are responding to the absence of reasons of that kind when they decide to take the drug in the absence of those reasons. Presumably, the fact that they are sensitive to these reasons makes them reasons-sensitive to *some* degree, even if this is not enough to make them free. So these potentially sufficient reasons to refrain from taking the drug *are* relevant to their freedom; it's just that they don't constitute a wide enough range to make them free and responsible (or so most reasons-sensitivity approaches to freedom would say).

However, there are other potentially sufficient reasons to refrain from taking the drug that addicts could be sensitive to and that are intuitively *not* relevant to their freedom concerning their act of taking the drug. Imagine, for example, that the addict wouldn't have taken drug if he had reason to believe that it would not make him feel high (because, say, the substance didn't have the desired properties). If in the actual case he only took the drug because he believed the drug to have those properties, then he wouldn't have taken the drug if he had thought that it didn't have those properties. Or imagine that he had reason to believe that, although the substance did have those properties, his own current physical state was such that the drug wouldn't have the desired effect on him (but perhaps would only make him sick). Maybe in that case, too, he wouldn't have taken it. Or, finally, imagine a scenario where for

whatever reason the addict didn't have the desire (or a strong desire) to take the drug, but had the desire to do something else instead.

p. 117 In that scenario, too, presumably, he wouldn't have taken the drug. All of these are counterfactual scenarios ↪ where the addict wouldn't have taken the drug as a result of recognizing sufficient reasons not to take it.

Does the fact that the addict was sensitive to those reasons mean that he *was* sensitive to reasons when he took the drug? Or, perhaps more plausibly, does this mean that he was *more* sensitive to reasons (sensitive to reasons to a larger degree) than we thought at first sight? I don't think that we want to say either of these things. I think we want to say that these are not the kinds of reasons that can help determine whether he was, *in the relevant sense*, sensitive to reasons when he took the drug. For, in the actual case, he took the drug motivated by the desire to get high and the belief that by taking the drug he would feel high. His addiction only got to "kick in" in this case *given* that these were the actual circumstances. If the circumstances had been quite different, for example, if he had reason to believe that the substance wouldn't make him feel high, or if he hadn't had a sufficiently strong desire to take the drug, then (we may assume) he wouldn't have taken the drug. But, intuitively, this doesn't make him any less addicted to certain drugs *that he believes are likely to have the desired effect*. And that addiction, the addiction to drugs that he believes are likely to have the desired effect, is what makes us want to say that the addict is not free when he takes the drug on that specific occasion. So, arguably, the only reasons that are relevant to an account of reasons-sensitivity (the reasons that we are interested in when giving an account of freedom in terms of reasons-sensitivity) are reasons that the agent could have been responsive to in circumstances where he *had* the relevant motivation to take the drug.

How should we fit this within an account of reasons-sensitivity? A traditional counterfactual account would have to accommodate this by specifying additional requirements that the relevant reasons to refrain would have to meet in order to contribute to the agent's sensitivity to reasons. One could do this, along the lines of what I suggested in the previous paragraph, by requiring that the primary motivating reasons be held fixed in determining which types of sufficient reasons to refrain are relevant in each case. But the purely actual-sequence based account that I have offered here has a much easier time at this. For, when one is inquiring about the reasons whose absence enters into the actual causal explanation of an agent's action, there is no further need to hold anything fixed. The fact that one is focusing on the actual causal history is enough to get the right kind of focus on the actual circumstances.

Think about the addict, again. The sequence of events issuing in his act of taking the drug actually includes the desire to get high and p. 118 the belief that the act of taking the drug would make him feel high. Is, for example, the ↪ absence of the belief that the substance lacks the desired properties, or the absence of the belief that the substance would not make him feel high, *also* part of the actual sequence? Arguably not. That would be like saying that, when your belief that the sky is blue causally contributes to a certain effect, the *absence* of your belief that the sky is *not* blue also causally contributes to that effect. But this seems wrong. If, for example, you find yourself looking at the sky because you find the color blue relaxing, your belief that the sky is blue explains your act of looking at the sky, but it seems wrong to suggest that the absence of the belief that the sky is not blue also explains it. Imagine that you didn't know what color the sky was on a certain day (perhaps it's blue, perhaps it's grey, or pink, you just have no clue). Then, presumably, you wouldn't be equally motivated to look at the sky, even if, in those circumstances, you still lack the belief that the sky is not blue. This suggests that, when you believe the sky is blue and you look at it motivated by that belief, the absence of the belief that it's not blue doesn't also play an explanatory role.

In other words, the fact that we are asking whether the absence of a reason is part of the actual sequence, when we know that the actual sequence already contains other important elements, helps constrain the reasons whose absence can be causally efficacious. As a result, we don't get spurious absence causation of a kind that would seem to make agents more reasons-sensitive than they really are. Again, the phenomenon we want to account for is not the addict's failure to be suitably reasons-sensitive when he takes the drug "in abstract" (abstracting away from the circumstances in which he takes the drug). It is, rather, his failure to be suitably reasons-sensitive in circumstances in which his irresistible compulsion to take the drug is triggered. The account of reasons-sensitivity presented here is especially well suited to capture this, given that it understands reasons-sensitivity in terms of the elements that play a causal role in the *actual* circumstances, where those circumstances include the reasons that actually triggered the addict's urge to take the drug.<sup>12</sup>

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## Notes

1 I say "The relevant elements of" because presumably not every aspect of the causal history of an act is relevant to the



agent's freedom in performing that act. Thus, if freedom supervenes on actual sequences, it should supervene, not just on whole causal histories, but also on the relevant elements of those histories (those elements of the causal history by virtue of which the act is free).

- 2 Thus Frankfurt wrote: "The circumstances that made it impossible for him to do otherwise could have been subtracted from the situation without affecting what happened or why it happened in any way ... When a fact is in this way irrelevant to the problem of accounting for a person's action it seems quite gratuitous to assign it any weight in the assessment of his moral responsibility" (Frankfurt 1969: section V). Ginet also reconstructs Frankfurt's reasoning in this way in Ginet (2003: 81–2). Fischer explicitly endorses the supervenience claim in Fischer (1987, p. 72 of Fischer 2006). However, I think that this commitment to supervenience results in some internal problems with Fischer's view. I discuss this in Sartorio (forthcoming: see especially chs 1 and 2), and there I also touch on some of Fischer's more recent claims about supervenience. Incidentally, I think that a more careful reconstruction of the supervenience reasoning in Frankfurt cases would appeal, not to the claim that the causal histories in question are exactly the same, but to the claim that they are *relevantly* the same. See Sartorio (forthcoming: ch. 1).
- 3 One might think that the causal histories would have to be different with respect to the strength of the desire to take the drug (that desire would have to be stronger in the case of the addict than in the case of the non-addict). However, it's not clear that this needs to be the case. The desire may be equally strong in both cases but the non-addict may be able to resist it in the presence of reasons to refrain from taking the drug, while the addict may not. I discuss this and other responses of this kind in Sartorio (forthcoming: ch. 4).
- 4 I discuss the main actual-sequence approaches that appeal to a reasons-sensitivity condition, the views advocated by Fischer and Ravizza and by McKenna, in Sartorio (forthcoming: ch. 4, part I). I argue that the counterfactual-based accounts of reasons-sensitivity offered by such views are not clearly consistent with Supervenience, and that this is a serious problem for those views *qua* actual-sequence views of freedom.
- 5 Responsibility for omissions is an important element in Fischer and Ravizza's own view (see Fischer and Ravizza 1998: ch. 5).
- 6 Yet other philosophers distinguish different concepts of causation or kinds of causal relation, and argue that absence causation belongs to only some of those kinds. See, e.g., Hall (2004).
- 7 I discuss this in more detail in Sartorio (forthcoming: ch. 2). An interesting consequence of this is that certain counterfactual possibilities can play a role in an actual-sequence view (if actual sequences are quasi-causal histories, then the possibility of certain causal relations plays a role). Indeed, in Sartorio (forthcoming: ch. 1) I argue that actual-sequence views can embrace the idea that freedom is partly grounded in possibilities, as long as those possibilities help ground actual sequences. See also Sartorio (2011).
- 8 Davidson himself seems to think that the primary reason for action doesn't exhaust the full causal history or the complete explanation of the action. See Davidson (1963: 17).
- 9 Arpaly and Schroeder have recently appealed to absences of reasons to account for some problematic cases of "non-paradigmatic" actions: behaviors that, on the face of it, appear to be actions, but that don't seem to be done for reasons. See Arpaly and Schroeder (2014: section 3.7). They discuss two classes of potential examples of actions of that kind: actions done out of blind habit (such as turning right at a certain intersection while driving to work), and "arational" actions (such as jumping for joy, after hearing some good news). They argue that the relevant absences of reasons causally explain the behaviors in those cases, and that this is partly why those behaviors count as genuine actions. My jumping for joy, e.g., is causally explained by (among other things) the absence of reasons not to jump: it's something I do because I'm not sitting inside a car, or standing on a cliff, etc. I agree. In fact, I'd go further and suggest that the relevant absences of reasons can make the agent *sensitive to reasons* when she engages in those kinds of behavior. For example, in the right circumstances I can be sufficiently sensitive to reasons, and thus responsible, when I'm jumping for joy.
- 10 There is counterfactual dependence between two actual events X and Y when, if X hadn't occurred, then Y wouldn't have occurred (roughly, in the closest possible worlds where X doesn't occur, Y also doesn't occur). Since Frank's choice would still have occurred in the absence of the desire to shoot Furt, the choice didn't counterfactually depend on the desire.
- 11 Lewis, the main contemporary proponent of the counterfactual view of causation, famously noted that causation doesn't require counterfactual dependence. See Lewis (1986, 2000). According to most counterfactual views of causation, counterfactual dependence (of the right kind) is sufficient for causation, but it is not necessary.
- 12 I presented an early version of this paper at the 2013 New Orleans Workshop in Agency and Responsibility. Thanks to Dave Shoemaker for organizing the workshop, and to the members of the audience for their helpful feedback. I also gave versions of this paper at the "Back to the Ranch" metaphysics conference in Tucson, Arizona (in January of 2013), at a formal epistemology workshop in Toronto (in June of 2013), and at the University of Pennsylvania (in November of 2013). Again, thanks to the audiences at these events for their comments. This paper is part of a larger, book-length project where I develop an actual-sequence view of freedom (see Sartorio manuscript; this paper is based on the ideas developed in ch. 4, part II). Many people have helped me with the ideas presented in this paper. Special thanks are due to Randy Clarke, Juan Comesaña, John Fischer, Ish Haji, Terry Horgan, Michael McKenna, Shaun Nichols, Derk Pereboom, Tim Schroeder, Mark Timmons, and the members of a graduate seminar at the University of Arizona in the Fall of 2013.