

Positive Illusions, Perceived Control, and the Free Will Debate

Thomas Nadelhoffer and Tatyana Matveeva

Somewhere between the conditions of slavery and omnipotence the mass of humanity lives out ordinary lives, each person seeking to master his or her part of the world, and in the course of this developing beliefs about how it works, and who, or what controls the events of life.

--Orville G. Brim, Jr. (1974: 1)

Introduction:

It is a common place assumption among both philosophers and psychologists that having accurate beliefs about ourselves and the world around us is always the epistemic gold standard. However, there is gathering data from social psychology that suggest that illusions are quite prevalent in our everyday thinking and that some of these illusions may even be conducive to our overall well being. In this paper, we are going to explore the relevance of these so-called “positive illusions” to the free will debate. More specifically, we are going to use the literature on positive illusions as a springboard for examining Saul Smilansky’s suggestion that (a) our purportedly commonplace beliefs in libertarian free will (LFW) and desert-entailing ultimate moral responsibility (UMR) are two such positive illusions, and (b) if people were to become disillusioned with respect to LFW and UMR, there would be wide reaching negative intrapersonal and interpersonal consequences.

For present purposes, we are going to evaluate Smilansky’s view—which he has dubbed “free will illusionism”—by ferreting out the empirical assumptions he needs in order to get his view off the ground.¹ But first, we will examine the aforementioned data on positive illusions—especially the “illusion of control”—in order to give ourselves an

¹ For an earlier attempt to criticize Smilansky’s view in light of the some of the preliminary free will studies that have been run by experimental philosophers, see Nadelhoffer and Feltz (2007).

empirical frame of reference. Then we will consider whether this research could be used to help bolster Smilansky's view. Ultimately, we will rely on research from both social and developmental psychology concerning perceived and experiential control to try to show that it does not. By our lights, while Smilansky's worries concerning what would happen if people lost faith in LFW and UMR are understandable, his view does not appear to be as well-supported empirically as it would need to be in order to garner our acceptance. If we are right, then the burden of motivating free will illusionism has yet to be met.

1. Positive Illusions and the Free Will Debate

On the surface, it seems obvious that having accurate beliefs about both the world and oneself is necessary for psychological well-being. Consequently, it is no surprise that the orthodox view in psychology has always been that being in contact with reality is one of the hallmarks of mental health. According to this traditional view—which for present purposes we are going to call the Correspondence Theory of Well-Being (CTWB)—“the ability to perceive reality as it ‘really is’ is fundamental to effective functioning” (Jourard and Landsman 1980: 75).² After all, simply imagine a person who is entirely delusional—e.g., Jim the corporate banker who one day comes to believe himself to be an intergalactic space pirate. Because having this kind of radically false belief about oneself is an obvious instance of mental *illness*, we are tempted to assume that mental *health* must somehow require the absence of delusions, illusions, and biases altogether.

² See, also, Allport (1943), Erikson (1950), Fromm (1955), Haan (1977), Jahoda (1958), Menninger (1930), and Vaillant (1977) for similar defense of CTWB.

On this admittedly intuitive “reality based” view, mental health requires epistemic accuracy. However, contrary to our intuitions, there is mounting evidence that suggests that widespread illusions may play a markedly more positive role in our mental economy than psychologists have previously assumed. Consider, for instance, the suggestion by Shelley Taylor and Jonathon Brown that “a set of interrelated positive illusions—namely, unrealistically positive self-evaluations, exaggerated perceptions of control or mastery, and unrealistic optimism—can serve a wide variety of cognitive, affective, and social functions” (1988: 193). It appears that contrary to what we’ve been told by the proponents of CTWB—who have traditionally portrayed humans as “naïve scientists” constantly searching for the truth about themselves and the world around them (Fischhoff 1976)—the mounting evidence paints a much less flattering picture of humanity whereby we are much more like “charlatans” who are, “trying to make the data come out in a manner most advantageous” to our “already-held theories” (Fiske and Taylor 1984: 88).³

As a result, it is now widely acknowledged that illusions, biases, and errors are much more common in human cognition than previously assumed. Rather than single-mindedly pursuing the truth at all costs, we often settle for whatever evidence allows us to think more highly about ourselves in relation to other people and the world around us. More surprising still is the fact that these epistemically problematic inferences, beliefs, and judgments appear to be adaptive in a wide variety of domains. As Taylor and Brown point out:

Evidence from social cognition research suggests that, contrary to much traditional, psychological wisdom, the mentally healthy person may not be fully cognizant of the day-to-day flotsam and jetsam of life. Rather, the mentally healthy person appears to have the enviable capacity to distort reality in a

³ See, e.g., Fiske and Taylor (1984), Greenwald (1980), Nisbett and Ross (1980), Sackeim (1983), and Taylor (1983).

direction that enhances self-esteem, maintain beliefs in personal efficacy, and promotes an optimistic view of the future. These three illusions, as we have called them, appear to foster traditional criteria of mental health, including the ability to care about the self and others, the ability to be happy or contented, and the ability to engage in productive and creative work. (1988: 204).

And while illusions exist on a continuum—ranging from totally delusional and destructive to minor and comforting—in this paper we are solely going to limit our attention to the so-called “positive illusions.” More specifically, we are going to focus on the aforementioned “illusion of control” identified by Taylor and Brown (1988) as it is the one that is most germane to our present purposes.⁴

Psychologists from a variety of fields—e.g., developmental psychology (White 1959), learning theory (Bandura 1977; deCharms 1968), social psychology (Heider 1958), and psychoanalysis (Hendrick 1945)—have long recognized the importance of the sense of personal control. However, it appears that “beliefs in personal control are sometimes greater than can be justified” (Taylor and Brown 1988: 196). For instance, studies have shown that it is not uncommon for people to have the illusion of control even in situations that are determined entirely by chance (Langer 1975).⁵ It appears that when people expect a particular outcome to occur and it does occur, they frequently “overestimate the degree to which they were instrumental in bringing it about” (Taylor and Brown 1988: 196) even in situations where control is mostly (or even entirely) lacking.⁶

Perhaps the most interesting feature of the literature on the illusion of control for present purposes isn't that it appears to be so pervasive in healthy individuals but rather

⁴ See, also, Abramson and Alloy 1981; Alloy *et al.* 1981; Golin *et al.* 1977; Golin *et al.* 1979; Greenberg *et al.* 1988.

⁵ See, also, Alloy and Abramson 1979; Horswill and McKenna 1999; Langer and Roth 1975; Spacapan and Thomson 1991; Thomson and Spacapan 1991.

⁶ See, e.g., Miller and Ross 1975.

that the mildly and severely depressed seem less susceptible to it.⁷ Indeed, research on what Mischel (1979) calls “depressive realism” suggests that “depressed individuals provide more accurate estimations of their degree of personal control than do non-depressed individuals (Taylor and Brown 1998: 196).⁸ There are two distinct and important issues worth highlighting at this point. First, according to proponents of depressive realism, depressed individuals are in an epistemically advantaged position over the non-depressed when it comes to their judgments concerning how much control they have over their environment. Second, it has purportedly been shown that this epistemic advantage may sometimes be emotionally and socially maladaptive.⁹ In light of these findings, Taylor and Brown conclude—contrary to the proponents of CTWB—that “the capacity to develop and maintain positive illusions may be thought of as a valuable human resource to be nurtured and promoted...these illusions help make the world a warmer and more active and beneficial place in which to live” (1988: 205).

Needless to say, this is a controversial claim that has received its fair share of criticisms.¹⁰ Luckily, for present purposes we need not concern ourselves with the problems associated with the literature on positive illusions, the illusion of control, and depressive realism given that our goal is merely to see whether this literature could, in principle, lend support to work being done in the free will debate by Smilansky. So, we

⁷ See, e.g., Abramson and Alloy 1981; Golin *et al.* 1977; Golin *et al.* 1979.

⁸ It’s worth pointing out that in a review of the extensive literature on depression Ackerman and DeRubeis (1991) suggest that while several studies support the theory of depressive realism, just as many studies provide evidence that is inconsistent with the view. For instance, according to proponents of cognitive theories of depression, depressed individuals systematically interpret the world in a negative manner that is *not* congruent with reality—see, e.g., Abramson *et al.* 1989; Bargh and Tota 1988; Beck 1967; 1976; Ellis 1962; Pietromonaco and Markus 1985; Rehm 1977. For present purposes, we need not come down on either side of the debate between those who favor depressive realism and those who favor cognitive models of depressive distortion as trying to settle the debate between the two rival camps would take us too far a field.

⁹ See, e.g., Brown 1986; Campell and Fairey 1985; Kuiper 1978; Kuiper and Derry 1982; Lewinsohn *et al.* 1980.

¹⁰ See, e.g., Colvin and Block 1994; Cummins and Nistico 2002.

are simply going to assume for the sake of argument that positive illusions exist and that they are often emotionally and socially adaptive. The question we now want to address is whether Smilansky is correct in assuming that our purportedly common place beliefs in LFW and UMR are examples of these kinds of adaptive illusions.

2. Smilansky's Free Will Illusionism¹¹

Smilansky's argument for free will illusionism typically begins with a discussion of what he takes to be our ordinary moral practices. On his view, "most people not only believe in actual possibilities and the ability to transcend circumstances, but have distinct and strong beliefs that libertarian free will is a condition for moral responsibility, which is in turn a condition for just reward and punishment" (Smilansky 2000: 27).¹² Smilansky calls the kind of control that is necessary for robust conceptions of moral blameworthiness and desert "up to usness," and he suggests that in one very important respect nothing is ultimately up to us. Because he believes (a) that LFW requires that an agent's actions ultimately flow from who she is morally, and (b) that "what a person is, morally, cannot ultimately be under her control" (Smilansky 2001: 74), Smilansky concludes both that LFW is non-existent and that the notions of UMR which depend on its existence are therefore ungrounded.¹³

¹¹ Parts of this section originally appeared in Nadelhoffer and Feltz 2007.

¹² It is unclear whether the belief in LFW and UMR is as widespread as Smilansky suggests. Indeed, recent work in the growing field of experimental philosophy suggests that people may be more compatibilist than philosophers have traditionally assumed. See, e.g., Nahmias *et al.* 2005; 2006; Nahmias and Turner 2006; and Nahmias 2006.

¹³For present purposes, we need not be concerned with Smilansky's argument against LFW and UMR. It is worth pointing out that he does not merely suggest that we happen not to have LFW, rather he makes the much stronger claim that the kind of "up-to-usness" one finds in libertarian accounts of free will are incoherent. As he says, "the conditions required by an ethically satisfying sense of libertarian free will, which would give us anything beyond sophisticated formulations of compatibilism, are self-contradictory,

On his view, there appear on the surface to be only two responses—namely, compatibilism and hard determinism. And while we are told that neither of these two responses to the non-existence of LFW and UMR is wholly adequate, Smilansky nevertheless feels that each contains an important grain of truth. First, he points out that compatibilists are surely correct to highlight both the importance and the possibility of people having “local reflective control over their actions” (Smilansky 2001: 77). According to Smilansky, acknowledging that we have compatibilist control, second order volitions, reasons responsiveness, and the like is necessary if we are to foster a “community of responsibility”—i.e., a community whereby people’s lives and actions are judged to be “based largely on their choices” (Smilansky 2001: 78). As he says, “even without libertarian free will, it is reasonable to desire that compatibilist distinctions concerning control affect the way one is treated, and to see this as a condition for civilized existence” (Smilansky 2001: 78).

Smilansky nevertheless thinks that compatibilism is inadequate when it is judged from what he calls the “ultimate perspective” (Smilansky 2001: 77). On his view, “we can make sense of the notion of autonomy or self-determination on the compatibilist level but, if there is no libertarian free will, no one can be ultimately in control, ultimately responsible, for this self and its determinations” (2001: 75). For instance, even though we may justify punishing someone on compatibilist grounds, Smilansky suggests that we are nevertheless punishing her for “what is ultimately her luck, from what follows from who she is—ultimately beyond her control, a state which she had no real opportunity to alter, hence neither her responsibility nor her fault” (2001: 76).

and hence cannot be met. This is so irrespective of determinism or causality” (Smilansky 2001: 7). In this respect, Smilansky’s views concerning LFW share several affinities with those of Galen Strawson (1986)

Given that Smilansky thinks that we are not ultimately responsible for our actions, it would seem natural for him to simply promulgate hard determinism—a move he resists. For even though he believes that hard determinists are ultimately correct that we don't have LFW and UMR, Smilansky nevertheless believes that they are too quick to reject or undervalue the importance of compatibilist control for our everyday moral practices—practices which do not require LFW and UMR. By his lights, if the belief in hard determinism were to become widespread, the aforementioned compatibilistically grounded community of responsibility would likely be torn asunder. Indeed, Smilansky forebodingly warns that, “the difficulties caused by the absence of ultimate-level grounding are likely to be great, generating acute psychological discomfort for many people and threatening morality—if, that is, we do not have illusion at our disposal” (Smilansky 2001: 87).¹⁴

For present purposes, we are going to follow Nadelhoffer and Feltz (2007) in calling this The Disutility of Disillusionment Assumption (DDA)—which is essentially the prediction that if people were to adopt the perspective of the hard determinist, the moral fabric that holds us together would unravel.¹⁵ On this view, the compatibilistically grounded moral norms and values that are central to individual and societal well being could not weather the storm that would result from wide-scale awareness of the ultimate perspective. If Smilansky were correct in assuming that (a) the majority of people falsely

¹⁴ In this respect, Smilansky's position is squarely opposed to the aforementioned Correspondence Theory of Well-Being (CTWB). For whereas Smilansky claims that certain illusions are necessary for effective functioning, the proponents of CTWB claim just the opposite.

¹⁵ We would like to thank NAME OMITTED FOR BLIND REVIEW for pointing out that DDA could actually be further broken down into the following two claims: (a) Disillusionment about LFW and UMR will cause people to lose faith in the compatibilist control they actually do have, and (b) Loosing faith in compatibilism will produce negative consequences both socially and existentially. For present purposes, however, we are simply going to lump these claims together since we are actually more interested in (a) than (b) and if (a) is not true, then the worry about (b) ends up being unmotivated.

believe both that we have LFW and that LFW is necessary for moral responsibility, and (b) availing people of these false beliefs would produce deleterious social and personal consequences, we would indeed find ourselves in quite a predicament.

So what does Smilansky suggest we do? According to free will illusionism, because the benefits of wide-scale illusory beliefs about the existence of LFW and UMR far outweigh the costs associated with dispelling these beliefs, “people as a rule ought not to be fully aware of the ultimate inevitability of what they have done” (Smilansky 2001: 85). Consequently, those of us who have already been disillusioned ought to keep the truth to ourselves.¹⁶ On the surface, Smilansky’s view concerning the importance of our illusory beliefs concerning LFW and UMR appears to be supported by the data on positive illusions discussed in Section 1. After all, he is essentially suggesting that having illusory beliefs about free will and desert-entailing responsibility—much like having other positive illusory beliefs such as the illusion of control—may be a blessing in disguise. But is he right about this?

In answering this question, it will prove useful to first do a bit more unpacking of Smilansky’s DDA—which can be construed in the following perspicuous way:

1. Most people are under the spell of a positive illusion with respect to the dual existence of LFW and UMR.
2. If people were disillusioned about LFW and UMR, then they would lose sight of the fact that there is an important grain of truth in compatibilism—namely, that human beings do have the kind of local control that is necessary for grounding most of our moral practices as well as our sense of well-being.
3. Because disillusionment would produce negative emotional and social consequences, those of us who are aware that the beliefs in LFW and UMR are merely positive illusions, should keep this fact to ourselves lest we lead people to throw out the compatibilist baby with the cold water of hard determinism.

¹⁶ It is worth pointing out that Smilansky does not advocate intentionally deceiving people—he merely suggests that we should leave the misinformed masses to their illusory devices.

Analyzing either the first or third premise would take us too far a field.¹⁷ For present purposes, the key assumption is the second premise—i.e., the claim that being disillusioned about LFW and UMR would undermine people’s sense of compatibilist control and moral responsibility. What we really want to ascertain is whether the inference from disillusionment to disutility is justified.

In order to properly evaluate Smilansky’s argument, we are going to look more carefully at the literature on perceived control. After all, his attempt to motivate free will illusionism is driven by DDA—which is in turn driven by the assumption that accepting the truth of hard determinism would undermine our sense of control, autonomy, and responsibility. Fortunately, there is a voluminous literature in psychology concerning control that we can draw upon in trying to ascertain whether Smilansky’s worries are well-founded. As we are about to see, the data from both social and developmental psychology suggest that they are not.

3. Perceived Control and Experiential Control: Lessons from Old Age

To say that the issue of personal control has received a lot of attention in the psychology literature would be a gross understatement. Given that “individual differences in perceived control are related to a variety of positive outcomes, including health, achievement, optimism, persistence, motivation, coping, self-esteem, personal adjustment, and success and failure in a variety of life domains” (Skinner 1996: 549), the attention received by control is understandable. As a result, literally dozens of closely

¹⁷ On the one hand, assessing the truth of the first premise would force us to wade into the thorny and often technical free will debate concerning the nature of LFW and UMR. On the other hand, the third premise depends on the truth of the second premise—which is the main target of our investigation.

related control constructs have been used by psychologists.¹⁸ But for present purposes, only three aspects of personal control are particularly salient to the task at hand—namely, objective control, subjective control, and experiential control.

Objective control simply refers to how much actual control a person has over her decisions, actions, and environment. For an agent to have objective control over x is for her to have the ability to do or not do x as she sees fit. Typically, the kinds of things that limit our objective control include internal compulsions and external constraints and coercions. An individual who does not have objective control is not necessarily unfree in the strong metaphysical sense that concerns some philosophers but rather in the garden variety sense of unfree that we speak of when other people (or the world at large) prevent us from doing as we please.¹⁹ Consequently, it is understandable why we would prefer having objective control whenever possible. After all, to lack it is to be limited in one's opportunities and choices. But as important as we may believe having objective control is, it turns out to be less important than the second aforementioned aspect of control—i.e., perceived control.

Research has shown that perceived control—which refers to an individual's *beliefs* about how much control she has—is “a more powerful predictor of functioning

¹⁸ For instance, personal control (Gurin *et al.* 1978), perceived control (Skinner 1995), locus of control (Lefcourt 1981; Rotter 1966), learned helplessness (Seligman 1975), self-efficacy (Bandura 1989), cognitive control (Averill 1973; Fiske and Taylor 1991), mastery (Dweck 1991), personal causation (Gurin *et al.* 1978), vicarious control (Rothbaum *et al.* 1982), illusory control (Rothbaum *et al.* 1982), personal competence (Weisz and Stipek 1982), primary control (Heckhausen and Schulz 1995), self-determination (Deci and Ryan 1985), secondary control (Rothbaum *et al.* 1982), action control (Chanowitz and Langer 1980), decisional control (Miller 1979), predictive control (Rothbaum *et al.* 1982), informational control (Fiske and Taylor 1991), instrumentality (Vroom 1964), and proxy control (Bandura 1986). For overviews of the vast control and competency literature, see Haidt and Rodin 1999 and Skinner 1996.

¹⁹ In many respects, objective control is just the kind of control that the so-called soft determinists were interested in during the middle of the 20th century. See, e.g., Stace 1953 and Ayer 1954.

than actual control” (Skinner 1996: 551).²⁰ One explanation for why perceived control is so important to our overall well-being is that humans appear to have an innate desire to effectively engage with their environment. On this view, the desire for control is an essential component of human motivation. Indeed, as each of us learns early on in life, “the experience of control is joyful, the loss of control can be devastating” (Skinner 1995: xvii). And while this innate desire has been labeled differently by different researchers—e.g., effective motivation (White 1959), mastery motivation (Harter 1978), and the need for competence (Deci and Ryan 1985)—the underlying idea is the same in each case.²¹

Because we have a desire for competence, causal efficacy, and control, we quite naturally do better when we believe that we have these things regardless of whether we actually do.²² Consider, for instance, the following remarks from Ellen Skinner:

When people perceive that they have a high degree of control, they exert effort, try hard, initiate action, and persist in the face of failures and setbacks; they evince interest, optimism, sustained attention, problem solving, and an action orientation. When people perceive control as impossible, they withdraw, retract, escape, or otherwise become passive; they become fearful, depressed, pessimistic, and distressed” (1996: 556).

In light of the importance of perceived control, researchers have investigated the link between our perceptions of control and a wide variety of things including “health, achievement, school performance and retention, motivation, interpersonal competence, political beliefs, social action, parenting, teaching, marital satisfaction, work success, conformity, creativity, problem-solving, information seeking and processing, emotion, and longevity” (Skinner 1995: 3). Moreover, clinical work has linked perceived control

²⁰ See, e.g., Averill 1973 and Burger 1989.

²¹ See, also, Connell and Wellborn 1991; DeCharmes 1981; Deci and Ryan 1985; Skinner 1995; 1995.

²² It’s worth pointing out that our beliefs about control cannot be entirely incongruent with reality. As Taylor and Brown point out, “the illusion of control typically represents a mild distortion in domains over which people actually have some control...these illusions remain mild because the social environment tolerates and fosters moderate illusions but not substantial degrees of illusion” (1994: 24).

to “coping, depression, anxiety, alienation, apathy, phobias, self-esteem, and personal adjustment to critical life events” (Skinner 1995: 3). All of this research suggests that believing we have control is essential to emotional and social well-being.

Having now discussed the first two aspects of control it is time to discuss the third—namely, experiential control. Unlike objective control, which concerns an agent’s *actual* causal relationship to the world, and perceived control, which concerns an agent’s *beliefs* about her causal efficacy, experiential control concerns an agent’s *feelings* of control. In this respect, experiential control is closely linked to perceived control. Indeed, our beliefs concerning control are sometimes driven by our feelings of control (and vice versa). To see how, consider once again the illusion of control—which is the belief that one has more control than one actually does. How might such an illusion get a grip on us?

One way we may come to form this kind of illusory belief involves our underlying feeling that we really are in control. After all, we can easily imagine circumstances where our feelings concerning control could lead us to form mistaken beliefs about our actual control. For instance, imagine a child on an amusement park ride that is on fixed rails but which nevertheless has a steering wheel. The child turns the wheel left and right and it appears that the car moves accordingly. Of course, neither the child nor the steering wheel has any actual effect on the unfolding events. But because the child has the feeling of being in control, the child forms the mistaken belief that she is actually controlling the car. This story represents a clear example of our beliefs about control might be led astray by our feelings of control.²³

²³ See Fischer (1994:14) for a discussion of similar example by Carl Ginet.

Of course, insofar as the child's false belief about control in this case doesn't appear to be adaptive (or maladaptive, for that matter), we might think the child is under the illusion of control without necessarily being in the grip of a positive illusion. But regardless of whether we think this is an instance of a positive illusion or merely a non-adaptive instance of the illusion of control, for present purposes the example nevertheless sheds some light on the relationship between the three aspects of control. For despite the fact that the child has no actual control over the unfolding ride, because she feels and believes that she is in control, she is thoroughly amused nevertheless. In this case, it appears that ignorance really is bliss.

Having now examined the various aspects of control in more detail, we are finally in the position to assess Smilansky's argument for free will illusionism. Keep in mind that on his view if people were to become disillusioned about LFW and UMR, they would cease to believe that they have the compatibilist control they actually do have—thereby creating potentially disastrous consequences. To put Smilansky's point in the language of the control and competency literature, disillusionment about LFW and UMR would undercut people's perceived and experiential control. But does this assumption settle with the gathering psychological data? It does not appear that it does. After all, the only thing required for perceived control and experiential control is that the agent believes and feels that she "is interacting with the environment while attempting to produce a desired result or prevent an undesired outcome" (Skinner 1996: 551).

If this is correct, then the joint belief in LFW and UMR may not be a positive illusion after all. In order for the purportedly mistaken belief concerning the existence of LFW and UMR to be a positive illusion, those who become disillusioned about LFW and

UMR should be worse off than they were before. Of course, on Smilansky's view, they *would* be worse off given that once they became aware of the truth about the ultimate perspective, they would lose their faith in the compatibilist control and moral accountability they really do have. But, by our lights, it is entirely unclear how ceasing to believe in LFW and UMR would cause people to feel any less local control over their decisions and actions.

Even if Smilansky were correct that from the ultimate perspective “luck swallows everything”—to borrow a phrase from Galen Strawson (1998)—there is no reason to conclude that our conscious beliefs, desires, intentions, decisions, and choices are mere epiphenomena. But insofar as our belief that our mental states are causally efficacious remains in tact, we see no reason for assuming that being disillusioned about LFW and UMR would undermine our sense of local control, autonomy, and self-determination—each of which merely requires that we have at least some say in how our lives unfold. The ultimate perspective may teach us a lesson or two about the ubiquitous role that luck plays in our lives, but it does not show that our conscious mental states are causally inert. Of course, it could turn out that our conscious mental states really are little more than epiphenomena, but neither determinism nor the ultimate perspective entails epiphenomenalism. Hence, neither would undermine our sense of local and reflective control.²⁴

Keep in mind that Smilansky concedes that we do in fact have compatibilist control—he just thinks that once we view ourselves from the ultimate perspective, we see that while we do have “local reflective control over their actions” (2001: 77), how this control gets exercised is entirely a matter of dumb luck. As he says:

²⁴ For an extended discussion of this issue, see Nahmias 2006.

Many people would find it hard to think that the partial compatibilist truth matters, as in fact it ethically does, if they realized the sense in which both the compatibilistically free and the unfree were merely performing according to their mould. And this might lead them to succumb to ‘pragmatic’ consequentialist temptations, or an unprincipled nihilism. The ultimate hard determinist perspective does not leave sufficient moral and psychological ‘space’ for compatibilistically defensible reactive attitudes and moral order. The fragile compatibilist-level plants need to be defended from the chill of the ultimate perspective in the hothouse of illusion. Only if we do not see people from the ultimate perspective can we live in a way which compatibilism affirms—blaming, selectively excusing, respecting, being grateful, and the like. (Smilansky 2001: 89-90).

But as intuitive as this view may seem on the surface, it is unclear that the disillusionment that concerns Smilansky would have the negative effects that he predicts. To see why, it would be helpful to look at what developmental psychologists have to say about control and competency.

For starters, return once again to the aforementioned child at the amusement park. A crucial feature of the example is that it involves a child. Had an adult been on the ride instead, she would not have even bothered to touch the non-steering wheel in the first place as it would have been clear to her that she could not actually wield any control over the car. The moral of this story for present purposes is that both our perceived control and experiential control change as we move from infancy to old age. When we are children, it seems as if the entire world is ours for the taking. To the mind of a young child, everything seems to be under her control. And when parents, teachers, and other authority figures begin placing constraints on the unfettered freedom the child fancies, the result often involves frustration, crying, tantrums, and other forms of protest. For instance, the child who thoroughly enjoyed the aforementioned amusement park ride certainly doesn’t like being told it is time to go home when the ride is over!

If we leap ahead and consider this child as a woman in her sixties, we find that many of the illusions of control that gripped her youthful mind have lost their hold on her mental economy. As Ellen Skinner—one of the leading experts on constructs of control in psychology—points out:

Old age brings with it the recognition that many of life's events are the result of happenstance, luck, chance, fate, or coincidence. Events that are severe, negative, and nonnormative, such as early widowhood, disability, and victimization, are labeled "accidents" and rarely seem to be the result of any discernible systematic influences amenable to human control. At this age, many of the attributes that before were the objects of 'pride', such as mental ability, physical prowess, beauty, and robust health, are now seen in their decline as ultimately uncontrollable, and as characteristics that although genetic, are distributed based on 'luck' as well...It is as if, when reflecting on their control as they age, people change from psychologists, to sociologists, to historians, to philosophers. (1995: 118)

Furthermore, she goes on to suggest that:

In a very general sense, then, the development of control during childhood can be thought of as a progressive realization of the limitations of one's own competence. The infant's global undifferentiated sense of agency is shorn of the power of longings and wishes; bounded by the effects of other people, task, difficulty, and chance; and brought up short by comparison to other's performances. In contrast, adulthood can be conceptualized as a time of increasing recognition of the boundaries of 'contingency': a realization of the limits of human control and the narrow range of outcomes that can potentially be influenced by human action. Adults come to know that society imposes strict constraints on the competencies and people who will be rewarded, that history changes contingencies even within our lifetime, that chance and fate have a hand in all of life's successes and failures, and that the really important outcomes, death of self and loved ones, are out of human control. (1995: 121-122)

We have quoted Skinner at such length because her remarks make it clear why Smilansky's dire predictions are somewhat overblown. The process of disillusionment that has produced so much hand-wringing is one that we all undergo as we march inevitably from the cradle to the grave. As we age, we become increasingly aware of the ultimate perspective that causes much of Smilansky's fretting. And yet, because our

sense of control is “remarkably tenacious” and our “efficacious self” is very resilient (Skinner 1995: 5), our gradual realization that luck played a bigger role in our lives than we had previously assumed mostly leaves our beliefs and feelings of control largely intact. It appears that dislodging our perceived control requires awareness of actual loss of objective control. The purely theoretical realization that even though we are often able to exercise local control over our actions luck nevertheless plays an important role in how our lives turn out does not appear to be enough to undermine our beliefs and feelings of control.

In some important respect, we are all determined—a word we use with a hint of irony—to come to terms with the realization that from the ultimate perspective nearly everything we do and everything that happens to us is a matter of luck. But rather than being something people ought to be shielded from as Smilansky suggests, this process of disillusionment is part of the human condition. More importantly, so long as our belief in the causal efficacy of our mental states survives our gradual realization that at some level luck reigns supreme, our innate desire for control, competence, and autonomy will continue to be satisfied at least as far the issue of the ultimate perspective is concerned. If this is correct, then Smilansky’s worries—as reasonable as they may seem to be on the surface—appear to be overblown.²⁵

Of course, this is not to suggest that there is no link between old age and depression—although the precise nature of the relationship is contentious. For instance, one early review of 27 studies on old age and depression found that eight reported that

²⁵ We have to admit that Smilansky’s worry about disillusionment is one that has worried us in the past as well. In another paper we are presently co-authoring with Adam Feltz and Tamler Sommers (n.d.), we suggest that a well-known cognitive bias known as impact bias may be to blame for these misplaced concerns.

younger adults are more depressed, six reported that older adults are more depressed, and thirteen reported either no difference or mixed results (Feinson 1985a, b). The inconclusive nature of these studies led Marjorie Feinson to call the supposed link between depression and old age a “scientific myth” (1985a: 191). However, more recent studies have persuasively demonstrated that the oldest age groups do indeed have the highest rates of depression.²⁶

For present purposes, the important question is whether this increased level of depression among the elderly is partly caused by the aforementioned realization that from the ultimate perspective luck plays a key role in how our lives unfold. If this were true, it would certainly help Smilansky’s case by undermining one of the central strands of our criticism of his view. Unfortunately for him, it does not appear that the ultimate perspective has much to do with the increased rate of depression among the elderly. Instead, the mounting evidence suggests that several unsurprising factors play a role, including: (a) increased levels of pain, (b) physical infirmity, (c) mental degeneration, (d) widowhood, (e) retirement, (f) economic hardship, (g) lack of social support, and (h) loneliness. When taken together, these factors—which are often endemic to old age—understandably undermine the sense of control among the elderly who experience them (Pearlin *et al.* 1981; Rodin 1986a; 1986b). More importantly, these are features of growing old that even compatibilists would concede really do undermine local control.

So, while we often do indeed end up having a diminished sense of control as we grow older, it is driven by an actual diminution of objective local control that goes hand in hand with the aging process rather than a retrospective realization that luck played a

²⁶ See, e.g., Aldwin 1990; Baltes *et al.* 1990; Harris *et al.* 2003; Harris *et al.* 2006; Holden *et al.* 1986; Mirowsky 1995; Mirowsky and Ross 1992; Moss *et al.* 2006; Rodin 1986a; 1986b; Ross and Mirowsky 1989.

central role in our lives all along. Hence, while we are indeed likely to become more depressed as we grow old, it has much to do with our declining mental, physical, social, and economic well-being and little to do with our increasing awareness that the unfolding of our lives is largely shaped by forces that are ultimately beyond our local control. Insofar as this is the case, the relationship between old age and depression does not appear to provide Smilansky with the kind of data he would need to get around our present objections.

4. Conclusion

In this paper we have evaluated Smilansky's free will illusionism in light of the evidence from social and developmental psychology concerning positive illusions and perceived control. And while the literature on positive illusions appears on the surface to bolster Smilansky's inference from disillusionment to disutility, the evidence from the control and competency literature suggests that this move is unwarranted.²⁷ More specifically, it seems that the only way that being disillusioned about LFW and UMR could have the negative emotional and social effects that Smilansky envisions is if it led people to believe that their mental states are mere epiphenomena. But given that Smilansky himself suggests that we do have local control even if we don't have ultimate control, it seems that he is committed to the falsity of epiphenomenalism no less than the non-

²⁷ It is worth pointing out that there are a series of forthcoming papers by psychologists (e.g., Baumeister *et al.* forthcoming; Vohs and Schooler forthcoming) that purportedly show that when you induce disbelief in free will in people, they are more likely to engage in immoral behavior (e.g., cheating) and less likely to engage in other forms of pro-social behavior (e.g., helping). On the surface, these studies would appear to support Smilansky's view. However, there are several problems with the experimental design implemented in these studies—an issue that Nadelhoffer is presently investigating. These methodological problems notwithstanding, there is also evidence that suggests that determinists are no less punitive than libertarians (e.g., Stroessner and Green 1990; Viney *et al.* 1982; Viney *et al.* 1988)—which speaks against Smilansky's view. All of these studies merit more attention—but addressing them in the present paper would take us too far a field.

philosophers he is trying to shield from the purported truth about the ultimate perspective.²⁸ So, either Smilansky needs to figure out another way of motivating free will illusionism or he needs to give up his claim that people really do have local compatibilist control. Until he takes one of these courses of action, we do not think the burden of motivating free will illusionism has been met.²⁹

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²⁸ Given that epiphenomenalism may pose a real threat to our sense of control and autonomy, it is open for Smilansky to be an illusionist about epiphenomenalism even if being an illusionist about LFW and UMR turns out to be unnecessary.

²⁹ We would like to thank NAMES OMMITTED FOR BLIND REVIEW for helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

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