



Causal responsibility for addiction

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ABSTRACT

Addictive behavior sometimes involves harmful moral transgressions for which the addicted individual may be blamed. However, blame may motivate addiction stigma, which has its own harmful consequences, including failures to provide or seek out treatment and recovery resources. Minimizing blame and stigma, while acknowledging the moral dimension of addictive behavior, thus recommends itself as a worthy public health objective. The disease and choice models of addiction both face difficulties in reducing stigma, the latter because harmful choices are considered culpable. By challenging the widely held libertarian conception of human agency, an explicitly deterministic understanding of the genesis and expression of addiction, including voluntary choices, can help keep reactive attitudes to wrongdoing in check. This will mitigate the perceived blameworthiness of addicted individuals, thus reducing stigma and increasing the chances of finding compassionate and effective care. Such an approach to addiction will recognize the need for moral accountability but not include punitive attitudes and policies justified by belief in libertarian agency.

1. Stigma and models of addiction

The stigma attached to addiction – disapproval of and discrimination against those with substance use disorders – stems in part from the moral, physical, and sometimes legally punishable harms that can result from addictive behavior, among them dishonesty, deception, child neglect, theft, and illicit substance use. Such harms justifiably incite disapproval. Addiction stigma is therefore not entirely irrational but reflects an understandable wariness, given that such harms are widely known to be possible consequences of addictive behavior (Satel & Lilienfeld, 2014). Stigma can also express the reactive attitude of blame underlying the moral model of addiction: that addiction results from a blameworthy moral defect or character flaw (Frank & Nagel, 2017).

Even though stigma may sometimes involve valid moral judgments, it nevertheless presents obstacles to productive responses to addiction, including prejudice on the part of clinicians, punitive social policies (e.g., failure to provide harm reduction services such as syringe exchanges), concealment of one's condition, and reluctance to seek out treatment. Reducing stigma has thus become a major objective of agencies addressing substance abuse and other behavioral disorders (Volkow, 2020). The question thus arises: how, without ignoring or downplaying the morally problematic dimension of addictive behavior, can addiction be de-stigmatized?

Current approaches to destigmatization often portray addiction as a brain disease resulting in compulsive behavior for which addicted

individuals don't deserve blame (Volkow, Koob & McLellan, 2016). However, the disease model has had limited success in mitigating stigma (Kvaale et al., 2013). Moreover, critics of the disease model point out that addiction involves voluntary choices and the exercise of rational capacities, even if addictive behavior is strongly motivated by the altered brain (Heather and Segal, 2017). On the *choice model* of addiction, addicted individuals retain some ability to be guided by forward-looking considerations, including rewards and sanctions, in making choices, some of which may involve foreseeable harms. They are thus not bereft of moral agency, and are consequently liable for blame, perhaps punishment, should intentional choices and voluntary behavior result in harm. As a result, the choice model of addiction may engage, even legitimize, the same suite of reactive attitudes that drives the moral model: those with addictions deserve blame for any harms they inflict, thus might merit stigmatization.

In what follows I want to suggest a means to mitigate reactive attitudes, but without ignoring the moral dimension of addiction inherent in the choice model. The basic insight, commonsensical to behavioral science but perhaps inimical to folk conceptions of human agency, is that the genesis and expression of addiction, even in voluntary choices, are fully caused phenomena. In particular, a deterministic, cause-and-effect understanding of addictive behavior shows that addicted individuals could not have done (deliberated, chosen, acted) otherwise in the actual situations in which their addiction took hold and in subsequent situations involving moral harms; they don't have the *unconditional ability* to

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do otherwise (see below). The moral dimension sometimes present in addiction does not disappear on this account, but emotion-driven moral outrage in the face of wrongdoing may be harder to sustain, and justify, when the causal story behind addictive behavior is fully appreciated.

2. Libertarian agency and blame for addiction

Attitudinal research, both in the West and cross-culturally, suggests that folk conceptions of free will and human agency include a significant *libertarian* component (Sarkissian et al., 2010; Nadelhoffer and Sinnott-Armstrong, 2014; Nadelhoffer et al., 2020); that is, it seems widely although not universally believed that we do not live in a deterministic universe, in which case behavior in actual situations is thought not to be completely necessitated by the causes in play.¹ Rather, it is supposed individuals could have done otherwise under exactly the same conditions (Nadelhoffer et al., 2020), thus have what philosophers call the *unconditional ability* to do otherwise.² This sets us up as being ultimate, *ab initio* originators: at the moment of decision, choice, or action we have a capacity to determine behavior such that the behavior is not fully traceable to antecedent causes. Although research suggests that lay folk also hold beliefs about free will and moral responsibility that are *compatible* with determinism (Nahmias et al., 2005), so are at least of two minds about free will,³ belief in the unconditional ability aligns with philosophical libertarianism about free will (Palmer, 2014), the thesis that indeterminism is a necessary condition of moral responsibility and justifiable blame (about which more below).

Since placing blame tracks an individual's causal responsibility for behavior, the libertarian claim that we are, in effect, uncaused causers allows placing a very strong sort of blame for moral infractions. Libertarian blame tends to discount the determining role of conditions that, according to scientific bio-psycho-social explanations, actually account for the person's character, motivations, and subsequent actions. The person could have done otherwise but culpably did not, and in a way that blocks passing the causal buck to antecedent factors. We can see, therefore, that belief in libertarian free will could help drive stern, moralistic, and punitive attitudes toward addicted individuals, while making it easier to ignore the actual explanation of their failings (Double, 2002). Of course, libertarians, whether folk or philosophical, need not, and generally do not, deny that there are causal influences on choices and behavior. But the kernel of unconditional freedom they suppose exists nevertheless makes the agent a radical originator of behavior, and thus deeply blameworthy, in a way determinism does not.

As it stands, there is little scientific basis for accepting the libertarian account of human action, even if some scientists and philosophers continue to defend it. Instead, there's ample evidence that human beings and their behavior are the effects of sufficient sets of causes situated in the genome, phenotype, and their formative and current environments. Of course, many of these causes are complex, multifactorial, non-

¹ Causal determinism is roughly the thesis that there is one possible next state of affairs given the laws of nature and the current situation, see (Hofer, 2016).

² The unconditional ability to do otherwise contrasts with the *conditional or counterfactual ability*, an ability compatible with determinism. I could and might have done otherwise *had the situation been different* in some respect that engaged the relevant behavioral capacity. Compatibilists claim this is the only relevant sense of the ability to do otherwise when blame is at issue, a claim I contest in section 4.

³ For a useful methodological critique of research on free will beliefs and a cross-cultural study suggesting that there may not be a universally held folk concept of free will, see Berniunas et al. (2021).

algorithmic, imperfectly understood, and in many cases still unknown; but defenders of libertarian free will notwithstanding, there's no observational or experimental evidence to suggest that we have some self-forming or behavior-initiating capacity that owes nothing to antecedent conditions.⁴ And were there such a capacity, its exercise would pose a mystery since the behavior wouldn't be fully traceable to antecedents.

Libertarians about free will claim that *indeterminism* in nature (how much of it exists, and where, being open empirical questions) yields a stronger sense of responsible agenthood than under determinism, and it does so *in virtue of* the self's causal disconnection from antecedents (Clarke and Capes, 2017). However, since indeterminism makes it the case that the agent's own character and motives *themselves* can't be the final determiners of action, the basic requirement of agency – that actions be intelligibly up to the person – seems undermined, not strengthened. We need agential *determinism*, not *indeterminism*, to be sources of action for which we can be held responsible (see below). Although a detailed critique of libertarian free will is beyond the scope of this paper, its logical and empirical shortcomings, and the considerations that favor deterministic accounts of behavior, should make it unappealing to those interested in viable explanations of, and approaches to, addiction; and indeed, most behavioral scientists, clinicians, and addiction professionals likely need no convincing on this score.⁵

3. How determinism can mitigate stigma

Nevertheless, given that the libertarian conception of agency likely influences public attitudes and policies toward addicted individuals, as well as their own self-evaluations, it is worth challenging as a means to reduce addiction stigma. Once one sees that indeterminism can't increase, but might actually *decrease*, responsible agenthood, then for all practical purposes one can be a determinist about behavior and responsibility. Persons *can't* have done otherwise in actual situations, at least not in a way that would give them more control, or make them more responsible, than under determinism. Such *pragmatic determinism* obviates libertarian agenthood, and makes clear – any indeterminism aside – that behavior is the fully caused, traceable-back-in-time outcome of formative conditions not chosen by the person, as well as the current situation.

Personal responsibility, therefore, becomes understood as proximate, not (as the libertarian might claim) ultimate, with a corresponding shift in the level of blame that rationally applies to the offender. Accepting pragmatic determinism distributes causal responsibility for addiction outside the person in space and time, and since causation is necessary (although not sufficient) for blame, moralistic and punitive attitudes toward the person premised on libertarian agency will likely be mitigated, what we can call the *mitigation response* (Clark, 2003, 2021). Indeed, research indicates that appreciating the deterministic origins of character and behavior can reduce the tendency to blame and punish (Clark et al., 2014; Shariff et al., 2014), and therefore in the case of addiction, reduce stigma.

All this is possible without ignoring the individual's role as the proximately responsible agent that made voluntary choices leading to addiction and, once addicted, choices that may have caused moral and

⁴ Some philosophers and scientists have offered differing naturalistic theories of libertarian agency, e.g., (Kane and Palmer, 2014); (Tse, 2013); and (Bala-guer, 2004); but none have adduced clear empirical evidence for a capacity to determine choices that is both uncaused in some respect yet still attributable to the agent. For a detailed analysis and critique of recent defenses of libertarian free will see (Caruso, 2021).

⁵ A notable exception is Jeffrey Schaler, who in his 2002 book, *Addiction is a Choice*, defends a libertarian "free will" model of addiction; reviewed at <https://naturalism.org/resources/book-reviews/addiction-is-a-choice>.

legal harms. This is the agential determinism mentioned above. But, crucially, choices to seek out and consume drugs, at whatever stage of addiction, are now understood not as the radically free outcomes of an uncaused will, but (any indeterminism aside) as fully caused by sufficient conditions, whether biological, environmental, psychological, or situational – all explanatory domains will likely apply. We can, at least in principle if not in practice, always trace voluntary behavior, even that first fateful choice that led to substance abuse, back to conditions that would have had to have been different for a different choice to occur.

Such tracing does not, and should not, remove the need for accountability when responding to moral harms, but it should remove, or at least attenuate, the libertarian variety of blame that helps to justify punitive attitudes toward those struggling with addiction, ones they sometimes tragically adopt toward themselves. Stigma and self-stigmatization premised on radical agenthood should give way to a reality-based compassion, lessening the attitudinal barriers to seeking and finding effective treatment. Taking a pragmatically determinist view of behavior, including voluntary, reason-guided choices, also focuses attention on the bio-psycho-social factors that actually *explain* addiction, thus helping to improve approaches to prevention, treatment, and recovery. Such approaches will of course not include punitive interventions or omissions premised on the assumption that those with addictions could have made, but simply refused to make, better choices. As Hanna Pickard suggests, we should hold addicted individuals responsible, but without *affectively* blaming them (Pickard, 2017).

4. Compatibilist objections

Even if the addicted self could not have done otherwise, not all will agree that causal determinism should reduce blame and thus help to destigmatize addiction. The majority of philosophers of action are *compatibilists* (not libertarians) concerning free will and moral responsibility (McKenna & Coates, 2019). The compatibility of determinism and moral responsibility, they argue, means that basically rational wrongdoers might well *deserve* punishment – stigma being a form of social punishment – despite the fact that they don't have the unconditional ability to do otherwise. Rather, on the compatibilist account, desert (deservingness) is tied to having sufficient rational and behavior control capacities to have done otherwise *had, counterfactually, the situation been relevantly different*: the *conditional* ability to do otherwise (see note 2). Michael Moore, a compatibilist philosopher of law and criminal justice, declares that any tendency in the face of determinism to refrain from placing blame – any sympathy for the offender – is a “moral hallucination” (Moore, 1997, p. 132). Our sympathetic imaginations in favor of reducing blame for sufficiently rational wrongdoers, including those with addictions (Moore, 2019) should *not*, he says, be triggered by appreciating that they are fully determined in their character and actions.

This seems to me too harsh and indeed unrealistic in its reading of human psychology. It is simply the case that when apprised of the conditions that explain bad character, weakness of will, poor judgment, and even malevolent motivations, that our reactive, retributive emotions are to some extent blunted – the mitigation response. And this for good reason: since blame tracks causal responsibility, the conditions causally responsible for the offender *too* merit blame, albeit practical, not moral. The rational response to determinism is to hold not just offenders, but the formative and current conditions extending beyond them in space and time causally responsible for wrongdoing. This has the psychological effect of reducing reactive blame targeted at the person, who is no longer seen as a libertarian first cause or prime mover.⁶ This permits a more practically effective response to moral harms: the

quieting of outrage better enables us to look *outside* the offender – the most proximate cause of the offense – for distal and situational causes that, were they addressed, would reduce future instances of bad behavior. There is a virtuous moral and practical circle here: consideration of distal and situational causes mitigates reactive blame, which in turn allows fuller consideration of those causes.

Compatibilists who argue that the psychology of blame does not, or should not, include the mitigation response are in effect blocking access to this dynamic, which seems to me counterproductive. Besides Moore, among them are Daniel Dennett, who claims that consideration of determinism is simply beside the point in adjusting our policies of blame and punishment (Dennett, 2015; Dennett and Caruso, 2021); only the *conditional* ability to do otherwise is relevant when assessing blameworthiness. We needn't, and shouldn't, consider too closely the causal provenance of bad behavior, seems to be Dennett's compatibilist advisory. Although he would agree that agents are fully determined in their character, he argues they can be blamed for not properly exercising their capacity for self-formation, even those growing up in tough circumstances: “...it is worth reminding ourselves that in some cases – *maybe most cases* – the very hardships and injustices and assaults they endured hastened their achievement of self-control and responsibility.” (Dennett and Caruso, 2021, emphasis added). This claim is at odds with research showing how hardships in childhood and adolescence – trauma, poor nutrition, exposure to lead, gang violence, parental neglect and substance use, etc. – usually *undermine* optimal maturation into responsible adulthood and perhaps increase the risk of addiction (van der Kolk et al., 2005; Rademaker et al., 2008). It seems hard-hearted, *and* it deflects attention from the actual causal story, to say that individuals exposed to such environments deserve blame for defects in their character, self-control, or morals.

Compatibilists William Hirstein, Katrina Sifferd, and Tyler Fagan agree with Dennett that our self-forming capacity (“diachronic self-authorship”) and its exercise, albeit traceable to factors not of our own choosing, make us deserving of blame for our character and behavior (Hirstein et al., 2018). On their view, determinism is irrelevant to assessing responsibility (206), so my response to Dennett applies to them as well. They also argue that our punitive responsibility practices, notably retributive punishment in the criminal justice system, are justifiable expressions of our reactive emotions, emotions which drive attributions of “basic desert” to wrongdoers (211): they should be punished whether or not it produces any beneficial consequences. But it isn't clear (at least to me), why we shouldn't second-guess such emotions in light of determinism. Left unchecked, our natural penchant to place blame often overshoots any productive response to wrongdoing, including harms attributable to addiction (see last section). Reflecting on the causal story behind a person's addiction and addictive behavior can help relax the grip of punitive reactivity, thus lessening stigma.

I can only speculate about why these compatibilists take such a hard line on blame, but it seems an unwarranted concession to just one side – the dark side – of our moral psychology. Compassion, encouraged by the mitigation response, is sometimes thought unbecoming a tough-minded, realist take on human nature; and it's sometimes confused with being too quick to forgive or excuse. Neither is the case: compassion is compatible with insistence on accountability, although it may make our accountability practices less needlessly punitive; and it does not automatically entail forgiveness – the lifting of liability for sanctions. Offenders, including those with substance use disorders, who show no remorse for harmful behavior or intent to reform, are not good candidates for being forgiven.

As noted above, the mitigation response does not require us to excuse harms resulting from addiction. Intentional and rationally mediated wrongdoing, even if strongly motivated by cravings (e.g., for cocaine) and fear of withdrawal (e.g., from opioids), still needs to be addressed by accountability practices and interventions that leverage the remaining rational behavior control capacities of the wrongdoer. Indeed, it is the residual responsiveness of those with addictions to anticipated

⁶ “Tout comprendre, c'est tout pardonner” - to understand all is to forgive all. Although this French proverb overstates the case, it points to the psychological dynamic in play.

contingencies that *justifies* accountability, including legal sanctions in some cases, as a means to improve behavior.⁷ This is the forward-looking, consequentialist rationale for holding agents responsible, as opposed to desert-based rationales (e.g., “basic desert”) that justify sanctions independently of their beneficial consequences in shaping behavior and stabilizing society.⁸

As pointed out by an anonymous reviewer, compatibilists can acknowledge that deficits in impulse-control and rationality brought about by addiction may influence judgments of blame and responsibility: we can't reasonably expect those in the grip of a strong addiction to resist drug seeking or consumption in the way a non-addicted person likely could. Nor are most compatibilists hard-hearted, deliberate ignorers of causal determinants, bent on meting out just deserts. In particular, in her book *The Limits of Blame*, philosopher Erin Kelly argues (persuasively, in my view), that environmental and social hardships *should* mitigate blame for bad character and behavior (Kelly, 2018). But as I've suggested above, compatibilists sometimes fail to acknowledge the importance of questioning libertarian agency as a means to modulate judgments of blame, and implausibly insist that, even in a deterministic universe, individuals deserve blame for not forming themselves correctly. Those with addictions might, according to compatibilists, be blameworthy for having formed themselves to make the voluntary choices that ultimately led to their substance use disorder.

5. Keeping natural reactivity in check

The moral status of harm-involving addictive behavior necessarily implicates the nature of morality itself. Moral norms and our sometimes visceral response to their violation obviously function to shape behavior in ways that maintain social stability and cooperation. In particular, our evolved, naturally selected behavioral endowment includes a strong inclination to punish, and thus deter and incapacitate, transgressors (Darley, 2009). More often than not, this urge arises without much thought to the distal and situational causes of harmful behavior, or to the forward-looking, functional role of punishment in encouraging adherence to norms. From the point of view of our retributive emotions, punishment is simply *deserved*, full stop; hence the appeal of desert-based justifications mentioned above. Indeed, the consideration of distal causes is sometimes actively suppressed in service to such emotions, which find their ideal target in presumptively libertarian agents who could have unconditionally done otherwise.⁹

This means that promulgating causal determinism in service to destigmatizing addiction, as well as in other morally freighted arenas such as criminal justice, faces an uphill battle against our tendency to single out human agents as special targets of blame. This tendency works to some degree to restrain malefactors, which is why it evolved, but has considerable personal and social costs when regimes of harsh, retributively motivated punishment overshoot what's needed to achieve goals such as public safety, deterrence, and moral reform. The effect of stigma in marginalizing those struggling with addiction and in reducing access to treatment is an example of such punitive excess. Although our moral psychology predisposes us to see agents as first or uncaused causes, a scientific self-understanding can help correct this misperception. To the

⁷ In *Commonwealth vs. Eldred*, the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court upheld that criminal sanctions are justifiably imposed on those in recovery who break laws when relapsing, see <https://law.justia.com/cases/massachusetts/supreme-court/2018/sjc-12279.html>.

⁸ For extensive discussion of desert-based, consequentialist, deontological, and other justifications for social and legal sanctions, see (Dennett and Caruso, 2021) and (Caruso, 2021).

⁹ Documentaries about Hitler's childhood and formative influences were objected to because they might have “humanized” him, see <https://www.beliefnet.com/news/2003/01/getting-hitler-ready-for-his-close-up.aspx>

extent that stigma is motivated by belief in libertarian agency, challenging that belief can reduce stigma and its harms, leading to more realistic, compassionate, and effective responses to addiction and other behavioral disorders.

How might such a challenge proceed? A detailed proposal is well beyond the scope of this paper, but might include: 1) educating clinicians and others involved in addressing addiction on the full range of causal determinants of voluntary choices and the scientific implausibility of libertarian agency; 2) developing behavioral interventions, informed by a naturalistic conception of ourselves (Pies, 2007), that stress the forward-looking, non-punitive accountability practices advocated by Hanna Pickard (Pickard, 2017); and 3) conducting public education on how the science of addiction, and behavioral science more generally, casts doubt on libertarian free will and ultimate blame, while leaving moral norms intact and giving us greater control over behavioral pathologies. Evidence already exists that highlighting causal determinism can mitigate punitive attitudes (Shariff et al., 2014; Clark et al., 2014), but specific messages and curricula would need design and evaluation to determine their effectiveness in reducing stigma. Fortunately, public discussion of our concepts of agency, freedom, and responsibility, including skepticism about libertarian free will, is well underway,¹⁰ so broaching pragmatic determinism in the context of education about addiction and stigma is not unprecedented or untoward. Bringing science to bear on reducing addiction stigma arguably involves recasting our conception of agency in light of science itself, and behavioral science will likely play a major role in that reconceptualization.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Thomas W. Clark: Conceptualization, Investigation, Writing – original draft.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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¹⁰ Recent mainstream publications have covered the debate about free will and moral responsibility, see for example [There's No Such Thing as Free Will](#) (2016) in *The Atlantic* and [The Clockwork Universe: Is Free Will an Illusion?](#) (2021) in *The Guardian*.

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