# Contextualizing Free Will

For centuries philosophers have been arguing back and forth about free will. Incompatibilists appeal to the strong intuition that nothing counts as a free action if it has been brought about via a deterministic causal chain which does not ultimately go back to the agent. Compatibilists emphasize a much more moderate conception of what it is for an action to be free – on their view, freedom is very well compatible with determinism. Both competing sides thump that their conception of free will meets the commonsensical, or at least the one and only relevant understanding of that notion; each side insists on capturing just the right kind of intuitions about freedom of the will in their account.

Which moral should be drawn? It has been argued that the debate has reached an impasse (van Inwagen 2000) or that our ordinary concept of freedom is incoherent (Double 1991, Jackson 1998). Hawthorne (2001) has made a more constructive suggestion: freedom statements, statements in which freedom of the will is ascribed to or denied of some subject, might be contextsensitive in the sense that they have different truth conditions across different contexts of use.

Concerning the conflict between the compatibilist and the incompatibilist, this suggests that freedom statements have different truth conditions across ordinary contexts and contexts in which determinism comes into focus. And while the ordinary truth conditions for freedom ascriptions are often easily met, they are too demanding to be met in contexts in which we focus on determinism. This allows for a moderate compatibilism, since the truth of determinism does not inflict the truth of our ordinary freedom ascriptions. Let's dub this view “freedom contextualism”.

If freedom contextualism is on the right track, then any account which ignores the contextsensitivity of freedom statements inevitably falls short of accounting for a pertinent class of intuitions about freedom. If successful, the view therefore explains the dead end situation between compatibilists and incompatibilists and offers a semantics of freedom statements which does justice to the most pertinent intuitions in favor of each of the competing views. In doing so, freedom contextualism provides a completely new perspective on one of the knottiest imbroglios philosophy has to offer.

Unfortunately, the view does not seem particularly compelling as Hawthorne presents it. On the one hand, Hawthorne motivates freedom contextualism exclusively on the basis of the fact that the view provides a solution to the compatibility problem. That makes freedom contextualism seem utterly *ad hoc* and supports at best an ambiguity hypothesis about freedom statements. On the other hand, Hawthorne does not seem to put much effort into the formulation of a plausible freedom contextualist analysis. That is unfortunate, because the analysis he suggests does not seem to get off the ground to begin with. It begs the question against the incompatibilist and is therefore utterly ill-suited to play the dialectical role it is supposed to play in the compatibility debate. In a nutshell: Hawthorne makes freedom contextualism look like a non-starter. [[1]](#footnote-2)

But is it really? In this paper, I shall step into the breach for freedom contextualism. My aim is twofold. On the one hand, I shall argue that freedom contextualism can be motivated on the basis of our ordinary practice of freedom attribution, which shows that the view is anything but *ad hoc* and explains data which cannot be accounted for by an ambiguity hypothesis. On the other hand, I shall suggest a more plausible freedom contextualist analysis, which emerges naturally once we pair the assumption that freedom requires that the agent could have acted otherwise with a plausible semantics of “can” statements. I'll dub the resulting view Alternate Possibilities Contextualism, or APC, for short. In contrast to Hawthorne's view, APC is well-motivated in its own right, does not beg the question against the incompatibilist and delivers a context parameter which allows for a wide range of context shifts. I conclude that, far from being a non-starter, freedom contextualism sets an agenda worth pursuing.

# 1 Why freedom contextualism looks like a nonstarter

Hawthorne's freedom contextualist endeavor is driven by the idea that the view provides a toolbox to resolve a well-known puzzle about free will.[[2]](#footnote-3) The way Hawthorne sets up the puzzle, there is an apparent conflict between two very plausible convictions.

The first is a commonsense conviction that many ordinary ascriptions of free will of the form ‘It is up to me whether I do x or not-x’ and ‘S did x of his own free will’ and so on are true. The second is the idea that as we tend towards a God’s eye view of ourselves – in the context of reflective philosophy – those ascriptions of free will are not true of us any more. Call the first premise the Mooreian premise. Call the second premise the God’s eye premise. (…) The Mooreian premise encourages us to think ordinary freedom claims are true (…) The God’s eye premise, on the other hand, encourages us to think that ordinary freedom claims are false (…) So there is a conflict. (2001: 66f.)

How can the conflict be resolved? The conventional skeptical, standard compatibilist, and libertarian solutions all come with problems. This makes a contextualist approach look promising:

My own [contextualist] solution simultaneously accords more respect to both the Mooreian premise and the God’s eye premise than any of these retorts. According to my analysis, both premises are true. When ordinary speaker utter English claims of the form ‘S did x freely’ (and their synonyms), they frequently speak the truth. But when our sphere of attention is widened by philosophical inquiry, we are rarely in a position to truly utter the English words ‘S did x freely’. Accordingly, the English words ‘S did x freely’ (and ‘It is up to S whether or not he does x’ and ‘S did x of his own free will’ etc.) must have a meaning that somehow allows its truth conditions to vary according to the sphere or attention of the people deploying it. The truth of freedom claims must somehow be indexed to spheres of attention. (ibid:68)

Hawthorne then proceeds to “develop an analysis of ‘S freely does x’ precisely along these lines” (ibid.). According to what we can call the Relevant Explainers Account, or REA, for short,

REA. S does x freely only if S’s action is free from causal explainers beyond S’s control - Psst! - except for those explainers that we are properly ignoring. (ibid.)[[3]](#footnote-4)

A causal explainer, according to Hawthorne, is “simply a state of affairs which provides an adequate causal explanation of an action” (ibid.). The truth of a freedom statement is then construed as depending on both the “causal influences upon action” and “the context of attention” (ibid.). This yields the desired freedom contextualist solution to the compatibility problem of freedom and determinism:

When ordinary speaker utter English claims of the form ‘S did x freely’ (and their synonyms), they frequently speak the truth. When we approach a God’s eye perspective on the causal nexus, we become ever more bolder when claiming that S does x freely – for as we approach that perspective, the causes that we are properly ignoring diminishes. In the context of ordinary life, by contrast, the causes that are properly ignored are much greater in number and thus it is much easier for ordinary freedom ascriptions to be true. (ibid.:69)

Hawthorne's presentation of REA remains pretty much in the abstract. He does not give examples for types of causal explainers we may properly ignore in ordinary life, but not in the face of the consideration of determinism. One natural way to flesh out what he may have in mind is this: in many ordinary contexts, we may ignore all but those causal explainers that are internal to the agent; all we need to care about are the agent’s motivational states, for instance. Freedom ascriptions made in contexts of that kind are true because the motivational states themselves are within the agent’s control. In contexts in which determinism is considered, in contrast, we also have to take the innumerable causal explainers prior to the agent's willing into account. Hence, the condition stated in REA fails to be met in such contexts: the state of the world at some time before the agent's birth together with the laws of nature, say, is not in the agent's control. Hence, our freedom ascriptions turn out false in the face of determinism.

The way Hawthorne presents the view, freedom contextualism looks like a non-starter. Two problems are particularly striking. First of all, it seems odd to motivate a semantic claim about the workings of “free” and its correlates solely on the basis of its merits in solving certain systematic philosophical problems. As Keith DeRose points out in connection with contextualism about “knowledge”,

the contextualist’s appeal to varying standards (...) in his solution to skepticism would rightly seem unmotivated and ad hoc if we didn’t have independent reason from non-philosophical talk to think such shifts in the content (...) occur. (DeRose 2002:169)

The same goes for a contextualist response to the compatibility problem. Contextualism in general, and freedom contextualism in particular, is a semantic claim. As such it is plausible only if there is genuinely *semantic* evidence for the contextsensitivity of „free“ (or whatever predicate is at issue). In the case of “know”, epistemic contextualists have long provided this kind of evidence by pointing to apparent context shifts in our ordinary practice of knowledge attribution (e.g. DeRose 2005). In fact, it is not uncommon for epistemic contextualists to endorse the contextsensitivity of “know” on the basis of such evidence without at the same time accepting that anything of philosophical interest – let alone a solution for the skeptical problem – follows from that contextsensitivity (Feldman 2001; Klein 2000). In Hawthorne's presentation of freedom contextualism, any such evidence for the contextsensitivity of “free” and its correlates is missing. As a consequence, freedom contextualism looks a desperate proposal – a superficial *ad hoc* maneuver to answer a deep philosophical question.

Relatedly, I take it that freedom contextualism – as any other contextualist view – is plausible only if we are able to find a broader range of values for the context parameter to which „free“ is plausibly sensitive than merely the two postulated by Hawthorne. The prospects for a contextualist claim according to which there are only two kinds of contexts for freedom-ascriptions – those covering *every* situation in which determinism is not considered, and the others covering *only* situations in which determinism is taken into account – seem rather dim. Ambiguity (as e.g. in Balaguer 2009; 2010) would be a more suiting diagnosis in that case. For freedom contextualism to be plausible as a solution to the compatibility problem, it will have to be plausible in its own right first. And that requires evidence for a broad range of context shifts in the way we actually use “free” and its correlates and not just reference to a difference in our everyday use and our philosophical use of “free”.

The second major problem with Hawthorne's exposition of freedom contextualism concerns the contextualist analysis (or condition) he puts forward itself. REA works with the notion of control. But in doing so, it obviously begs the question against the incompatibilist. Incompatibilists will typically reject the idea that we have control over any of our motivational states (or in fact about anything whatsoever), if these motivational states (or whatever other causal explainer we are focussing on) are in turn determined by events over which we lack any kind of control. In fact, this is but one way of phrasing what the compatibilism debate is about. As Schulte rightly points out,

[w]e speak of people controlling their movements or their facial expression, but we also say that the autonomic nervous system controls respiration, or that a thermostat controls the room temperature. It is clear, therefore, that in some ordinary sense of ‘‘control’’, determined agents can exercise control over their actions, but there is presumably also an ordinary sense of this term in which control and determinism are incompatible. (Schulte 2014:673)

REA fails to factor this dimension of the debate in; it simply *presupposes* that the compatibilist gets the matter about control right. This is a serious problem. In presupposing that compatibilism wins over incompatibilism from the outset, REA undermines its own motivation – it makes a contextualist framework superfluous as a solution for the compatibilism issue.

Is freedom contextualism a nonstarter, then? Let's not give up too soon. In what follows, I shall first provide ordinary language evidence for the contextsensitivity of freedom statements, and then proceed to offer a freedom contextualist analysis which is compelling in its own right, commits no question begging against the incompatibilist, and establishes a context parameter which can take a broad range of values.

# 2 The ordinary language basis for freedom contextualism

The puzzle about free will, recall, consists in the tension between our inclination to ascribe freedom a lot in ordinary contexts, and our disinclination to do so once we zoom into the deterministic causal history of the agent's doings. In what follows, I shall argue that not much hinges on determinism here, though. In fact, the same mechanism can be observed across all kinds of ordinary contexts: it is the zooming into the causal antecedents of an action that results in a disinclination of the kinds of freedom ascriptions we are usually willing to make. The assumption that determinism holds throughout the whole history of the world does not play a key role in that pattern. As a result, there is actually evidence for the contextsensitivity of “free” from our *ordinary* practice of freedom attribution. The consideration of determinism turns out to be a special instance of the kinds of contexts which result in a tendency to deny freedom.

That this is indeed so is seen best by employing a method familiar from the way contextualism is usually motivated in epistemology. In what follows, I'll present a variety of situations, each of which is evaluated from two different contexts. In one context, freedom gets ascribed, in the other denied. Yet, the freedom predicate is used in a completely established and comprehensible fashion in both contexts and both the freedom ascription and the freedom denial seem true as uttered in their respective contexts. The most straightforward explanation of this fact, of course, is that both statements are in fact *true* as uttered in their respective contexts. And this fact would be perfectly explained, if freedom statements were indeed contextsensitive – if they had different truth conditionsacross each pair of freedom ascriptions and denials. In other words, it would be perfectly explained if freedom contextualism were true. Thus, the cases motivate freedom contextualism on the basis of our ordinary practice of freedom attribution. Here are the cases.

BUNGEE. Fred booked a bungee jump, but when it comes to actually jumping he gets extremely scared and, after trying in vain to bring himself to jump, decides to climb back down. 1) The organizer says to his assistant “Too bad he didn't take the opportunity. But alright – *it was his free choice* not to jump. No one forced him.” 2) Fred is devastated; he spent so much money on the whole thing and didn't even jump in the end. His girlfriend consoles him: “Okay, so you lost the money. But *it wasn't your free choice* not to jump. You were just too scared to do it. That's just the way it is.”

CRIMINAL. Carl, who is only 22, is the member of a criminal gang. One day, Carl's girlfriend exchanges glances with a man at a bar. Carl beats him up; the man has to be hospitalized. 1) After announcing a sentence of three years without parole, the judge says “*He was free* to juststep out of the bar and go home. No one seduced him this time – in fact, his girlfriend tried her best to deter him from hitting the victim.” 2) Carl's social worker explains a few days later “Carl comes from a very dysfunctional family; violence is all he knows – he has no strategy to deal with his emotions. *He wasn't free* to just step out of the bar and go home. When he gets upset, his control mechanisms are very weak.”

INQUISITION. When asked to revoke his theological views in order to rescue his life, Luther allegedly said something along the following lines: „My conscience is captured in God’s words, I cannot make any recantation, for it is impossible to act against one’s conscience. Help me God. Amen.“ 1) When Kim reads the quote, she thinks “This man is so impressive. *He was free to* take the easy way out. Instead he sticked to what he believed in.” 2) When Jim reads the quote, he thinks “It’s really interesting how constraining one’s own character can be. Being the person he was, *Luther* *wasn't free to* take the easy way out; he just had to stick to what he believed in.“

SHOWS. Frieda watches her favorite show on DVD. Every time an episode is about to end, she forms the intention to turn her laptop off and go to sleep. But every time the episode is over, she goes on watching. The next day, she is dead tired. 1) Her colleague is not particularly understanding when Frieda shows up deadbeat again and says: “It's actually quite easy: you reach for the computer and shut it off; *it's a matter of your free choice* to keep watching all night. Now make yourself useful.” 2) Dragging herself around later that day, Frieda thinks, “I am really not in control of that habit; watching shows all night *is not a matter of my free choice*. I am so weak-willed.”

When I say that these cases motivate freedom contextualism on an ordinary language basis, I am, of course, not saying that there my not be other strategies to deal with the appearance of truth in the seemingly contradictory exemplary utterances.[[4]](#footnote-5) What the cases establish do establish, however, is that freedom contextualism is not *ad hoc*. There are ordinary language cases that *prima facie* suggest that freedom statements have varying truth conditions across different contexts of use. This appearance calls for an explanation. And since freedom contextualism accounts for the phenomenon in a straightforward and quite established manner, there is no reason to reject the view on the basis of a lack of motivation from ordinary discourse. To the contrary: the way we actually use the freedom predicate suggests pretty much what freedom contextualism postulates.

Note, too, that *if* the above cases *are* to be explained in terms of freedom contextualism, then apparently there are more values for the context parameter than merely the two that are needed in response to the puzzle about freedom. Determinism plays no role whatsoever in any of the contexts we looked at. All of the contexts are ordinary in the sense that determinism is not considered. Thus, the cases suggest that the truth conditions of freedom statements vary across ordinary contexts in much the same way as they seem to vary across ordinary contexts and contexts in which determinism *is* considered. The freedom contextualist is therefore not in any way committed to the implausible claim that there are merely two values of the context parameter, in which case an ambiguity hypothesis would provide the more plausible semantic account.

# 3 Alternate Possibilities Contextualism

Let me now proceed to present what I take to be a plausible contextualist account of freedom ascriptions:

PAP. S does x freely only if S could have done otherwise.

But wait. Isn't this just a version of the famous principle of alternate possibilities?[[5]](#footnote-6) Correct. PAP is nothing other than that. What makes PAP a contextualist view about freedom ascriptions is the insight that “can” statements quite generally, and thus statements of the form “S could have acted otherwise” *are* in fact contextsensitive. Let me explain.

The condition on freedom formulated in PAP crucially contains the predicate “could have”, which is, I take it, simply the past tense form of the predicate “can”.[[6]](#footnote-7) Let's call any statement in which “can” occurs as a modal auxiliary a “can” statement. It is generally held that “can” statements are contextsensitive.[[7]](#footnote-8) The standard semantics for “can” statements has been developed and worked out in great detail by the linguist Angelika Kratzer (Kratzer 1979, 1981). The basic idea is crisply condensed in the following passage. Focussing on the statement “I cannot play the trombone”, Kratzer lays out that one may mean rather different things by a “can” statement.

I may mean that I don't know how to play the trombone. I am sure that there is something in a person's mind which becomes different when he or she starts learning how to play the trombone. A programme is filled in. And it is *in view of this programme* that it may be possible that I play the trombone. Or suppose that I suffer from asthma. (...) *In view of my physical condition* I am not able to play the trombone, although I know how to do it. I may express this by uttering [“I cannot play the trombone”]. Or else imagine that I am travelling by sea. The ship sinks and so does my trombone. I manage to get to a lonely island and sadly mumble [“I cannot play the trombone”]. I could play the trombone *in view of my head and my lungs*, but [not *in view of the fact that] the trombone is out of reach*. (Kratzer 1981: 54, my emphasis)

Let's call the view Kratzer develops here “possibilism”.[[8]](#footnote-9) On that view, “can” statements quite generally are restricted possibility claims. Thus, for statements like “S can PHI” to be true, it has to be possible, *in view of certain facts*, that S PHI. The “in view of” phrase is implicit in every “can” statement. The facts in the “in view of” phrase give us a set of relevant worlds – or the modal base worlds, as Kratzer calls them. Hence, for a “can” statement to be true, there has to be a p-world among the modal base worlds, as determined by the facts in the implicit “in view of” phrase.

Which facts go into the “in view of” phrase? That depends on the context. Sometimes, we are interested in what Kratzer can do in view of the program in her brain. Sometimes, we are interested in what she can do in view of the fact that her trombone is out of reach. In the first case, the modal base will comprise any world in which the program in Kratzer's brain is in actuality, in the second case, any world in which her trombone is out of reach. Moreover, we plausibly hold some background assumptions fixed. We will, for instance, usually fix the natural laws and assume that things are sufficiently normal. But, and this is important, we abstract away from everything else. Apart from the fact that determine the modal base, every fact in the world will vary wildly across the modal base worlds. The modal base for Kratzer's abilities in view of her brain program will therefore comprise worlds where she is bald and worlds where her hair is long, worlds in which she has a trombone to her avail and worlds in which she doesn't, worlds in which she is Chinese and worlds in which she is Polish; and so on. As is easy to see, the truth conditions, and hence the truth values, of “can” statements vary across contexts on the standard semantics: there is a world in which Kratzer's brain is programmed as in actuality and she plays the trombone, say, but there is no world in which she has no trombone to her avail and plays the trombone. Thus, it will be correct in some contexts to state “Kratzer can play the trombone”, but false in others.[[9]](#footnote-10)

Against the background of the standard semantics of “can” statements, we are now in a position to formulate our freedom contextualist analysis more explicitly. According to PAP, S does x freely only if S could have done otherwise. And according to the standard semantics of “can”, S can PHI if and only if it is possible, in view of the relevant facts, for S to PHI, where it will vary across contexts which facts are relevant. These two can now be combined into the view that PAP, rightly understood, translates into what I will call Alternate Possibilities Contextualism, or APC, for short:

APC. S does x freely only if it was possible, in view of the relevant facts, for S to do otherwise, where it will vary across contexts which facts are relevant.[[10]](#footnote-11)

APC has obvious merits. On the one hand, it derives the contextsensitivity of “free” from an independently motivated paradigm about freedom: freedom requires alternative possibilities. On the other hand, “can”, the crucial contextsensitive element in APC, is almost uncontroversially contextsensitive, so that the standard semantics for that expression is all we need to get our contextualist account off the ground. It is hard to think of ways in which a freedom contextualist analysis could be better motivated than that.

Note as well that, in contrast to Hawthorne's REA, APC does not beg the question against the incompatibilist. Quite to the contrary. The problem about the compatibility of freedom and determinism is traditionally taken to arise primarily against the background of PAP. PAP is therefore one of the crucial premises in the incompatibilist's line of reasoning. APC starts off from this very premise. It is therefore fully in line with the incompatibilist's set of initial assumptions.

Now, of course, the plausibility of APC ultimately hinges on its capacity to account for the context shifts the freedom contextualist postulates. My aim in the next two sections is to show that APC does an excellent job on that level as well. On the one hand, it allows for the desired classification of the ordinary language cases I presented in the last section. On the other hand, it yields the intended resolution of the compatibility problem. Freedom contextualism, if plausible to begin with, is therefore quite plausibly understood in terms of APC – it is plausibly understood as arising from the contextsensitivity of PAP.

# 5 Accounting for the ordinary language cases

Let's look at the ordinary language cases first. In BUNGEE, the organizer states “It was his [i.e. Fred's] free choice not to jump”, while Fred’s girlfriend utters the negation of the same sentence. Both statements seem fully legitimate and, indeed, true as uttered in their respective contexts. On the view I am advancing, this is because in the organizer's context a statement of the form “Fred could have done otherwise” would come out true, whereas the same statement would come out false in the girlfriend's context. This in turn is because “can” naturally goes with different “in view of” phrases in both contexts; the modal base of “Fred could have chosen not to jump” differs. Hence, “Fred could have chosen to jump” has different truth conditions and, accordingly, different truth values in both contexts. And hence, a necessary condition for “It was Fred's free choice not to jump” is met in the organizers context, but not in the girlfriend's. This explains the organizer's freedom ascription and the girlfriend's freedom denial.

Let's look at all this in some more detail. The organizer emphasizes that no one forced Fred to climb back down. This suggests that he is is interested in what Fred could have done in view of the fact that no *external* forces prevented him from jumping. The modal base will therefore comprise any world in which no external impediment to jumping is in place, whereas Fred's internal features will vary. Among the so restricted worlds, there will apparently be quite a few worlds in which Fred jumps. That is because the modal base will comprise quite a few worlds in which Fred is not as scared as in actuality. External forces are held fixed, internal forces vary. “Fred could have chosen to jump” comes out true in the organizer's context.

Not so in the girlfriend's context. In rationalizing her freedom denial, she emphasizes that Fred was too scared to jump. Thus, she is interested in what Fred could have done in view of the very fear he was experiencing. The modal base of “Fred could have done otherwise” will therefore comprise only worlds in which Fred is as scared as in actuality. And among those worlds, there will not be any in which he jumps. In the girlfriend's context, internal forces – Fred's fear – are held fixed as well. Thus, “Fred could have chosen to jump” comes out false in her context.

The same strategy can be used to explain the other three cases. In CRIMINAL, the judge ascribes freedom to Carl. To bolster this claim, he points out that no one seduced Carl to beat his victim up. Thus, he seems to be interested in what Carl could have done in view of the fact that no one seduced him. In view of that fact, he could have walked out the bar. There are, after all, quite a few modal base worlds in which no one seduces him and he *does* walk out the bar: modal base worlds in which Carl is better at controlling himself, for instance. The social worker, in contrast, utters a freedom denial and emphasizes that Carl lacks the crucial control mechanisms to deal with emotions in a non-violent way. Thus, he seems to be interested in what Carl could have done in view of his lack of control mechanisms. In view of that lack, he could *not* have walked out the bar. Among the worlds in which he lacks any non-violent strategies to deal with his emotions, he could not have gone for a more peaceful course of action. We can observe the same pattern as in BUNGEE: in the judge's context, only external forces are held fixed, while the social worker holds internal forces – Carl's lack of control mechanisms – fixed as well.

Likewise in INQUISITION. Here, Kim ascribes freedom to Luther, while Jim utters a freedom denial. The reason seems to be that Kim is in a context in which she admires the Luther’s extraordinary virtuousness, while Jim is in a context in which he is struck by the constraining forces of one’s character. Consequently, Jim is concerned with what Luther could have done in view of him being the as virtuous as he is, while Kim, who emphasizes that virtuousness of such a high degree cannot be taken for granted, is just as well interested in scenarios in which he throws his virtuousness over board. That Luther didn’t go for this option is the very accomplishment she admires. And while there are no worlds in which Luther is as virtuous as he was and nevertheless revokes his views, there seem to be several in which he is less virtuous and does so. Again, the difference seems to be that Jim holds an internal feature fixed – Luther's character trait – that gets varied by Kim.

In SHOWS, finally, Frieda's colleague ascribes freedom to Frieda, while Frieda considers herself unfree. The reason seems to be that Frieda's colleague is interested in what Frieda could have done in view of the fact that she has the repeated opportunity to shut down her computer. The modal base worlds for a “could have done otherwise” statement therefore comprises any worlds in which those opportunities obtain. And of course, there are several among them in which Frieda shuts down her computer; Frieda will not be weak-willed in all of those worlds, after all. Frieda herself, in contrast, factors her weakness of will in. She is interested in what she could have done in view of the fact that she is as weak-willed as she actually is. Thus, the modal base will comprise only weakness of will worlds. And of course Frieda does not shut down her computer in any of those worlds. Again, then, Frieda holds an internal impediment fixed, which gets varied by her colleague.

So here we have an account of the variance in the truth conditions of the freedom statements across ordinary contexts in terms of APC. If freedom requires alternate possibilities, then context shifts in the ordinary language cases can be neatly accounted for in terms of the varying truth conditions, and hence truth values, of the underlying “could have done otherwise” statements. More specifically, what accounts for the variances in the truth conditions of freedom statements is that the freedom denier holds some internal impediment to acting otherwise fixed, which gets varied by the freedom ascriber.

I take this to be a highly intuitive explanation for the variances in the truth conditions of freedom statements. It very much seems like our inclination to ascribe freedom is diminished once we zoom into the causal history of an act. While zooming in, we sometimes come across internal forces that govern the agent's doings, which are not in focus most of the time. And once those forces come into focus, the agent does not seem free anymore. APC explains this neatly: usually internal forces do not come into focus. But sometimes they do – sometimes we are interested in what the agent could have done *in view of those forces*; and if the agent could not have acted otherwise on that resolution of “can”, then we are unwilling to count her as free.

# 6 Solving the puzzle about free will

The same strategy can be applied to the compatibility puzzle about free will. The puzzle, recall, is that in ordinary contexts we are inclined to ascribe freedom on a regular basis. But once determinism comes into focus, our entitlement to such ascriptions is jeopardized. On the general freedom contextualist account, the puzzle can be resolved once we notice that our ordinary claims to “freedom” and our denials of “freedom” in the face of determinism need not be contradictory. If “S Φs freely” is uttered in a fairly ordinary context – a context in which determinism is not considered – it may well be true, even though the same statement would come out false as uttered in a context in which determinism *is* considered. This is because, according to the contextualist, “free” picks out different properties in both statements – the truth conditions of freedom statements vary across ordinary contexts and contexts in which determinism is taken into account.

Let’s see how this can be spelled out in terms of APC. On the APC framework, the variance in truth conditions of freedom claims traces back to a variance in truth conditions of the underlying “could have done otherwise” statements. So let's see whether the truth conditions of “can” statements vary in the right way to explain the postulated variances in our statements about freedom. What needs to be shown is that the modal base of a “could have done otherwise” statement is different when determinism is considered than in ordinary contexts.

This seems indeed plausible. When determinism is in focus, the totality of all actual facts up to the moment in which the action is performed (including facts about the natural laws) go into the “in view of” phrase; in other words, the modal base will comprise only worlds in which the *totality* of facts is preserved. In contexts of this kind, “could have done otherwise” statements turn out false: no one can perform any action in view of the fact that she is determined not to perform it. If the modal base comprises only worlds in which the totality of facts up to the moment of the action is preserved, then it does not comprise any in which the agent acts otherwise. In fact, the modal base contains only the actual world itself in that case.

In ordinary contexts, this is very different; it will not be required that the totality of the actual facts be preserved in that world or that some prior state of the world and the laws necessitate some act. Which facts *do* go into the “in view of” phrase in ordinary contexts? – That depends. The ordinary contexts we considered in the last section, for instance, have but one feature in common: determinism is not considered. But that doesn’t mean that “can” statements constitute a homogeneous class when it comes to their modal bases. That is the very lesson from the ordinary language cases: there is not *one* specific set of facts that is relevant in all ordinary contexts. Rather, the truth conditions of “could have done otherwise” statements vary across ordinary contexts to the very same extent as they vary across ordinary contexts and determinism contexts. That is not problematic, though. As long as “could have done otherwise” statements *often* turn out true in ordinary contexts, we can solve the puzzle about freedom just fine.

# Upshot

Let me wrap up. I argued that Hawthorne's freedom contextualism is not particularly appealing, because it is *ad hoc*, ill-supported by the linguistic data and begs the question against the incompatibilist about freedom. I then proceeded to motivate freedom contextualism on the basis of our ordinary usage of the freedom predicate and present a freedom contextualist view, which does not fall prey to the problems I identified about Hawthorne's account. Alternate Possibilities Contextualism (APC) starts off from a version of the Principle of Alternate Possibilities and combines that principle with the standard semantics of “can” statements. For an agent to be free, I argued, it has to be true that there is a relevant world in which the agent acts otherwise, where it will vary on the context which worlds are relevant. The view is well-motivated, does not beg the question against the incompatibilist, and explains the context-shifts posited by the freedom contextualist. It should be viewed as a promising contestant in the free will debate.

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1. Willaschek (2010) also suggests a freedom contextualist view, which I cannot discuss in detail in this paper. At first sight, Willaschek’s view seems to have some advantages over Hawthorne’s. Yet, it invites other problems, chief among them the problem of reducing claims about original causation (the context sensitive element in Willascheks view) to claims about event causation. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Hawthorne does not talk much about determinism, but several of his remarks suggest that he accepts

that it is the consideration of determinism that underlies the pull of the God's eye premise. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. REA is modeled on Lewis's (1996) contextualist analysis of knowledge, which is a variant of Relevant

Alternatives Contextualism. Note that, in contrast to Lewis's analysis, Hawthorne does not intend his

condition to state a full analysis. All that is given is a necessary condition. Note, too, that Hawthorne is

merely toying with this view. He is primarily interested in the similarities of the skeptical problem in

epistemology and the compatibility problem in the free will debate and how contextualism can be used to

solve both. It is therefore unsurprising that he toys with a freedom contextualist condition which is

modeled on one of the most prominent versions of epistemic contextualism. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. One may try and offer a pragmatic explanation for the appearance of correctness of one of each pair of

claims in the examples, for instance. With respect to “know”, this anti-contextualist strategy is pursued by

Brown (2006). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. In its original version, the principle of alternate possibilities is about responsibility (Frankfurt 1969). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. See (Lehrer 1976: 270) for an elaboration on the time indexed structure of „can“ statements. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Some people think that the modal auxiliary „can“ is actually ambiguous between epistemic, deontic and

circumstantial uses. But first, this is a minority view, and secondly, the ambiguity is usually not thought

of as arising within the class of „can“ statements ascribing ability. Thus, the account is in line with the

general argument I am putting forward. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. In the philosophical literature, the view is explicitly endorsed by von Wright (1951), Lewis (1976), and

Horgan (1979). A variant is also endorsed by Lehrer (1979). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. My own view of ability statements differs from the standard view in several respects (see

SUPRESSED). Where the standard view is on the right track, however, is in holding that abilities are

had in view of certain facts. Since it is this feature which matters in the present context and since my own

view entails the condition stated in APC as a necessary condition for an agent having an ability, I shall

stick with the standard semantics in this paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. This is also how Horgan (1979) thinks about freedom ascriptions. Schulte (2014) considers it in passing. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)