

Autonomous Agency in Anti-Dualistic Social Ontologies: A Compatibilist Notion

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Abstract

Anti-dualistic social ontologies, those highlighting the intrinsic interdependency of agency and structure as two sides of the same coin, are sometimes criticized for failing to provide a satisfactory account of autonomous – capable and free – agency, or even denying the reality of such agency. This paper contests these claims, arguing that anti-dualistic ontologies only conflict with autonomous agency when the latter is understood in a highly voluntaristic sense, whose ideational roots go to what philosophers of free will call “incompatibilist” intuitions of freedom. Those intuitions suggest that actions (intentions, decisions) ultimately determined by extrinsic causes lack the kind of freedom presupposed by moral responsibility, so when agentive autonomy is presumed to involve such freedom, it does indeed cohere poorly with the anti-dualistic picture of intrinsically structured agency. Herein, however, an alternative, “compatibilist” notion of autonomy is advanced, such that does not conflict with extrinsic determination and is therefore congruent with anti-dualistic social ontologies.

KEYWORDS

agency, anti-dualism, autonomy, compatibilism, free will, social ontology

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1 | INTRODUCTION

It is all too common to find two neighborhoods, perhaps even very close to each other, where the offspring of the residents have drastically different prospects in life, the two different growth environments correlating with vastly different likely educational attainment, income level, healthiness, and life expectancy, among other things. Clearly, there appear to be *structural determinants* that partly explain how people's lives unfold. Yet most of us believe there is *real agency* too, and – assuming that choice making is a constitutive part of agency – real choices that people make. Occasionally these notions seem to clash. Consider someone having grown up in a neighborhood where children are statistically more likely to end up in prison or die young than become high-school graduates, a youth recruited into a criminal street gang at thirteen, who at eighteen, after years of intense social conditioning and perhaps under severe group pressure, kills a competing gang member. We could find ourselves torn between conflicting intuitions about how to judge the case. On one hand, we may appreciate that such people “are victims themselves,” victims of a society that has failed to nurture them right; perhaps even feel like saying the person was not truly morally responsible. On the other hand, we may also want to say the person must have “made bad choices,” and therefore is very much responsible.

People differ in how exactly they fit these intuitions together, and so do social theories. Some of the differences could be said to imply different kinds of *social ontology*. Put another way, different intuitions about agency and its structural determinants may seem differently concordant or consistent with different types of social ontology. Obviously, individualistic theories favor the reality of agency, choice and decision-making over that of structural determination, and some holistic theories might suggest social structure is more real than individual agency. To me, though, more interesting are the many – surely, a majority of – social theories that grant (roughly) *equal* reality to agency and structure. I see two basic attitudes that such theorists could adopt toward the ontological relationship of individual agents and social structures: the first is to emphasize the relative *independence* (separateness, or “dualism”) of agency and structure, the second, their mutual *interdependence* (unity, “monism”) (Elder-Vass, 2010, p. 4; Piirainen, 2014b, p. 80). Of course, agency and structure are to *some* extent interdependent and have *some* independence too, no theory should completely deny either, but as one or the other aspect may be foregrounded, social ontologies could be placed on an axis between the dualistic and monistic ideal types.

In sociological theory, the *interdependence* – monistic “duality, not dualism” – of agency and structure has been highlighted by, say, Bourdieu (1977), Elias (1978), Giddens (1979) and, more recently, various relational, practice-theoretical, and process sociological accounts (e.g., Abbott, 2016; Barnes, 2000; Collins, 2004; Crossley, 2011; Emirbayer, 1997; Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; King, 2004; Latour, 2005). I call their ontologies *anti-dualistic* because their key concepts (“figurations,” “fields,” “collective practices,” “social networks,” “habitus” or “habits”) are meant to capture *both* the social-structural *and* individual-agentive aspect, and *express their intrinsic interconnect-edness*. Consequently, they prefer *horizontal* metaphors to vertical ones, their ontologies are “flat,” unstratified; as Andrew Abbott (2016, p. 1) bluntly puts it, “There are no levels.” Macro structure is not “a vertical layer above the micro,” but rather “the unfurling of the scroll of micro-situations,” which are always “embedded in macro-patterns” (Collins, 1998, p. 21).

Margaret Archer (1995, chap. 4; see Piirainen, 2014b) famously accused this sort of ontologies of “*central conflation*.” Archer herself and a few others hold the opposite attitude, that of giving more weight to the relative *independence* of agency and structure (e.g., Archer, 1995; Bhaskar, 1979; Elder-Vass, 2010; Groff, 2004, chap. 5; Hodgson, 2004, chap. 2; Mouzelis, 1995; Porpora, 2015). They insist on the *analytical dualism* of – which, to Archer and those of a similar ontological realist

persuasion, implies *real* distinctness too, an “*ontological hiatus*” between – structure and agency; that these are not just different aspects of the same thing but *two different things* (Archer, 1995, pp. 14–15, 196; Bhaskar, 1979, pp. 42–48). Typically, they do not view themselves as dualists in a philosophical or substance-metaphysical sense, but also vehemently reject social-ontological “conflation” – that is, anti-dualism, strict monism. A key notion for many is *emergence*: both agency and structure supposedly emerge from their components in a way that makes them, their essential features and causal powers, irreducible to those components. In contrast to relational and process sociologists, many (though not all) emergentists advocate *hierarchically stratified* ontologies of human being, society, and the world in general (e.g., Elder-Vass, 2010; Smith, 2010).

Personally, if and when I indulge in ontological or metaphysical debates,¹ I advocate an anti-dualistic – Deweyan, pragmatist and transactional, relational and anti-essentialist, process-metaphysical – position (Piironen, 2014b). From an emergentist perspective, such anti-dualistic ontologies fail to grant sufficient autonomy to both social-structural entities and individual agents (Archer, 1995, p. 81). I have tried to answer some of their arguments before, and will try again here. For a single article, I deem it an appropriate task to deal with just one side of their dual challenge, and on this occasion will defend the reality of autonomous agency in anti-dualistic ontologies. That is, I mean to answer the common argument that, *as anti-dualists do not allow for a sufficiently independent – emergent – intention forming and volitional decision making, they fail to allow* (a satisfactory account of) *real agentive autonomy* (Archer, 1995, pp. 121–132, 2003, pp. 1–16, chap. 1; Bhaskar, 1979, chap. 3; Porpora, 2015, chap. 5; Smith, 2010, chap. 4). Effectively the claim that, anti-dualists give too much weight to social determination, at the expense of real choice.

Now “agency,” as traditionally defined, does differ from random behavior and aimless activity precisely in being both *intentional* and under the agent’s *volitional control* – arguably entailing *choice making* and, hence, ability to do otherwise (Flew, 1985, pp. 5–6). This links it to what philosophers call *free will*. Some even say agency is “human freedom, free will” (and that agents – as “those who exercise free will” – should therefore be distinguished from other kinds of actors) (Alexander, 1992, p. 8). Others might not read quite as much into the meaning of bare agency, but at least once we add the qualifier *autonomous* – meaning (relatively) *capable and free* – it will involve certain expectations about intention forming and decision-making that philosophers of free will have been debating. Moreover, to make sure, let me focus here on *the specific type of autonomy* that people generally think is *required for moral responsibility*; the connectedness of *that* concept to freewill philosophy should be obvious (Barnes, 2000). At least, discussions over autonomous agency and philosophical debates over free will overlap in their concern with much *the same psychological capabilities* (see Dennett, 2021, pp. 9–14; Mele, 2001). And as those capabilities are traditionally, almost “by definition,” presumed to be relatively self-standing as opposed to simply directed by extrinsic causes, their reality and thus the reality of autonomous agency may indeed appear to be contradicted by such anti-dualistic theories that make agency intrinsically structured and expect it to follow (broadly, statistically) along structural lines.²

However, in this paper I seek to conceptualize morally responsible autonomous agency in a way compatible with anti-dualistic ontologies. Specifically, I argue that anti-dualistic ontologies only conflict with a highly *voluntaristic* notion of autonomous agency – one that is thought *incompatible with (intentions, decisions and) actions being ultimately determined by extrinsic factors* (see Archer, 1995, pp. 65–66, 80–84, 121–132, 2003; King, 2009, pp. 273–277; Varela, 2001, p. 63; cf. Barnes, 2000; Loyal & Barnes, 2001; Pleasants, 2019). That voluntaristic notion indeed has roots in philosophy of free will, but more precisely only in what van Inwagen (1983) termed “incompatibilist” intuitions in that field. It is an ideational descendant of the Kantian interpretation of “ought implies can,” the ability to do otherwise, in the *metaphysical* sense of *not being causally (pre)determined* in the matter. Incompatibilism has been a centerpiece of “libertarian” (which defend the reality of

free will) and “skeptical” (which question or deny it) positions in freewill philosophy, but these do not exhaust the field. Here, in order to conceptualize agentic autonomy in a way consistent with anti-dualistic social ontologies, I draw from the main alternative to incompatibilism, “compatibilist” philosophy. Leaning on certain ideas by the leading contemporary free-will compatibilist, Daniel Dennett, and showing that they are well congruent with an anti-dualistic ontology inspired by John Dewey's transactional pragmatism in particular, I hope to offer tools for my fellow anti-dualists to insist on the reality of autonomous agency, conceptualizing it in a way compatible with extrinsic determination.

The argument brings together three themes. Firstly, I discuss anti-dualistic ontologies' notions of agency/structure and their problematic relationship with the traditional juxtaposition of voluntarism and determinism, paying special attention to some of the intuitions of freedom involved. Secondly, I draw from compatibilist philosophies of free will in order to offer an alternative to the juxtaposition of (voluntary) agency and (determining) structure, arguing that their apparent opposition rests on incompatibilist intuitions of freedom. Thirdly, I flesh out in some detail many of the social-scientific and -theoretical implications that I take my compatibilist view of the reality of autonomy to have, including certain social political and jurisprudence related implications. While logically distinct per se, I intend to show that the three themes are interlinked by ideational and conceptual connections, and that there is a coherent case to be made for combining them in the way proposed herein.

2 | ANTI-DUALISTIC ONTOLOGIES' CONFLICT WITH VOLUNTARISM

Anti-dualists like me believe that all human agency, intentions and choices, as well as any agent's success in life, is (metaphysically speaking)³ thoroughly dependent on what other people do or have done – on behaviors, technologies, and other materials that can be described in social structural terms. Structures constitute *intrinsic* parts of what anybody does or thinks (Abbott, 2007; Barnes, 2000; Collins, 2004; Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Fuchs, 2001), indeed of *who one is*: there is no “core” to any agency or agent, or to humanity, personhood or self, independent from and unshaped by structural determinants.⁴

Structures, for that matter, we think are equally dependent on agency. Neither structures nor agents have any essence of their own – nothing has, for we believe there *are* no essences, or even “things,” independently from the unfolding relations of social life (Elias, 1978; Emirbayer, 1997; Powell, 2013). I myself see structures as *patterns in people's* (technologies and other materials involving) *behavior* that social scientists pick out from the stream of social life with their conceptual tools and sometimes find useful for explanatory and predictive purposes. Such key anti-dualistic concepts as *social practices, networks, and figurations*, refer to slices of *agency/structure* – agentic structure, structured agency. Meanwhile, individual people, even though they as inherently active and thoroughly socially conditioned beings are the crucial existential embodiment and implementation of both agency and structure, are not thought social-theoretically fundamental. Any given individual no doubt swims as best they can in the stream of social life, but that is typically of minor consequence as the stream can carry them wherever, or drown them any given day. As the classic of pragmatism John Dewey (1927/1988) put it, any human “individual *par excellence*” is fundamentally “moved and regulated by ... [their] associations with others”: their actions, or indeed thoughts “cannot even be described, much less accounted for, in isolation” (p. 353).

Certainly, many people *think of themselves as* independent individuals able to choose their way in life, and oftentimes *do* quite self-consciously make choices, even big life decisions about pursuing a particular career, for instance, as well as countless small ones about adopting new ideas or habits and giving up others, but anti-dualists stress that this calls for social scientific explanations. The

very idea of independent individual is a contingent socio-cultural product (Collins, 2004, pp. xix–xx, chap. 9; King, 2004, pp. 14–16), an outcome of modern age “individualization” – agentive/structural developments whereby people have become increasingly encouraged and forced to “reflexivity,” making self-conscious and apparently self-reliant choices, seeing themselves as individual choosers, self-made biographical selves (Beck et al., 1994). Especially people fortunate enough to live in the few most egalitarian and peaceable (non-warring, or warring only in faraway places) industrialized constitutional democracies that meet the hallmarks of a welfare state, may become quite blind to much of their dependency on structure.⁵ They may indeed think of themselves in *voluntaristic* terms: as *independent individuals* who can *choose freely* what to do in life, and *ceteris paribus deserve the sole credit and blame* for their actions.

I would *not* say this individualistic voluntarism is an *altogether* false narrative. Independent agency, choices, and individuality are realities in a few contexts, from many standpoints, and anti-dualists admit they are realized in certain important institutions (Barnes, 2000, p. xi; Fuchs, 2001, p. 21). That is because individualization has been a real socio-cultural, agentive/structural development, and relatively independent individual agency is therefore real to many people. (The social constitution and history of individual independence, freedom or autonomy is a research topic that anti-dualists of a relational-sociological bent in particular should find interesting and be theoretically well equipped to investigate.) Also, due to the vast multiplicity of socio-cultural influences precipitated by global media and the internet hitting us with an enormous diversity of potential habits and ideas every day, many of us contemporary individuals are rather *unique* concoctions, too. However, that does not mean we are, metaphysically speaking, truly independent or separate from structure. Unique concoctions our minds may be, but never ones uninfluenced by other people and, hence, structures.⁶ Individual diversity-creating modern media and the internet, too, are not only (like all technologies) parts of social/cultural structures, but powerful channels for structures to influence, condition, and change our minds (see Coudry & Mejias, 2019; Greenfield, 2014; Kivinen & Piironen, 2023; Noë, 2015).

Therefore, while in some contexts I have no objections to the individualistic and voluntarist narratives, in *social theoretical* contexts, and especially from a *metaphysical* viewpoint (engaging that philosophers' language-game), I prefer anti-dualistic descriptions that justify, for social scientific research purposes, the operationalization of individuals as *nodes of social networks*, conceiving research into them as “zooming in” to singular nodes. In social theory I concur with Latour (2005) that individual and agentive – just like collective and structural – terms are “groupings,” categories that bring certain things together and leave others out, and that their referents should not be presumed to exist independently from us “group makers, group talkers, and group holders” (p. 32). What any action and, hence, agent (and intention) *is* depends on (and changes with) the socio-cultural environment (e.g., Abbott, 1927/1988, 2007, pp. 7–10; Dewey, 1927/1988, p. 357), other people's behavioral structures (e.g., Crossley, 2011, pp. 2–3; Dewey, 1922/1983, pp. 43–47, 60–62). All this makes me *reject the ontological juxtaposition* of agency and structure, view agency as an inherently social affair that takes place “through, not against, culture” (Alexander, 1992, p. 10; see also, e.g., Barnes, 2000; Collins, 2004; Crossley, 2011). Therefore, I prefer social-theoretical narratives where people “drift” with the flows of the stream of social life, which social scientists may describe as pushes and pulls of structural patterns, to make the choices they make (also, e.g., Collins, 2004, pp. xiii–xx, 3–6).

3 | DIVERSE INTUITIONS OF AGENCY

Many social theorists, certain types of emergentists in particular, accuse anti-dualistic theories of sacrificing something crucial about *what agency* – or, at least, *autonomous agency* – *is*, of missing

or misrepresenting something essential to it (intentionality, consciousness, reflexivity, or self/person, perhaps) (e.g., Archer, 2003, pp. 1–95; Porpora, 2015, pp. 129–142; Smith, 2010, chap. 4). But anti-dualists like me suspect that these criticisms are based on overly individualistic and voluntaristic notions of agency, which, as explained, do indeed conflict with anti-dualism. The *ideational roots* of those notions can be traced back to certain “*incompatibilist*” (Van Inwagen, 1983) intuitions articulated by philosophers of free will.

These intuitions have been highly impactful in social theory. They have effectively been incorporated into the very juxtaposition of agency and structure – often thought to *express the antithesis between voluntarism/freedom and determinism* (Archer, 1995, p. 65; Barnes, 2000, pp. x–xi; Flew, 1985, pp. 90–109; Hays, 1994, pp. 59–60; King, 2009, pp. 273–277; Loyal & Barnes, 2001, pp. 507–508; Pleasants, 2019; Varela, 2001, p. 63). Consequently, some degree of conflict between this traditional notion of (autonomous) agency and anti-dualistic ontologies is well-nigh unavoidable: attempts to eliminate the juxtaposition, to “conflate” agency and structure, will seem to throw in doubt the freedom and, hence, autonomy of agency, or even agency as such.

In fact, the hold of the incompatibilist intuition has been strong even on some anti-dualists. Giddens (1976), for one, thought it “analytical to the concept of agency ... that a person ‘could have acted otherwise’” – and stated even that this requires us to believe in indeterminism, that “the world ... does not hold out a predetermined future” (p. 75). Notably, though, his attempts to fit this notion of agency into his purportedly anti-dualistic social ontology have provoked accusations of internal inconsistency from both emergentist and anti-dualistic critics. Emergentists like Archer (1995, pp. 117–132) insist that *agency cannot truly be real* in Giddens's ontology, while anti-dualists like King (2004, pp. 7–10, 2009, pp. 274–276, 2010; also Pleasants, 1999, pp. 99–100, 112–113) argue that Giddens's *ontology cannot truly be anti-dualistic* – that his voluntaristic notion of agency implies a dualism not unlike Archer's emergentism. I think these accusations indicate, from opposite perspectives, that the reality of incompatibilist agency indeed sits poorly with anti-dualistic social ontologies; we should admit that it is more naturally congruent with those (relatively strongly)⁷ emergentist ontologies where agency springs from *ontologically irreducible mental powers* of self-conscious decision making. Such emergentists, sometimes motivated by an *essentialist* metaphysical conviction that there must be a *real* – as opposed to merely “nominal” (categorization-dependent) – *essence* to agency/consciousness/person, have accused anti-dualists of turning people into behavioristic machines, or “zombies” (see Archer, 2003, chap. 1; Groff, 2013, pp. 81–82; Porpora, 2015, chap. 5; also Bhaskar, 1975/2008, pp. 105–117). A notable philosophical controversy is involved here: anti-dualists tend to be *anti-essentialists*, too (Emirbayer, 1997; Fuchs, 2001) – a point to which I return later.

I hear a cluster of emergent-essentialist, incompatibilist-voluntaristic intuitions speaking whenever people express discomfort with the *probabilistic predictability of agency from structure*, claiming that it conflicts with freedom/autonomy. Even though there is no *logical* contradiction between the two, as *an empirical fact* predictability affects many people's reckoning of agentive freedom (Monterosso & Schwartz, 2020, pp. 379–380) – arguably revealing certain shared intuitions (Hays, 1994, pp. 59–60; King, 2009, pp. 273–275). Quite a few social theorists and scientists seem uneasy with predictability. Consider the typical reactions to the digital-age business model of “datafication,” which leans on massive digital surveillance and computer algorithms' capability to probabilistically predict – and, thereby, enable statistically effective manipulation of – individuals' decisions, based on Big Data and the individuals' personal data (see Couldry & Mejias, 2019; Kivinen & Piironen, 2023; Lanier, 2018; Zuboff, 2019). Many of the people most vocal about it are *alarmists*, saying datafication threatens our autonomy/free will. Moreover, notably, they use emergent-essentialist terminology here, complain that there is something dehumanizing about algorithms invading our personal inner space and conditioning us like behavioristic automata, or zombies (Couldry & Mejias, 2019, pp. 153–173;

Lanier, 2018, pp. 5–24, 126–128; Zuboff, 2019, chap. 10 through 13.). Others are less concerned about it but lean on the same intuitions: the popular historian Yuval Harari sees datafication as evidence to there being no free will. He says freedom was always but a myth, though one it was easy to believe in when the means of external surveillance and control of thoughts were as cumbersome and uncertain as they were before datafication (Harari, 2018.).

Evidently, many social theorists would agree with the emergentist Ruth Groff's (2013) observation that, "while probabilistic laws may loosen the grip of necessitation, they do not appear to ... return control to the agent. Instead, the agent's act looks to be merely a locus of statistical likelihood." (pp. 73–74.) Of course, most emergentists do not deny that there *is* such statistical predictability to agency (cf., however, Groff, 2019, p. 182); instead, they – Bhaskarian critical realists in particular – see it as evidence of structural relations or entities' causal powers, and insist that agents must have their *own* irreducible powers to *counteract* those predictability-creating structural determinants.⁸ They celebrate the *merely* probabilistic nature of predictability as proof of human agents' emergent mental powers – and more generally of the fundamental "openness," unpredictability in terms of strict laws, of social reality (Archer, 1995, pp. 69–70, 195–196; Bhaskar, 1975/2008, pp. 105–117; Porpora, 2015, pp. 116–117, chap. 2.).

It is worth mentioning that anti-dualists, at least *pragmatist* anti-dualists such as myself, totally *agree* with critical realists about openness in this sense, although for largely *opposite philosophical reasons*, given how the doctrine of causal powers central to critical realism is grounded in an essentialist metaphysics of "natural necessities" (Bhaskar, 1975/2008; Groff, 2004). Pragmatists believe there is *only probabilistic* predictability, even in "hard" sciences, precisely because we reject the idea of "essential natures" of things (Brandom, 2004, p. 2)⁹ – along with the whole subject–object dualism, which lies in the heart of the critical realists' absolute division between the intransitive-ontological reality and people's forever-erring notions of it. As "*transactionalists*," believing that "the mind and the world jointly make up the mind and the world" (Putnam, 1981, p. xi), pragmatists avoid presuming any subject-independent objective Nature of anything – posit only a world-as-we-conceive-it whose probabilities are constantly estimated in organism–environment transactions (Piiroinen, 2018, p. 66.). (Therefore, we do not presume any subject-independent nature of Causality, either; we may not define causality as "constant conjunctions of events" but, *pace* critical realists, we do agree with Hume that causality is something *seen* in the world – dependent on minds and explanatory needs (also Dennett, 2017, pp. 354–358; Fuchs, 2001, p. 37; Kivinen & Piiroinen, 2004, pp. 233–234). Moreover, in scientific and other inquiries, as Dewey (1938/1991, pp. 452–457) put it, causality is a "logical," *not* ontological category.)¹⁰

Keen to track down causally powerful particulars and their essential natures as they are, critical realists are likely to take issue with the anti-dualistic (e.g., Abbott, 2016, p. 3; Crossley, 2011, pp. 1–3; Fuchs, 2001, p. 260; Latour, 1986) view that agents get their (social scientifically interesting) powers from the flow of other people's networked behaviors. This again is connected to the question of the probabilistic predictability of agency from structure just mentioned, which could in principle turn into a *purely quantifiable* issue if agents had no power independent from structure; there would remain only the challenge of *acquiring and computing sufficient quantities of data* about networked behaviors. Such in principle predictable people, emergent-essentialists may suspect, would have lost their human-agentive essence, turned into soulless behavioristic automata, zombies incapable of real agency – only mechanically responding to causal pressures (See Archer, 1995, pp. 117–132, 2003, chap. 1 and 9; Groff, 2013, pp. 81–82; Porpora, 2015, chap. 5; cf. also King, 2009, pp. 273–275; Loyal & Barnes, 2001, p. 507.). We anti-dualists should take a very different view of structural predictability: *embrace* it as a fulfillment of the sort of "sociology of thinking" that Randall Collins (1998) pictured, such that rests on so much of agency being determined by social processes that, in effect,

“[s]ocial structure is everywhere, down to the most micro level” (p. 46). The business model of datafication we should see as an algorithmically automatized realization of such sociology of thinking, and its successful commoditization as an empirical confirmation of the veracity of anti-dualism. It shows that structure and agency are indeed two sides of the same coin, and “levels” in social science but heuristic tools needed only because of our limited capacity to fathom the complexity of networked lives – tools which computers are now making obsolete (Latour et al., 2012).

Yet I would *not* say that people are not autonomous agents. That is because I recognize that incompatibilist-voluntarist sentiments are *not the only* intuitions involved in the concept of agency, even that of autonomous – unquestionably involving a considerable *degree of* capability and freedom – agency. Many of us do not think that autonomous agency requires ultimate independence from other people. Therefore, I am hopeful that, leaning on our *other* intuitions, we can drop the voluntaristic notion and define autonomous agency in terms consistent with its intrinsic dependence on structure. Herein, I will do just that, drawing – somewhat like Barnes (2000) – from “*compatibilist*” intuitions in freewill philosophy.

This requires me to jump into the “conceptual morass” of agency/structure that Collins (2004), for example, tried to avoid by preferring the terms micro/macro instead (pp. 5–6).¹¹ I agree with him that, *traditionally conceived*, it is “a drawback of the term ‘agency’ ... that it carries the rhetorical burden of connoting moral responsibility; [that] it brings us back to the glorification (and condemnation) of the individual, just the moralizing gestalt that we need to break out from” (p. 6). However, I find it well worth the effort to face this challenge and argue for *another interpretation* of agency – and the moral responsibility it implies; for unlike Collins and, say, Loyal and Barnes (2001), I believe agency, suitably understood, is still a useful concept not only in certain limited social-theoretical/-scientific contexts but in general sociology too. Herein I seek to provide tools for such a suitable understanding.

I will try to do this without drowning too many of our commonsensical intuitions about agency in a sea of technical vocabulary, too. For example, while in broad terms I agree with Fuchs (2001) that, agency is “a variable at-tribute to personhood” with which “some observers make sense of some events,” and personhood is a socially constructed institution, I do *not* follow him into the conclusion that “persons do not act, much less act rationally” (p. 338). Nor am I, like Latour (2005, pp. 43–62, 70–80), extending the concept of agency to cover *all* kinds of activity/contributions to outcomes, blurring the distinction between intentional actions and other types of behavior (even granting agency to inanimate objects). Indeed, unlike Emirbayer and Mische (1998), too, my analysis of agency will acknowledge the key role of intentions (see Porpora, 2015, pp. 131–142).

I should mention, however, that my treatment of intentionality is not likely to satisfy strong mental realists. That is because I understand intentions much like Daniel Dennett (1987, 1996, chap. 2), as *descriptions given from the “intentional stance”* – a notion which highlights the *standpoint-dependence* of psychology and portrays mental vocabulary chiefly as *tools* for observers to explain and predict behavior with. Even more importantly, as a leading contemporary freewill compatibilist, Dennett (2003, 2021) offers useful ideas for tackling and expelling incompatibilist intuitions of autonomy.

4 | THREE BASIC POSITIONS ON FREE WILL AND AUTONOMY

For the present purposes, I group the positions in philosophy of free will into three basic types: Libertarianism, Skepticism, and Compatibilism – each with a variety of subtypes, and allowing “hybrid” positions combining ideas from different types.¹² Free-will *libertarians* (e.g., Kane, 1996) would be those who define the freedom of will required for moral responsibility in terms *incompatible with causal determinism* – with everything in the universe being causally (pre)determined so that

“every event is necessitated by antecedent events and conditions together with the laws of nature” (Hoefer, 2016) – and believe *there is* such freedom. Free-will – or, moral responsibility – *skeptics*, while agreeing with libertarians that the freedom required for moral responsibility is incompatible with determinism, typically advocate a *more comprehensive incompatibilism*, such that entails *denial of true freedom and responsibility regardless of the truth of determinism* (Caruso, 2021b). *Compatibilists*, finally, agree with libertarians that free will and moral responsibility *are real*, but only because they define them in terms *compatible with extrinsic determination*, indeed even with complete determinism (McKenna & Coates, 2021).

Now, for my goal of *shedding light on and offering conceptual tools for understanding the notion of autonomous agency in social theory*, much of the traditional freewill philosophical discussions are *beside the point*. Especially ideas and arguments tied to *determinism* – useful for examining whether free will could be real if the world turned out to be governed by strict, exceptionless laws of natural sciences (Fischer et al., 2007, pp. 1–2) – are *irrelevant* to social sciences and, therefore, most social theory (Loyal & Barnes, 2001, pp. 518–524; Pleasants, 2019, pp. 16, 19). For even if *physical-scientific* explanations should ultimately refer to exceptionless causal laws, most people understand there is no hope of finding such *social scientific* laws; social scientists who aspire explaining and predicting with law-like statements must follow Hempel and admit those are *probabilistic-statistical* laws only. Therefore, the antithesis of freedom and determinism implied by the social-theoretical agency–structure distinction is not exactly the same that has occupied freewill philosophical libertarians; structural “determinism” cannot mean complete predetermination: very few social scientists/theorists have presumed that actions are *completely* determined by structural causes (Loyal & Barnes, 2001, p. 518). Rather, it should be understood in the sense where, Y being “determined by X” means simply that Y “was caused by X, or that X featured prominently in its causation” (Pleasants, 2019, p. 9). Indeed, whatever justification there is to the widely shared belief that freedom is incompatible with anti-dualistic social ontologies, it surely cannot lie with anti-dualism involving a presumption of fully determined universe (although some emergentists might argue that).¹³ Rather, as explained, the belief seems connected to the feeling that even statistical predictability, which is indeed important to anti-dualists, conflicts with fully free or autonomous agency (see Archer, 1995, pp. 80–84, Groff, 2013, pp. 73–74; Hays, 1994, pp. 59–60; King, 2009, pp. 273–275).

In other words, the incompatibilist intuitions about autonomy conflicting with anti-dualistic social ontologies cannot be defined in traditional freewill philosophical terms. Yet the roots of those intuitions *can* be traced into philosophy of free will, specifically the Kantian view of “ought implies can.” While agency–structure juxtaposition is not typically *explicated* in Kantian terms, it definitely carries *ideational traces* of his freewill philosophical metaphysics.¹⁴ Therefore, it could be fruitful to draw from philosophy of free will in social theory, insofar as there are freewill-philosophical ideas and arguments that can be untangled from the question of determinism. And, happily, there *are* such ideas and arguments. At least the following key question clearly is of social theoretical relevance and does not require confirming or denying fully (pre)determined universe: *Given your definition of it, is the sort of freedom required for moral responsibility for an action compatible with the action being ultimately extrinsically determined?*

Some contemporary freewill philosophers have worked on that question, and actually, a few of them do not tie their position to either affirming or denying determinism. Compatibilists, arguably, never did: belief in determinism is not a logical prerequisite of the view that free will is *compatible with determinism* – that freedom would be real *even if* the universe *were* deterministic. Here is one appealing characterization: compatibilists define free will as, *not a metaphysical but a psychological affair*, which comes down to whether the agent *seems capable of forming intentional states and acting in accordance with them* (Monterosso & Schwartz, 2020, p. 375; see Dennett, 2003). On the

incompatibilist side, certainly, there are still many libertarians who find it important to deny (full) determinism (e.g., Kane, 1996; Searle, 2007; also Mele, 2001, chap. 11 and 12), and some “hard determinists” – or, “hard incompatibilists” (Pereboom, 2001) – denying freedom on grounds of (near enough)¹⁵ determinism (see Caruso, 2021b). However, increasing numbers of incompatibilists, too, now focus on other issues. Some libertarians, especially those who describe themselves as both libertarians *and* compatibilists (or, “compatibilist libertarians”), find the question whether the universe (under physical descriptions) is deterministic, simply irrelevant as long as agents *can be said to be, in some important sense, the crucial causes of their actions* (List, 2019; also Groff, 2013, pp. 80–82, 2019, pp. 182–184). And there are very few hard determinists these days; most skeptics doubt the reality of moral responsibility on some other grounds (Caruso, 2021b; Fischer et al., 2007, p. 3).

Of particular interest to me here is the following free-will skeptical argument, inspired by philosophers like Galen Strawson (1994, 1998) and Gregg Caruso (2021a, pp. 15–18, 51–56). It makes the claim that, irrespectively of whether everything is totally determined, *we* – our dispositions, characters, thoughts, and decisions – *are too determined by factors that are not in our hands* to be truly morally responsible. This claim is independent from the truth of determinism (Strawson, 1994, p. 5), allows the skeptic to be agnostic about it (Caruso, 2021a, p. 51), because most indeterministic determinants are not in our hands either.

I see here a possibility to *interpret incompatibilism* in a way that makes it *social-theoretically pertinent*. The interpretation is that, true moral responsibility requires the agent to make decisions that are not *too* determined by extrinsic factors. This is different from Kant's incompatibilism, but has some intuitive appeal of its own, as many people would agree that extrinsic determination *could* be a problem for morally relevant freedom or autonomy *even if* it did *not* amount to *absolute predetermination*. Moreover, when applied to the *social-theoretical* question of agentive autonomy *relative to social structure* in particular, my interpretation of incompatibilism coheres well with the above-discussed, common anxiety about probabilistic predictability and statistically effective determination threatening free will/autonomy. That is, it fits the fact that many social theorists are finding it intuitively appealing to view the predictability of agency from structure as an indicator of the agent lacking autonomy relative to structure (See Archer, 1995, pp. 80–84, 195–200; Couldry & Mejias, 2019, pp. 153–173; Groff, 2013, pp. 73–74; Hays, 1994, pp. 59–60; King, 2009, pp. 273–275; Lanier, 2018, pp. 126–128; Zuboff, 2019, pp. 307–308, 330–331.). Perhaps we could articulate that intuition like this: If an agent's actions are highly predictable from structure, there must have been – quite irrespectively of whether *determinism* is true – too impactful social-structural *determinants* for the agent to be truly autonomous.

Some such social-theoretical incompatibilists – “skeptics” – might say people are indeed too determined by structure to be truly autonomous. Others – “libertarians” – would disagree, insisting that there is real autonomy (relative to structure, at least) aplenty because much of our agency is not too determined by structural causes. But the antithesis of incompatibilism, compatibilism, is also of social theoretical relevance.

The way I see it, libertarian and skeptical variants of social-theoretical incompatibilism diverge, basically, in placing very differently the *limit* or *threshold* of (the peculiarity of) extrinsic determination that agentive autonomy can take. A skeptic who believes quite the *ordinary* genetic, social, and other extrinsic determinants mean that *no one is ever* truly responsible, deserving of blame or praise (e.g., Caruso, 2021a, pp. 15–18, 22–23, 37), could be interpreted as presuming a very *low* threshold. At least, for them, no *special* determinations are needed to make it the case that the agent's decisions are too much caused by extrinsic factors to be in their own hands. Meanwhile, libertarians must be presuming a much *higher* threshold because they agree with compatibilists that *most (adult) human beings are* morally responsible. Some might even follow such “narrow” freewill libertarians (Kane, 1996; also Searle, 2007) who believe that only *complete* predetermination would preclude

freedom, and insist that even a little bit of indeterminism somewhere in the relevant causal chains inside the agent's head makes the agent autonomous enough. Also the libertarians who admit that there can be *more or less* (voluntaristic) autonomy – in part,¹⁶ relative to how much structural determination there is (Archer, 1995, p. 196) – only suspect a clear minority of people of having so little autonomy that they are not truly autonomous or “active” agents at all (see Archer, 2003).¹⁷ Compatibilist social theorists, in turn, while in agreement with libertarians that most people are quite sufficiently autonomous to be morally responsible agents, come to that conclusion through different premises. For compatibilists only admit certain, relatively *peculiar types of extrinsic* determination (coercion, brainwashing, advanced Alzheimer's, some mental illnesses ...) to limit or deprive us of autonomy: they deny that extrinsic determination *in general* conflicts with autonomous agency, *no matter how predictable it makes us*.

Notice that social-theoretical autonomy skepticism, as defined above, is consistent with both anti-dualistic and emergentist social ontologies. It may be more obviously so with anti-dualistic ontologies, as those make agency quite a bit determined by structural factors; a skeptic would just happily conclude that there is, then, no true autonomy. But emergentists can be skeptics, too. They could regret to find that, although in *ideal* circumstances human agency would emerge as an autonomous (level of) reality, in many or all *actual* circumstances we are too determined by structure (and other extrinsic causes) to achieve this – remain what Archer (2003, chap. 9) calls “fractured” and “passive” agents. Meanwhile, social theorists who wish to avoid skepticism may find different notions of autonomy appealing according to whether they are anti-dualists or emergentists. Libertarian beliefs seem consistent with the emergentist notion of agents having irreducible *sui generis* powers that spring from their own, intrinsic essence (Groff, 2019; see also Archer, 2003, chap. 1; Bhaskar, 1979, chap. 3; Porpora, 2015, chap. 5; Smith, 2010, chap. 4; cf., however, Elder-Vass, 2010, p. 198; Hodgson, 2004, pp. 55–65); structures may restrict or stymie those powers, but agents can be truly autonomous in quite a libertarian sense as long as their powers are not totally overrun by extrinsic determinants. Anti-dualists, however, if they want to say there really is autonomous agency, should prefer a compatibilist notion of autonomy; or that is what I will argue.

5 | AUTONOMY FOR ANTI-DUALISTIC NATURALISTS

Crystallized, the compatibilist view I suggest here is that, autonomy is *chiefly not a metaphysical but a psychological affair*, a matter of *having certain mental capabilities – as evaluated from, and thus dependent on, a standpoint in a socio-cultural, practical context*. Such autonomy is *generally compatible with there being extrinsic causes determining agency*; indeed, it is itself a *product of* certain kinds of *extrinsic, socio-cultural causes* (See also Barnes, 2000.). Other types of extrinsic determinants may preempt, limit, or extinguish autonomy, but that is a special case and also a context- and standpoint-dependent question: there is *no overall limit/threshold* to how much extrinsic determination autonomy can withstand. This all dovetails logically with the anti-essentialism shared by many anti-dualists, as it implies there is *no metaphysical essence* to autonomy.

That is the gist of it. Now, let us discuss the social-theoretical and -scientific implications of this compatibilist notion.

I wish to highlight two general implications. First, the notion suggests that, when assessing autonomy, social theorists and scientists should recognize and keep in mind the issue's *context- and standpoint-dependence*, and the fact that there is always a multitude of legitimate standpoints to adopt and contexts to work in or investigate. Second, it encourages us to take a *gradualist* view of autonomy, and to appreciate that human agents can (grow up to) be more or less autonomous depending on their

socio-cultural, structural environment – whose potentially limiting or enhancing impact on autonomy is an apt research subject for social studies.

These points are well suited to anti-dualistic social ontologies. This is in part because anti-dualists, especially those who, like me, lean on a Deweyan (or similar) theory of action, already share a *remarkably similar philosophy of mind* with compatibilists like Dennett.¹⁸ Both Dewey and Dennett are ardent *Darwinian naturalists*, and see that it entails a *gradualist, as opposed to essentialist or dualist* notion of mind. They also emphasize the role of *cultural tools* such as language in creating *distinctively human* consciousness and cognitive capacities, while stressing that consciousness and cognition remain natural processes (of organism–environment transactions) that *crucially involve neurologically based habits* and other, ultimately very simple dispositions (Dennett, 1991, 1996, 2017; Dewey, 1922/1983, 1925/1988, 1928/1984, 1938/1991, pp. 15–65.). Mental life is those *functions* of habits and other dispositional processes that we – when observing some of the agent's behavior-in-context – find reasonable to *describe in intentional terms* (Dennett, 1987; Dewey, 1896, 1928/1984);¹⁹ and the self, personality, and character are *clusters* of such habits (Dewey, 1922/1983). As habits, according to Dewey, depend upon the socio-cultural (as well as other) environment, he agreed with his friend Mead (1934) that, *all human psychology is social psychology*. We adopt so many of our linguistic and other habits from other people that, our minds and selves are basically *social functions in biological bodies* – partly *consist of community norms* (Dewey, 1922/1983). It follows that to know a human mind, we need to know its history in a socio-cultural environment, and therefore the relevant features of that environment – a point well appreciated by Dennett (1987, pp. 64–65), too, even if he is often labeled a downward reductionist. We need “*holistic*” *psychology, transgressing the mind–environment dualism* as well as the body–mind and non-conscious–conscious dualism (Dewey, 1896, 1922/1983, 1925/1988, chap. 5 through 7, 1928/1984; see also Dennett, 1987, 2017, chap. 14).²⁰

This philosophy of mind – which is reminiscent of the recent “*4E*” (embodied, enactive, embedded, and extended) theories of mind/cognition (see Neven et al., 2018)²¹ – is a natural premise for anti-dualistic social theories (see, e.g., Bourdieu, 1990; Collins, 2004; Crossley, 2011). (Many 4E theories are indeed anti-dualistic *also* in their view of *agency–structure*.)²² As Bourdieu (1990, p. 55) understood, habit-like dispositional concepts such as his *habitus* overcome not just the mind–body and conscious–unconscious but, also, the individual–society and, indeed, freedom–determinism dualism, ultimately because they overcome the fundamental mind–world, subject–object dualism. They do this because habits are *combinations of “internal”* (biological-physiological) and “*external*” (including socio-cultural) *elements, causes and other determinants*.

Now consider, in this light, the case discussed at the beginning of the paper, that of a largely structurally determined youth from a deprived neighborhood being recruited into a street gang and, after years of habitualization through social conditioning and possibly under group pressure, killing a competing gang member. Remember the conflicting intuitions we had about how to judge this action, those of seeing the perpetrator either as a victim of the society, or as a morally responsible person having made bad choices. Notice that my kind of anti-essentialist compatibilist has no problem recognizing *both* intuitions and the fact that a *balance* needs to be sought between them – from a point of view, in a practical context. It is true that the intuition of perpetrators being victims of the society sits particularly effortlessly into those anti-dualistic ontologies where people drift in the stream of social life; but once we recognize that autonomous and responsible agency is *as much a socio-cultural creation* as is behavior lacking those attributes, and *drop the assumption of a metaphysical divide* between the two type of cases, nothing prevents us from appreciating both intuitions and seeking to balance them case by case. As Dewey (1922/1983) observed a hundred years ago, there is *some* validity to both views – blame the society/blame the bad person. However, when conceived as *absolute and disjunctive alternatives*, he stressed, they imply an *unreal person–society dualism* and are

too obsessed with antecedent causation, which – for us compatibilists – is *not integral to morality's* (social) *function*, that of *influencing future* actions. (pp. 16–19.)

Compatibilism is indeed the position best consistent with the Dewey's (1922/1983) action-theoretical view that, anyone's mind, character, and indeed will consists of their habits, which are *products of transactions with the* (largely, social) *environment*, and therefore *always have external causes*. The legitimacy of moral and legal judgments – and whatever freedom they presuppose – could not then hang on there being no extrinsic causes to the actions judged. Instead, the legitimacy turns on the judgments *-serving their social functions*. (See chap. 1 through 5, 25 and 26.) Certainly, Dewey saw room for improvement in how those functions were served – vacillation “between a too tender treatment of criminality and a viciously drastic treatment of it.” He dreamed of a “truly scientific criminal law,” judging “each individual case ... with something corresponding to the complete clinical record ... [by] competent physician[s].” (p. 35.) On a case-by-case basis, then, we may sometimes legitimately blame and punish an individual, and at other times legitimately exonerate them, blame the circumstances, for the same actions.

This view applies the pragmatist conception that any inquiry and judgment making – judicial proceedings being one example Dewey (1938/1991, chap. 6 and 7) used – is about coping with and solving a problematic (“doubtful”) situation that hinders the flow of action. Such organism-environment transactional situations, which always involve a socio-cultural backdrop and an actor's point of view, are the contexts of cognition that dictate the relevant features and facts of the case, the appropriate concepts and ideas to apply (Dewey, v; Gallagher, 2009, p. 37). In some problematic situations, where the relevant facts are thus and so, we can say the agent is *perfectly* or *sufficiently* autonomous; in others, we emphasize their *lack of* autonomy; and in yet others, we want to try and evaluate, drawing on psychological expert opinions, their *degree of* autonomy on some scale. Again, this implies the philosophical conviction that there is no metaphysical essence to autonomy. But legal discussions are a context in which an anti-essentialist gradualist, too, may want to *draw lines*, such as the degree of autonomy separating criminally responsible from *non-compos mentis*.²³ Importantly, though, such lines we see as *agreements by the relevant community*, not anything found “out there” in the supposedly not socially constructed Reality (see Barnes, 2000; Dewey, 1922/1983; also Dennett, 2021, pp. 21, 70).

To me, the most significant distinction in that connection is the Rylean one between *knowing how* and *knowing that*. Crucially, the former is the fundamental: knowing-that is based on or consists of, *may be* (a special form of) knowing-how (Ryle, 1946/1971; Gallagher, 2009; also Dewey, 1922/1983, pp. 123–130). As Dennett (2017) puts it, *comprehension* builds up from and consists of *competences* – involving neurologically embodied habits and micro-habits, ultimately neurons disposed to react when stimulated. There is no ontological hiatus, then: knowing-that/comprehension is but a special (problem-solving) type of knowing-how/competence that deals with symbols and propositions; it involves no non-physical, distinct knower, consciousness, soul, or mental stuff (Dennett, 2017, pp. 94–101, 299–300, 388–389; Dewey, 1922/1983, pp. 25–29, 50–53, 123–130). Still, the distinction is useful in many contexts, including discussions of the sort of autonomy required for moral responsibility. Displays of *other* types of competent knowing-how do *not* make us think that the agent is autonomous enough to be morally responsible, but displays of *knowledge and comprehension*, especially when indicating *capability critically to review one's own actions, decisions, and dispositions*, can make us think that.²⁴

In line with the gradualist philosophy of mind just outlined, sufficient knowledge and comprehension, and therefore autonomy and responsibility, are gradual matters lacking metaphysical demarcation lines, matters open to empirical investigation and contractual regulation (Dennett, 2003, 2021, pp. 69–76; Dewey, 1922/1983, pp. 8–10, chap. 5, 24 through 26; also Barnes, 2000; Fuchs, 2001, pp. 102–104). This allows us to recognize the vast grey area, spectrum of people

with less-than-normal-adult intellectual capabilities (children, many types of mentally ill or disabled people, senior citizens nearing senility ...), who are, at best, as Dennett (2021, pp. 73) puts it, only “*sorta* responsible,”²⁵ and the need to draw more or less arbitrary lines across that spectrum. However, arguably, most normal, appropriately socialized adults meet the criterion of sufficient knowledge and comprehension, and this makes autonomous agency and moral responsibility quite prevalent and real enough (Dennett, 2003, chap. 9 and 10, 2021, pp. 9–10, 14, 69–71; see also Dewey, 1922/1983, pp. 84–86, 193–195, 209–219). Indeed, as I have been saying, we compatibilists agree with libertarians that people do generally have the kind of autonomy required for moral responsibility – although we disagree with them about the *kind* of autonomy at issue. Consequently, we may recommend many of the same social and legal policies, although on rather different grounds.

6 | NOT METAPHYSICALLY GROUNDED BUT REAL ENOUGH RESPONSIBILITY

This is what crucially sets apart my kind of compatibilist's pragmatic, transactional and relational, and hence anti-essentialist and anti-dualistic notion of responsibility from any metaphysical realist ones that incompatibilists are committed. When judging whether someone – say, the young street-gang killer in the example above – was truly autonomous enough to be morally responsible, I do not think the correctness of the judgment or the distinctions it leans on depend on anything presumably standpoint-independently real. Instead, I urge we recognize that all such judgments and distinctions are made ultimately on *pragmatic grounds* – although *within the language-game of jurisprudence* we usually cannot refer to pragmatic reasons. Such reasons should be recognized in philosophical and other *meta*-discussions *about* the practices of jurisprudence, but within the practices, we typically only assess whether and to what extent the perpetrator was “truly responsible” – including sufficiently autonomous to be accountable for their actions – and therefore deserving of the sanctions. That is, there are important *forward-looking* (pragmatic, vis-à-vis our “social contract”) reasons for accepting a *backward looking* moral and legal system (Dennett, 2021, pp. 12, 18–19, 119–121.).

Now, sticking to philosophical and social-theoretical discussions about the sort of autonomy presupposed by moral responsibility, I just cannot see how people could have it *in the incompatibilist sense*. Namely, if I were to presume some silvery gleaming metaphysical line separating those practically capable of doing otherwise, from those too determined by extrinsic factors to do so, I would have to suspect that most people, when committing the bulk of their morally significant, even life-defining actions, are on the latter side of it. Indeed, I believe skeptics have made a convincing case for people typically being too determined by extrinsic factors to be truly responsible – *if* (but here is the catch) there is a metaphysical threshold to that. For metaphysically speaking, we are so much at the mercy of chance events and circumstances that, “luck swallows everything” (Strawson, 1998).

Even in liberal, democratic welfare states – the fragment of the world where the narrative of self-made selves is as real as it ever was to the majority of people – the kind of person and agent one becomes depends on loads of determinants that are not in one's own hands. It depends on the social class, neighborhood, and other networks one is born into, on having neglectful or even abusive or loving and supportive parents, on the kinds of teachers, friends, and chance encounters one happens to have, et cetera.²⁶ Moreover, the actions even of those luckiest with their psychologically constitutive factors depend on loads of circumstantial luck (Caruso, 2021a, pp. 15–18, 55–56, 107–108.). Should we take a metaphysical view of it, there would be no end to speculations about the lucky or unlucky determinants of our actions. If only your friend had not bought you that one more beer last night/you had had time for a proper lunch/that someone had not quarreled with you a moment ago/that irritating

song had not been playing on car radio/that distracting thought had not popped into your mind.... You would have been alert enough not to run down that pedestrian. But all those things happened to happen, and now you are guilty of involuntary manslaughter! (Do not get fixated on the “involuntary,” either; everyone has a “breaking point” and accumulation of bad luck could turn anyone a murderer.)

To me, this entails that libertarianism is not a sensible alternative: we need to be *either* compatibilists *or* skeptics about moral responsibility (see also Dennett & Caruso, 2021, pp. 51–53). I am recommending compatibilism here but openly confess to seeing no *logically forcing* reasons for anyone, even anti-dualists, to completely renounce incompatibilist intuitions (and hence, skepticism);²⁷ all I am arguing is that compatibilism makes more sense in light of, is better consistent with, anti-dualistic ontologies. That is because anti-dualists tend to be anti-essentialists – believe in no conceptualization-independent lines carved in the Reality. They should therefore find themselves gravitating away from the – always metaphysical Reality-implying – incompatibilism, toward a compatibilist view of free will/autonomy and moral responsibility as *social constructs* (see Dennett & Caruso, 2021, pp. 88–104; also Barnes, 2000; Dewey, 1922/1983, pp. 8–10, 53–59, 209–227). They should view these – like the agentive freedom and competence they involve, and agency itself, good and bad (and rational and irrational) choices and characters – as pragmatically justified (in a context, to an audience) descriptions to explain, predict, and judge behavior (see also, e.g., Fuchs, 2001, pp. 4–10, 21–25, 63–64, 97–149). Responsibility for autonomous actions is then a compatibilist concept because it implies no mention of the metaphysical nature of the causal chains leading to actions.

Following Dennett (2003, pp. 134–136, 224–246) and Dewey (1922/1983, pp. 16–19), indeed, metaphysical questions about the causal chains producing actions, especially the parts of the chains leading to extrinsic causes that contributed to the production of the agent's dispositions, are usually irrelevant to considerations about responsibility. Occasionally, of course, we – or the court and its expert witnesses – do think that the causal history of an agent's dispositional features, decisions and actions is relevant and mitigates or even absolves responsibility. But even then, the crucial consideration is *not* whether the person could *metaphysically* speaking have done otherwise, but *should* the person – *in our* (optimally, scientifically enlightened) *opinion* – have been able to do otherwise, given their capabilities, history, situation, and other factors (Dennett, 2003, pp. 295–302, 2021, pp. 121–122; Dewey, 1922/1983, pp. 8–18, 209–227).

It is indeed “our” – the society's, relevant community's or institution's – opinion that decides the issue, if the question of autonomy (crucially, of having sufficient comprehension) and, hence, responsibility is a standpoint- and context-dependent matter. As those are social constructs serving important social functions, they are empirical issues for the society (relevant community or institution) to discuss and make decisions about. Obviously, this or my compatibilist recognition of the reality of responsibility does not mean that we cannot criticize and seek to improve our existing moral and legal intuitions and institutions. Quite the contrary, most social constructionists and compatibilists find it important that the society keeps striving to improve its views on moral and legal issues – and, even more importantly, the normative and educational environment we as a society provide for nurturing future minds and actions – leaning on moral- and social-philosophical work and a growing scientific understanding of the mind (Dennett, 2021, pp. 161–171; Dewey, 1922/1983, pp. 8–18, chap. 5, 24 through 26.). Ultimately, though, as always, we only have our *limited* human standpoints here; in particular, there is no use hankering after a *God's-eye view* on whether someone is *truly* Autonomous and, hence, Responsible *or* “*just seems that way to us.*” Accordingly, there is no point in speculating whether decisions are, metaphysically speaking, extrinsically determined; autonomy and responsibility, like morality and law, as socially constructed institutions only call for “*apparent*” – from a human standpoint – freedom and capability of choice (See Dennett, 2003, pp. 93, 126–136, 292, 296–302; Dewey, 1922/1983, pp. 8–18, 54–57, 209–224.).

7 | FINAL WORDS

I know the solution just suggested will seem woefully inadequate to those strong realist essentialists who believe the ontological reality and nature of things is distinct from how they appear to anyone; many of them will insist there are standpoint-independent Facts-of-the-Matter about someone being truly autonomous and morally responsible or not. Their essentialism will likely see them favor an emergentist social ontology over anti-dualistic ones, too. Unfortunately, the roots of these disagreements cannot be solved here, as they lie less with ontology and more with differences in *meta*-ontological views (see Piironen, 2018), which are outside the scope of this paper. Herein I have been concerned with providing conceptual tools for my fellow anti-dualists to answer the claim that their position denies the reality of autonomous agency; I hope some will find these tools useful. I think they allow us to keep thinking in the anti-dualistic vein, with Dewey (1927/1988, p. 353) and others, that any human individual is fundamentally moved by their associations with other people – social structures of behavior – and yet also to believe in agentic autonomy.

The 4E theorist Alva Noë (2015) captures the spirit of this compatibilist outlook when pointing out that, it would be wrong to say we are “slave to” (not autonomous agents with respect to) the social structures we follow, when “our participation in such practices is, in many ways, precisely the exercise of our agency” (p. 10). Like the concept of moral responsibility it is linked to, agentic autonomy exists as an important social construct, which is generally consistent with the agent's dispositions and hence thoughts and decisions having extrinsic causes. Some specific kinds of extrinsic determinants we do recognize as mitigating or absolving factors, but that is never a metaphysical question, and hence not anything dependent on a particular kind of social ontology either.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Together with Osmo Kivinen (e.g., Kivinen & Piironen, 2004), I have argued that social scientific work *needs* *ontology*, least of all such that, like Roy Bhaskar's (1975/2008, p. 10), is presented as necessary “under-laboring” or “midwifery” for proper science. Yet I do not see any *harm* in social theorists occasionally engaging with ontological/metaphysical questions – having a “game of” metaphysics – even if it has very few implications for social scientific practice. Furthermore, Bhaskarian realists are probably right to insist that ontological/metaphysical presumptions may have *some* repercussions on social scientific work. Consider the recent alarmism about datafication, discussed later; which I believe is due to the alarmists harboring incompatibilist metaphysical notions of freedom/autonomy.
- ² Besides particularly social (or cultural) structures, social theorists have suspected several other types of structures of threatening autonomous agency. Much of it boils down to what is thought “extrinsic” to agency and its volitional mental processes. Some view *the unconscious* and, say, *biology* (including evolutionary history) as equally extrinsic structures as social forms and, hence, equally illegitimate explanations of agency (Archer, 1995, pp. 81–84; Varela, 2001).
- ³ As Blackburn (1996) observes, *metaphysics* – “the exploration of the most general features of the world” – can be understood in two quite distinct ways. First, as investigation of certain kind of *Facts* – “discovering the broad structure of reality”; second, as a “more self-reflective” enterprise aiming to shed light on *how we conceive* reality, its facts and structure – “how our ‘conceptual scheme’ or perhaps any possible conceptual scheme, structures our own thought about reality” (p. 64). *My* contributions to metaphysical discussions are meant more in the *latter* sense

of “metaphysics,” perhaps best verbalized as contemplations of *what seem to me most plausible conceptualizations and descriptions of mind-world transactions most generally speaking*. The readers of this journal, many of whom are critical realists who, following Bhaskar (1975/2008), aspire to contemplate “intransitive” ontology – the Nature of Reality as it arguably must be *independently of anyone’s conceptualizations* – should be aware of this in order to avoid unnecessary misunderstandings.

- ⁴ *Of course*, there are also biological and other non-social determinants to our agency (and social structure, if those are the same thing described in different terms). Some agency–structure dualists most fearful of social determination might hope that our physical and biological nature provides an “anchor” for individual self and freedom, but I do not see why such determinations should give us any more individuality or freedom worth wanting than social determinations.
- ⁵ This is because such societies’ structures imply, as a default state of affairs, relatively peaceful coexistence with other people and a lot of support from the society (human rights and individual freedoms, police and rescue department, some education, loads of infrastructure, etc.). If it is, furthermore, a “liberal” society, many more structures become invisible because the society is tolerant of a great variety of behaviors. People living outside peaceful, democratic, liberal welfare states may at least be more aware of many structures they find uncomfortably restraining or otherwise unsatisfactory – ones they do not identify with – though they are as blind as the rest of us to the structures permeating and constituting their minds and agency.
- ⁶ There is a *biological imperative* behind this. We humans (especially in our infancy and formative years) are biologically disposed – due to our species’ 2-million-year evolutionary history in socio-cultural ecological niches (e.g., Kivinen & Piironen, 2012, 2023) – to be influenced, even conditioned by the people and groups we depend on for our survival. We adopt countless habits of thought and action from them, a base structure upon which any individuality builds. (Dewey, 1922/1983, pp. 43–47, 60–62; see Mead, 1934; also, e.g., Abbott, 2007, p. 7; Crossley, 2011, pp. 2–3).
- ⁷ There are stronger and weaker versions of ontological (and epistemological) emergentism, and some of the weakest forms do not actually differ much from monism or disallow reductionism as an explanatory strategy (see Piironen, 2014a). In the present connection, there are differences with respect to whether and in what sense emergentists think ontological irreducibility entails *causal* irreducibility, for example. While most emergentist social theorists agree that, say, Giddensian duality is too conflated an ontology, their takes on the irreducibility of mental causes often differ, like between Archer’s strong “causal dualism” and Hodgson’s weaker “emergentist materialism” (Fuller, 2013, pp. 111–112). Intriguingly, many of the weaker versions of ontological emergentism (when not settling for a very *narrow* libertarianism, leaning on quantum-mechanical indeterminacy (e.g., Searle, 2007)) actually resort to *compatibilist* ideas when vouching for the reality of freedom. This is probably because, if “emergent” mental causes *just are* physical causes, themselves caused by preceding physical events, it could be hard to believe they escape being predetermined (Pereboom, 2001, pp. 72–79). Many weak-emergentists acknowledge this, and their defense of the reality of freedom comes down to little more than such compatibilist proposals as that, the brain/mind’s powers, *even if extrinsically determined*, “belong to the agents” and/or *are explanation-wise necessary* (Elder-Vass, 2010, p. 198; Hodgson, 2004, pp. 55–65; List, 2019; also Groff, 2013, pp. 80–82, 2019, p. 184).
- ⁸ Some of them even object to the term *determinant*. Archer (1995) states that, as her type of emergentists embrace “the dualism between voluntarism and determinism,” they view structural constraints and enablements purely as “objective costs and benefits ... which constitute reasons for action, yet have to be weighed by actors” – and therefore constitute only “conditional influences, not determinants of action” (p. 130).
- ⁹ As Brandom (2004) points out, whereas the “original” Enlightenment stayed true to the ancient idea of necessities and therefore conceived scientific explanation as a matter of “deducing what happens from exceptionless laws,” the “pragmatist enlightenment” of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century *embraced contingency* and viewed scientific explanation as “showing what made the events *probable*” (p. 2).
- ¹⁰ This is why pragmatists like me should not be interested in speculating about whether the universe is ultimately causally deterministic or indeterministic, either (see below). Those speculations are borderline senseless when causality is a mind-dependent explanatory device.
- ¹¹ He does locate agency – “if we are going to use that term” – in the micro, the small-scale, but stresses its structural nature and urges us not to identify it with the individual (Collins, 2004, p. 6). This is reminiscent of how Abbott (2007, pp. 7–10) subjugates actors to *action* – acts and interactions – and states that *interaction* is the proper substratum of social life, not the individual biological organisms that act.

- ¹² There are, for instance, “*compatibilist libertarians*” (List, 2019); “*semicompatibilists*” (see Fischer et al., 2007, p. 4); and many skeptics that allow *some* morally and legally relevant responsibility (see Caruso, 2021b).
- ¹³ Bhaskar (1975/2008, pp. 105–117) paints a picture of non-emergentist empiricists presuming full determinism and thereby denying freedom and autonomy in the traditional (incompatibilist) sense. Those who buy into this narrative might think that “*the problem*” of free will is not mere extrinsic determination and consequent probabilistic predictability of agency, but precisely the alleged (pre)determinism of non-emergentists’ universe. To such an emergentist, the compatibilist view I defend here will seem to avoid a crucial issue: it reads like suggesting that we “just ignore” the possibility of determinism, “agree not to think about it” (Porpora, personal communication), which will obviously feel unsatisfactory to those who believe we must *reject* determinism – by declaring that emergence reigns instead. Personally, however, I fail to see why the emergentist metaphysical credo should be more satisfying than *defining free will in a way that makes the possibility of determinism irrelevant*. The latter seems particularly well suited to *social-scientific* contexts, where speculations about determinism have so little bearing.
- ¹⁴ Sometimes those *are* explicated, too. Archer (1995), for instance, pledged to “defend Kant’s relatively autonomous self from Durkheimian attempts to render it socially dependent” (p. 285).
- ¹⁵ Pereboom’s (2001) hard incompatibilism differs from traditional hard determinism in allowing that there may be some (quantum-mechanical) indeterminacy. He argues, however, that it would not give us the sort of freedom required by moral responsibility. He also admits that another kind of (agent-causal) libertarianism-vindicating indeterminacy is not a logical impossibility, but says there is no evidence for it, and it flies against the contemporary scientific worldview – which is, broadly, deterministic.
- ¹⁶ Surely, no one thinks the level of structural determination is *simply inversely related* to that of agentive autonomy – the *type* of structural (and other) determinations must also matter.
- ¹⁷ Archer (2003, pp. 164, 298–306) thinks some agents’ reflexive capabilities have been so “fractured” that they have become “passive agents” – just drifting through life, pushed by external forces. However, most people in her vision are not like that (and even among the fractured, I suppose, only some of the *most* fractured might be morally non-responsible).
- ¹⁸ Several others have also noticed that, in many ways, “Dewey was ... the Dennett of his time” (Gallagher, 2009, p. 36).
- ¹⁹ There is, then, no deep discrepancy between conscious and other mental properties and their “underlying” physical “substratum” (cf., e.g., Archer, 2003, pp. 27–28). Mental life is *just another vocabulary* for describing processes that could also be described in physical terms, and while the *meanings* of mental vocabulary are irreducible to those of physical vocabulary, that is (arguably) *not* because they denote different conceptualization-independent referents in the world. A notable implication is the illegitimacy of the above-mentioned “zombie” argument, purportedly demonstrating a distinction between truly conscious systems and physically identical yet non-conscious systems; it is inconceivable to a monist like me that there could be exactly the same physical processes that *are* consciousness, yet no consciousness.
- ²⁰ In fact, both Dewey (1925/1988, chap. 7) and Dennett (2003, pp. 117–136, 224–246) believed in a “*broad self*.” The way I interpret that notion, the self is a *vertically flat (unstratified) and horizontally wide, process-like being without any permanent essence or strict boundaries, something continuously developing in transactions with its environment, and involving and incorporating many things that are not presently within its current body*.
- ²¹ To unpack the four “Es”: human minds/cognition are not just *embodied* (physical) phenomena but, also, always *embedded* in (largely, socio-cultural) contexts of action-in-an-environment, indeed *extended* into the environment in that they oftentimes intrinsically involve external components, and *enactive* in the sense that they partly make the environment what it is.
- ²² Gallagher (e.g. 2009, p. 38) has been particularly vocal about the social constitution of the mind, but many other 4E theorists appreciate it too. Some view the brain as a “predictive engine” constantly anticipating stimuli on the basis of (habitual) patterns of expectation, and as such serving an “agent located in multiple empowering webs of material and social structure” (Clark, 2016, p. xvi). Those webs *organize* our lives, Noë (2015) points out; they *structure* us both in broad outline and in many minute details: “Our lives are one big complex nesting of organized activities.... We are always captured by structures of organization” – which, “crucially... are not of our own making.” (p. 10).
- ²³ Obviously (I would like to think), ontological gradualism or anti-dualism does *not* mean denying making pragmatically useful (for some purposes) conceptual or analytic distinctions – as long as those are not thought to entail ontological

distinctness, gap or hiatus, different essential Natures. To be sure, many critics of anti-dualism (or, “conflation”) in social theory do claim that it means denying analytical distinguishability (Archer, 1995; Mouzelis, 1995, chap. 4), but I absolutely reject this; my version of anti-dualism only denies the realist dictum that the *correctness* of analytical distinctions *depends on ontological* distinctness.

- ²⁴ This outlook honors some of our dearest (Western, liberal) intuitions. Our courts are typically lenient toward culprits who, due to no fault of their own, are lacking in normal-adult comprehension. Meanwhile, as compatibilists like Dennett (2021, pp. 69–75; also Barnes, 2000, pp. 9–15) have argued, people who are *not* lacking in comprehension – or are because of their own choices (having not bothered to educate themselves, say, or having had a couple beers too many) – are typically considered autonomous agents who cannot use as excuses most ordinary extrinsic determinations.
- ²⁵ Notably, *true* responsibility *grows* (when it does) largely *from others* (the society) *holding us* – at first, only “sorta” – responsible, liable and accountable for our actions, from exposure to moral (and other) judgments and education (Dennett, 2003, pp. 276–277, 2021, pp. 73–75, 114; Dewey, 1922/1983, pp. 216–217). Indeed, the way it normally goes, an appropriately socialized and comprehension-wise competent self comes to *own – take responsibility for* – its actions, including those caused by their dispositions, *even if* they know there have been determinants to those that were not in their own hands (Dennett, 2003, pp. 134–136, 2021, pp. 69–75; Dewey, 1922/1983, chap. 26). Moreover, this is all perfectly reasonable when we are, like Dewey and Dennett, anti-dualists about the self/mind/consciousness; for then the self and its mental life is never anything like slices of a freeze-framed body/mind, or points in the cortex, but things that cover broad swaths of space-time. Once we break away from the Cartesian idea of a distinct, soul-like self in one's head wrestling with one's bodily dispositions, we can philosophically accept that we *are* our dispositions – and thus incorporate many of their originally extrinsic causes. This allows one to take responsibility for the consequences of one's habits, whatever their original causes (See Dennett, 2003, chap. 8 and 9, 2017, pp. 364–370; Dewey, 1922/1983, 1925/1988, pp. 212–225, 1928/1984, pp. 32–38.).
- ²⁶ There is the genetic lottery, too, and many other non-social chance determinants that are equally out of one's own hands, but obviously, I focus here on social determinants.
- ²⁷ Admittedly, libertarianism is not totally out of the question either; there are no final solutions or conversation-stopping killer arguments to definitively solve philosophical questions, so it will remain possible – and, to some extent, intuitively appealing – to conceptualize responsibility in libertarian terms, too. (In fact, some of the weakest or narrowest versions of libertarianism are, basically, just compatibilism but with the added conviction that not all our decisions are totally predetermined.) Still, skepticism in particular is a position I know some anti-dualists proudly embrace. They might argue that, precisely when we stick with incompatibilist notions, anti-dualistic ontology can help us dispute the reality of responsibility, and thereby question the legitimacy of our current criminal justice system, which arguably serves to maintain capitalist status quo and, typically, racial inequality. To this, I would answer that a compatibilist belief in the reality of responsibility does not mean preempting criticism of existing moral and legal intuitions and institutions. The possibility of criticizing and seeking to improve such intuitions and institutions does not depend on presuming that responsibility is not real.

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How to cite this article: Piironen, T. (2023). Autonomous agency in anti-dualistic social ontologies: A compatibilist notion. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jtsb.12393>