

# Actualism Doesn't Have Control Issues: A Reply to Cohen and Timmerman

Andrew T. Forcehimes<sup>1</sup> · Luke Semrau<sup>2</sup> 

Received: 10 December 2017 / Revised: 27 January 2018 / Accepted: 5 February 2018 /  
Published online: 16 February 2018  
© Springer Science+Business Media B.V., part of Springer Nature 2018

**Abstract** Recently, Cohen and Timmerman (*Journal of Ethics & Social Philosophy*, 10(3), 1–18, 2016) argue that actualism has control issues. The view should be rejected, they claim, as it recognizes a morally irrelevant distinction between counterfactuals over which agents exercise the same kind of control. Here we reply on behalf of actualism.

**Keywords** Actualism · Possibilism · Control · Diachronic action

## 1 Introduction

Recently, Cohen and Timmerman (2016) have offered a novel challenge to the view known as

*Actualism.* At  $t$  an agent  $S$  morally ought to  $\varphi$  at  $t'$  iff, at  $t$ ,  $S$  can  $\varphi$  at  $t'$ , and what would happen if  $S$  were to  $\varphi$  at  $t'$  is better than what would happen if  $S$  were to  $\sim\varphi$  at  $t'$ . (2016: 2)

Actualism, they maintain, has control issues. It recognizes a morally irrelevant distinction between counterfactuals over which agents exercise the same kind of control.

Here we reply on behalf of actualism. In section one we reproduce Cohen and Timmerman's central argument. In section two we show it to be unsound. It relies

---

✉ Andrew T. Forcehimes  
AndrewForcehimes@gmail.com

Luke Semrau  
Luke.Semrau@gmail.com

<sup>1</sup> Nanyang Technological University, School of Humanities, 14 Nanyang Drive, Singapore 637332, Singapore

<sup>2</sup> Vanderbilt University, 111 Furman Hall, Nashville, TN 37240, USA

crucially on the false claim that an agent exercises identical control, on more than one occasion, over the performance of an act. Section three concludes.

## 2 Against Actualism

To make Cohen and Timmerman's challenge vivid, consider the case they offer:

**Sadistic Suzy** Suzy is a sadistic doctor who is responsible for the well-being of Sick Sid. At  $t_0$ , Suzy can do the following:

- Completely cure Sid by giving him two shots of the complete cure (one at  $t_1$  and one at  $t_2$ ).
- Partially cure Sid by giving him two shots of the partial cure (one at  $t_1$  and one at  $t_2$ ).
- Let Sid die by giving him only one shot, giving him mixed shots or giving him no shots.

If Sid is completely cured, he will live a long and happy life for  $n$  years. If Sid is partially cured, he will live for  $1/2n$  years. Under any other act-set that Suzy can perform, Sid dies immediately thereafter at  $t_3$ . (2016: 3).

Suppose further that the following statements are true:

*Early.* If Suzy were to deliberate, at  $t_0$ , she would give Sid no shot at  $t_1$ .

*Late.* If Suzy were to give Sid a shot of the complete cure at  $t_1$ , she would give Sid no shot at  $t_2$ .

*Deliberation:* Suzy, at  $t_0$ , is deliberating.

Finally, the crucial stipulation:

*Identical Control.* "The kind of control Suzy has at  $t_0$ , over all act-sets she can perform from  $t_1$  to  $t_2$  is the same" (2016: 4).

The problem for actualism should now be in view. The trouble is that *Early* and *Late* – counterfactuals over which it is claimed Suzy enjoys the same kind of control – figure differently in actualism's account of what Suzy ought to do. Suzy could freely administer the complete cure at  $t_2$ , but she won't. For, if she were to administer the first shot of the complete cure at  $t_1$ , then, given *Late*, she would not administer the second shot of the complete cure at  $t_2$ . So, actualism recommends that Suzy administer the first shot of the partial cure at  $t_1$ . In this way, *Late* – a claim about what, given certain circumstances, Suzy would freely do in the future – makes a difference to what she ought to do now. *Early*, by contrast, makes no such difference. Actualism requires that Suzy administer the first shot of the partial cure at  $t_1$  even though, given *Deliberation*, she will freely do no such thing. It appears, then, that actualism regards *Early* and *Late* as morally different, even though, as stipulated by *Identical Control*, Suzy exercises the very

same kind of control over both. Cohen and Timmerman state the problem for actualism succinctly: “[I]n order to determine what, at  $t_0$ , Suzy ought to do at  $t_1$ , it doesn’t matter what Suzy *can* (at  $t_0$ ) do at  $t_2$ . Rather, what matters is what Suzy would do at  $t_2$  were she to do something or other at  $t_1$ ” (2016: 4). *Late* matters in determining what Suzy ought to do; *Early* does not. But it seems there’s no good explanation for this differential treatment.

The problem for actualism, demonstrated by *Sadistic Suzy*, can be generalized. Cohen and Timmerman thus maintain that actualists are objectionably committed to

*Actualism’s Consequence.* For any obligation  $o$  agent  $S$  has at  $t_0$  to  $\varphi$  at  $t_1$ , and for any early counterfactual,<sup>1</sup> and for any late counterfactual,<sup>2</sup>  $o$  is not even partly determined by the early counterfactual(s), but is at least partly determined by the late counterfactual(s). (2016: 5)

This consequence does indeed appear troubling. In what follows, however, we show this appearance to be illusory.

### 3 Against Identical Control

Cohen and Timmerman’s challenge hinges on their crucial stipulation: *Identical Control*. This is essential to generating the problem. It is only because Suzy is thought to exercise the same kind of control over both *Early* and *Late* that *Actualism’s Consequence* seems objectionable. But this stipulation, we contend, cannot be true.

We can start by noting that the following is an attractive feature of any account of control:

*Counterfactual Power.* If  $S$  has control over  $\varphi$ -ing,  $S$  possesses characteristics sufficient to determine whether or not  $S$   $\varphi$ s.

*Counterfactual Power* captures the idea that having control over an act entails the ability to dictate the facts concerning the performance of the act. It is intended to be neutral among differing accounts of control. Cohen and Timmerman, for example, endorse the similar thought that, “If an agent  $S$  has the ability to do otherwise, it follows that  $S$  has a kind of control over the truth-value of certain counterfactuals” (2016: 3–4).

Two observations are in order. First, *Counterfactual Power* is, in part, what individuates acts. It is precisely because Suzy has this power at multiple times that she performs multiple acts. Suppose, for example, at  $t_0$ , you ingest a mind-controlling drug that causes you to type ‘t’ at  $t_1$ , ‘h’ at  $t_2$ , and ‘e’ at  $t_3$ . Here you enjoy control only of the act, at  $t_0$ , of taking the drug. The typing of the letters, because you lack *Counterfactual Power* over each letter press, is merely a part of the act of taking the drug at  $t_0$ . The presses that follow are not distinct acts. Second, one’s exercise of *Counterfactual*

<sup>1</sup> *Early* in *Sadistic Suzy*, as its name suggests, is an example of an early counterfactual. For “an *early* counterfactual concerns what  $S$  would do at  $t_1$  given the circumstances that  $S$  is in at  $t_0$ ” (2016: 5).

<sup>2</sup> *Late* in *Sadistic Suzy* is an example of a late counterfactual. For “a *late* counterfactual concerns what  $S$  would do at  $t_2$  given the circumstances that  $S$  is in at  $t_1$ ” (2016: 5).

*Power* need not occur immediately prior to the performance of the act. Suppose the mind-controlling drug you ingested at  $t_0$  is of the slow release variety. You'll start typing at  $t_{10}$ . This lag is perfectly consistent with the supposition that you enjoyed *Counterfactual Power* over typing at  $t_0$ . As long as one has a characteristic sufficient to ensure that some act is performed – regardless of when its performance takes place – one has *Counterfactual Power* over that act.

Given this pair of observations there is nothing objectionable in Cohen and Timmerman holding that Suzy, at  $t_0$ , enjoys *Counterfactual Power* over both *Early* and *Late*. What is objectionable, however, is their suggestion that Suzy possesses *Counterfactual Power* over a single act at more than one time. More to the point, what is objectionable is the claim that she exercises *Counterfactual Power* over *Late* at both  $t_0$  and  $t_1$ . For *Counterfactual Power* implies

*Single Exercise*. An agent can exercise control over the performance of an act at most once.

As long as one can later exercise *Counterfactual Power* over some act, one cannot earlier exercise that same power over that same act. *Single Exercise* follows from the fact that if one possesses, at  $t_1$ , characteristics sufficient to determine whether or not she  $\varphi$ s at  $t_2$ , then one will lack, at  $t_0$ , characteristics sufficient to determine whether or not she  $\varphi$ s  $t_2$ . One's *Counterfactual Power*, at  $t_1$ , strips one of such power at any time prior.

To illuminate how *Counterfactual Power* implies *Single Exercise*, consider a similar power: consent. Suppose you'll undergo surgery at  $t_2$ . If you grant consent, then it will be an operation. If you don't, it will be battery. Now, suppose that your doctor will request your consent twice, at  $t_0$  and at  $t_1$ . While, by virtue of your consent, you can determine whether the surgery is an operation or battery, you exercise this power only once, at  $t_1$ . Whatever you choose at  $t_0$  is superseded by your choice at  $t_1$ . Even if we suppose that you consent at  $t_0$ , and further suppose, at  $t_1$ , when your consent is again requested, you again grant it, you still determine whether the surgery is an operation or battery only once, at  $t_1$ . While it's true that you choose not to exercise your power to change your plan (by revoking your consent), you nonetheless do exercise your power to make the surgery an operation rather than a battery (by reaffirming your consent).<sup>3</sup>

That an agent has control over an act at most once, nonetheless, may be thought objectionable. It appears to be in tension with an assumption commonly accepted by participants in the debate over actualism and possibilism: Namely, that there are true counterfactuals of freedom – i.e., facts about what agents would freely do if placed in certain circumstances.<sup>4</sup>

Appealing to such counterfactuals, one may offer the following objection. Suppose the below statements are all true:

- i. If S were to  $\varphi$  at  $t_0$ , then S would  $\lambda$  at  $t_2$ .
- ii. If S were to  $\sim\varphi$  at  $t_0$ , then S would  $\sim\lambda$  at  $t_2$ .

<sup>3</sup> We thank Travis Timmerman for pressing us to clarify this point.

<sup>4</sup> We thank an anonymous reviewer for this objection.

- iii. If S were to  $\psi$  at  $t_1$ , then S would  $\lambda$  at  $t_2$ .
- iv. If S were to  $\sim\psi$  at  $t_1$ , then S would  $\sim\lambda$  at  $t_2$ .

*What Happens*: S, in fact, performs  $\varphi$  at  $t_0$ ,  $\psi$  at  $t_1$ , and  $\lambda$  at  $t_2$ .

Assuming that all of the acts above are under S's control, it would appear that S controls whether or not to  $\lambda$  on more than one occasion. If S, at  $t_0$ , elects to  $\varphi$  then, given (i), she would  $\lambda$  at  $t_2$ . If she elects to do otherwise, given (ii), she would  $\sim\lambda$ . Later, if S, at  $t_1$ , elects to  $\psi$  then, given (iii), she would  $\lambda$  at  $t_2$ . If she elects to do otherwise, given (iv), she would  $\sim\lambda$ . Hence, it appears that the truth of (i) - (iv) is inconsistent with *Single Exercise*.

Yet, this objection fails. Suppose we assume that S has *Counterfactual Power* over  $\varphi$ -ing,  $\psi$ -ing, and  $\lambda$ -ing at  $t_0$ ,  $t_1$ , and  $t_2$ , respectively. Since *Counterfactual Power* implies *Single Exercise*, if the objection is correct, this stipulation should be inconsistent with the truth of (i) - (iv). However, given *What Happens*, we know that S will  $\varphi$  at  $t_0$ ,  $\psi$  at  $t_1$ , and  $\lambda$  at  $t_2$ . This is how, we can imagine, she elects to use her *Counterfactual Power* over these acts. And this is all that's needed to secure the truth of (i) and (iii). Because, if it is true that S  $\varphi$ s at  $t_0$  and it is true that S  $\lambda$ s at  $t_2$ , then the following is true: If S were to  $\varphi$  at  $t_0$ , then S would  $\lambda$  at  $t_2$ . This follows from *Conjunction Conditionalization* –  $(A \wedge C) \rightarrow (A > C)$  – which is an axiom of Pollock's SS (Pollock 1976: 42–43) and a theorem endorsed by both Lewis (1986: 132) and Stalnaker (1968, 1987: chp. 7).<sup>5</sup> The same reasoning allows us to secure (iii).<sup>6</sup> To get (ii) and (iv), it simply needs to be that, on the closest possible world, the reverse of *What Happens* occurs: S elects to use her *Counterfactual Power* to  $\sim\varphi$  at  $t_0$ ,  $\sim\psi$  at  $t_1$ , and  $\sim\lambda$  at  $t_2$ . The assumption of *Counterfactual Power* over each act is consistent with (i)-(iv). And hence, the appeal to true counterfactuals of freedom thus does nothing to impugn *Single Exercise*.

We are now in a position to reassess Cohen and Timmerman's challenge. Recall, actualism is thought objectionable because it illicitly “demarcates between counterfactuals that do and do not determine S's obligations, even in cases in which, at  $t_0$ , S has the same kind of control over what S does both at  $t_1$  and  $t_2$ , and thus has the same kind of control over the truth-value of both [Early and Late] counterfactuals” (2016: 5). But this suggests that Suzy exercises *Counterfactual Power* over her act at  $t_2$  twice, both at  $t_1$  and at  $t_0$ . This cannot be so. Here's the argument.

1. If S has *Counterfactual Power*, at  $t_0$ , over S's  $\varphi$ -ing at  $t_2$ , then S, at  $t_0$ , possesses characteristics sufficient to determine whether S, at  $t_2$ ,  $\varphi$ s or not.
  - a. Closer to Cohen and Timmerman's words: S has the ability, at  $t_0$ , to determine the truth-value of certain counterfactuals, namely, whether or not she  $\varphi$ s at  $t_2$ .

<sup>5</sup> One might, like Nozick (1981: 680–681) and Bennett (2003: 240), reject *Conjunction Conditionalization* for indeterminate worlds. But even this is, we believe, an error. For a series of persuasive arguments to this effect, see (Walters and Williams 2013) and (Walters 2016, 2009).

<sup>6</sup> As should now be clear, it would be a mistake to assume that the antecedents and consequents of counterfactuals involving human action, such as (i)-(iv), must be in some important way dependent. If an agent freely  $\varphi$ s, and freely  $\psi$ s, the result is a true-true counterfactual, regardless of the presence or absence of any further relationship between  $\varphi$ -ing and  $\psi$ -ing.

2. If, at  $t_0$ , S possesses characteristics sufficient to determine whether S, at  $t_2$ ,  $\varphi$ s or not, then nothing between  $t_0$  and  $t_2$  could prevent S from  $\varphi$ -ing at  $t_2$ .<sup>7</sup>
  - a. If something could, between  $t_0$  and  $t_2$ , prevent S from  $\varphi$ -ing at  $t_2$ , then it would not be the case that S possesses characteristics sufficient to determine the truth-value of the relevant counterfactuals, namely, whether or not she  $\varphi$ s.
3. *Identical Control* holds that S has *Counterfactual Power*, at  $t_0$ , over S's  $\varphi$ -ing at  $t_2$ .
4. Hence, *Identical Control* implies that nothing could, between  $t_0$  and  $t_2$ , prevent S from  $\varphi$ -ing at  $t_2$ . (from 1,2,3)
5. If S has *Counterfactual Power*, at  $t_1$ , over  $\varphi$ -ing at  $t_2$ , then S, at  $t_1$ , possesses characteristics sufficient to determine whether S, at  $t_2$ ,  $\varphi$ s or not.
  - a. Closer to Cohen and Timmerman's words: S has the ability, at  $t_1$ , to determine the truth-value of certain counterfactuals, namely, whether or not she  $\varphi$ s at  $t_2$ .
6. If S, at  $t_1$ , possesses characteristics sufficient to determine whether S, at  $t_2$ ,  $\varphi$ s or not, then something – namely, S at  $t_1$  – could, between  $t_0$  and  $t_2$ , prevent S from  $\varphi$ -ing at  $t_2$ .
  - a. Possessing characteristics sufficient to determine whether she, at  $t_2$ ,  $\varphi$ s or not, implies that she could prevent herself from  $\varphi$ -ing at  $t_2$  at  $t_1$ .
7. *Identical Control* holds that S has *Counterfactual Power*, at  $t_1$ , over  $\varphi$ -ing at  $t_2$ .
8. Hence, *Identical Control* implies that something can, between  $t_0$  and  $t_2$ , prevent S from  $\varphi$ -ing at  $t_2$ . (from 5,6,7)
9. Hence, *Identical Control* implies a contradiction. (from 4,8)

If one stipulates *Identical Control*, one stipulates a contradiction. And once this stipulation is dropped, *Actualism's Consequence* appears unobjectionable. This is sufficient to rebuff Cohen and Timmerman's challenge.

## 4 Conclusion

Cohen and Timmerman conclude their essay with a request. They write, “We want to know why, at  $t_0$ , Suzy's rotten moral disposition described in [*Late*] allows her to avoid incurring moral obligations that her rotten moral disposition described in [*Early*] does not, given that, at  $t_0$ , Suzy has (*ex hypothesi*) the exact same control over the truth-value of each counterfactual” (2016: 15). We have, on behalf of actualism, offered an answer. It's simply false that, at  $t_0$ , Suzy exercises the same control over *Early* and *Late*. One exercises *Counterfactual Power* over the same act at most once. Thus, there is a

<sup>7</sup> Two points of clarification concerning this premise. First, the premise asserts only that nothing *between* these two times could prevent S from  $\varphi$ -ing at  $t_2$ . This does not, of course, entail that S will  $\varphi$  at  $t_2$ . That would follow only if at  $t_0$  S exercised her *Counterfactual Power* to  $\varphi$  at  $t_2$ . Second, by “prevent” we mean “keep from happening” or “making something not be the case” without the suggestion that something is already in the works.

morally relevant difference – a difference in control – that undergirds actualism’s differential treatment of *Early* and *Late*. So, in the end, we agree that *Sadistic Suzy* illustrates a problem. But the problem lies with *Identical Control*, not *Actualism’s Consequence*.

## References

- Bennett, J. (2003). *A Philosophical Guide to Conditionals*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Cohen, Y., & Timmerman, T. (2016). Actualism Has Control Issues. *Journal of Ethics & Social Philosophy*, 10(3), 1–18.
- Lewis, D. (1986). *Counterfactuals* (Revised ed.). Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Nozick, R. (1981). *Philosophical Explanations*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Pollock, J. L. (1976). *Subjunctive Reasoning*. Boston: Reidel.
- Stalnaker, R. (1968). A Theory of Conditionals. In N. Rescher (Ed.), *Studies in Logical Theory* (pp. 98–112). Oxford: Blackwell.
- Stalnaker, R. (1987). *Inquiry*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Walters, L. (2009). Morgenbesser’s Coin and Counterfactuals with True Components. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*.
- Walters, L. (2016). Possible World Semantics and True-True Counterfactuals. *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*, 97(3), 322–346.
- Walters, L., & Williams, J. R. G. (2013). An Argument for Conjunction Conditionalization. *The Review of Symbolic Logic*, 6(4), 573–588.