

Saul Smilansky

Some Reflections on Hanoch Ben-Yami's Defence of Compatibilism

As Hanoch Ben-Yami states in the introduction to his engaging short book, *Aristotle's Hand: Five Philosophical Investigations* (Hebrew, 2012), he aims both to write an accessible book for readers without previous knowledge of philosophy, and to make some original contributions to the subject. At least in the chapter on free will which I discuss here, he succeeds. There is a price to be paid for the accessibility. For example, it leads Ben-Yami to spend a lot of time on explaining the sensible but philosophically familiar point that indeterminism in itself does not give us free will; and it prevents him from presenting his original contribution as rigorously (from the perspective of a philosopher) as one would want. Nevertheless I wish to take on his general move in the defence of compatibilism – the view that free will and moral responsibility are compatible with determinism, or with the absence of libertarian free will irrespective of determinism.

Ben-Yami argues, interestingly and counter-intuitively, that in order to understand how people can have free will (and be liable to blame, praise, and the like) we need to avoid the temptation to focus on the agent. In a suggestive analogy he offers (pp. 36–37), if we seek to understand whether a man is running a marathon it will not help us to focus on the actual running at a given moment, which might not differ much from the equivalent moment of running by a 10,000 metre runner. Rather, we should focus on the overall setup (such as the starting and finishing points, and the planned course). Likewise, claims Ben-Yami, free will and the associated moral notions are holistic systems and social constructs. People are considered more or less free when they can be moved by the demands of morality. It naturally follows (as numerous compatibilists have argued) that what matters is not the ability to have strictly done otherwise in the exact situation which occurred, but the *general* ability of the agent to be “reasons responsive” (Fischer and

Ravizza 1998); to evaluate and respond to environmental incentives and disincentives.

In his broadly Wittgensteinian explication, Ben-Yami seems to go further than previous compatibilists by de-emphasizing agency, with its focus on the traits of the agent and the specific causality which brought about the action. He assigns, as it were, the major role to the social environment – not only as the place within which agents play, but as a player in itself. Hence he claims that a kleptomaniac operating in an environment of insufficiently deterring threats would be unfree, while the very same person operating in a sufficiently threatening environment – who would thus respond to it and refrain from stealing – would be free (pp. 42–43)!

Ben-Yami goes on to tackle some possible responses to his view. The focus on praise, blame, reward, and punishment leads to the worry that we could thus not make sense of the typical feeling of, for example, a coffee drinker that her choice to drink coffee was free. Ben-Yami counters that such cases are but natural extensions of the rule – so that, roughly, we view ourselves as free when drinking coffee because, were we under threat of being blamed or punished for doing so, we would respond adequately, i.e., desist (pp. 45–47). I am not sure that this is all there is to the phenomenology involved even in the case of the coffee drinker, but perhaps in the context of Ben-Yami's response to the present objection this does not matter. In any case, the free actions that really matter in the free will debate are primarily moral actions, and hence this does not seem to be a major worry.

I will now raise a number of difficulties with Ben-Yami's discussion. At the outset it is important that we clarify the nature of the dispute here. What is it that is under contention, and what needs to be done in order to make one's case? It is not that if one succeeds in making a case for distinguishing between people who can and those who cannot be influenced by social incentives such as blame and punishment, then compatibilism triumphs. Utilitarians with no inherent interest in free will (such as Smart 1961), and hard determinists who reject free will and moral responsibility (such as Pereboom 2001), acknowledge such differences in efficacy; and propose that we make use of it, in a forward-looking, manipulative way. It requires argument why one needs to say (as Ben-Yami wishes to say) that compatibilism has been vindicated, rather than to say that it is

merely typically socially useful to follow distinctions in responsiveness to threats.¹

Even if one does wish to grant that such distinctions can establish some form of compatibilist freedom and moral responsibility, this still does not mean that the worry over the compatibility question has been overcome. As I have argued (e.g. Smilansky 2000; 2003; 2005), we need to recognize the falsity of the Assumption of Monism on the compatibility question. It might be that compatibilism captures some of the truth here, so that there are some forms of free will and moral responsibility that can be sustained; yet the compatibilist thought that, therefore, there is no need to worry over the compatibility question, would still be false. We need to acknowledge compatibility-dualism, which tries to capture the limited but true insights of both compatibilism and hard determinism. In order to respect persons we need to establish a Community of Responsibility broadly tracking compatibilist distinctions, yet acknowledge that the compatibilist form of life is deeply unjust, because ultimately no one can be responsible for the sources of her motivation and concomitant actions, and hence any serious payoff for those actions, such as severe punishment, is deeply disturbing. There is nothing in Ben-Yami's discussion as it now stands which distinguishes it from a merely consequentialist, manipulative interpretation of the notions of free will and moral responsibility; let alone which can dismiss a compatibility-dualist stance.

Beyond these general worries, Ben-Yami's "social practice" interpretation faces particular difficulties. I will note two of them. The first we can see from his interpretation of the kleptomaniac which I mentioned above. Consider

¹ Although, of course, there is no reason to think that the usefulness will track present intuitions about free will and moral responsibility. It is very plausible that sometimes *not* caring very much about agency and control, and thereby reducing the hope of wrongdoers that they could get out of prison by claiming, say, insanity, would be socially more useful. And as we know, in certain circumstances collective punishment and other such practices, where no pretence is even made for caring about agency, *are* efficient. More generally, Ben-Yami's interpretation is deeply revisionist. This is not the place to consider the prospects of a radical shift in our view of free will and moral responsibility, but we do need to see that the reinterpretation comes with a very high potential price, if it were widely realized. It is likely that people would not take kindly to being blamed, if they came to believe that they did not deserve to be blamed but were merely being blamed because of social usefulness.

the scenario where the kleptomaniac is confronted with a very strong threat in the social environment, such as a policeman at his elbow, and desists from stealing. Ben-Yami claims that he is therefore free, but it seems that a more plausible interpretation is that he has been merely terrified into inaction. The inner compulsion to steal still has great psychological force, making him (in a typical case) into a person who is driven to act irrationally because of the influence of forces which it would be unreasonable to see as a “free” part of himself. And on top of that, he has been frozen by the presence of the policemen, his psyche terrified into inaction. In this dramatic struggle between the irrational compulsions and the terrifying social fear no place seems left for a free and morally responsible agent. I see very little here that *is* free.²

Second, on Ben-Yami’s interpretation it becomes very difficult to establish causality and responsibility as a basis for blame, for instance. If kleptomaniacs can be seen as free simply because they have in fact been deterred, then surely normal criminals and would-be criminals are free when deterred. Yet what would then stop us from laying the blame on *society*, rather than on themselves, for the instances when they have *not* been deterred? Let us assume determinism (Ben-Yami and I agree that indeterminism would only complicate matters, without adding to the freedom). Let us further assume epistemic transparency and predictability here. On threat level 3, agent X is not deterred, which is to say, it is determined that he will commit the crime. Assume that on threat level 4, by contrast, it is determined that he will be deterred. Society decides to provide only the incentive of threat level 3, perhaps because enough people are thereby being deterred, and money is saved by not upping the threat to level 4. In that case, as predicted, X commits the crime. It then seems to me quite arbitrary to lay the blame on X, rather than on society. Society was aware that level 3 will not cause sufficient deterrence, while level 4 will causally result in deterrence; that, arguably, is all there is to it. Why say that X was free and is therefore blameworthy for committing the crime despite the warning of threat level 3, when he was merely moulded by forces beyond his control to be this sort of person, who will be caused to commit the crime, unless threatened by punishment at level 4 or above? Why blame him, rather than, if anyone, society – which (in this

² Moreover, animals, even quite lowly animals, refrain from certain actions in the face of a threat; yet surely we do not think they are “free” in the relevant sense?

scenario) foresaw exactly what was required in order to change the causal order in a successful way, but decided not to do so?³ Of course one can extend the disavowal of responsibility to “society” as well, but this will not help the compatibilist. The principled attribution of responsibility to the agent, let alone seeing him as really blameworthy, does not seem very convincing.⁴

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³ I raised the difficulty concerning the attribution of the fault to society versus the agent, and the way this supports a measure of hard determinism, in my “Trap” argument, see Smilansky 2012.

⁴ I am grateful to Iddo Landau, Ariel Meirav, and Daniel Statman, for helpful comments.

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Yotam Lurie

Philosophy: Does It Have a Point After All?

The focal point of Ben-Yami's fifth and final chapter of *Aristotle's Hand: Five Philosophical Investigations* (Hebrew, Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2012) is about the very purpose and value of philosophy. To comment on the nature of philosophy, as Ben-Yami does, is to engage in a meta-philosophical discussion. While this is a valid philosophical subject, it is not what is usually expected of an introductory text to philosophy. A prevalent assumption is that the novice to philosophy should, first, get a taste of what people do when they do philosophy, learn about its history, and engage in some critical philosophical discussions, before turning to self-reflections on the nature of the discipline, which are abstract and tend to be detached from particular philosophical discussions. To my surprise, Ben-Yami manages to pull off this highly difficult task admirably. He provides an illuminating meta-philosophical discussion that makes sense of philosophy in a way that is both instructive to the novice and edifying to the experienced philosopher. In what follows I first briefly spell out the gist of Ben-Yami's argument before taking issue with two matters that arise in its connection.

Ben-Yami's argument about the value of philosophy emerges in four steps, providing four philosophical theses about philosophy. First, he begins with a negative claim about the limits of philosophy and what it cannot provide. He argues that philosophy, in its armchair method of theorizing, does not contribute to *knowledge* within any particular domain. Second, though philosophy does not contribute to knowledge, Ben-Yami suggests that it can provide *understanding*. Related to this claim is Ben-Yami's third claim about philosophy of science as a second-order discourse that reflects on other disciplines. He claims that philosophical analysis of the concepts used within a scientific discipline, or for that matter in other disciplines such as psychology, brings about a better understanding of concepts used within that discipline and, thus, contributes to the possibility of developing

new scientific theories (p. 125). Finally, Ben-Yami's fourth and final claim, in a section subtitled, "Castles of Mist and the Open Space," is where he adopts a Wittgensteinian posture, arguing that the value of philosophy is mostly therapeutic, as "it removes the mist of confusion that hid from us the solid ground of reality" (p. 131). Ben-Yami begins his argument for this claim in counterfactual fashion: if philosophy's purpose is to contribute to knowledge, then philosophy is superfluous (p. 112). His argument is counterfactual because Ben-Yami does not think philosophy's purpose is to contribute to knowledge, yet it is also not altogether superfluous but has other more minor purposes.

Ben-Yami's argument for the value of philosophy is astute and edifying. It provides hope for philosophy, even if not that which nourished it in the past. Yet I find it difficult to embrace the argument in its four claims. A choice between them has to be made. More specifically, I argue that it is untenable to support Ben-Yami's two central claims about the value of philosophy together: On the one hand, he relegates philosophy to the role of handmaid to the sciences, which are entrusted by him with the task of contributing new knowledge; on the other hand, he assigns a therapeutic value to philosophy, suggesting that in response to confusion philosophy erects castles of mist, the value of which is merely therapeutic. These two positions, even if they don't directly contradict each other, are difficult to accommodate under the same roof.

The armchair approach to philosophy is considered by Ben-Yami to be unproductive and deficient. This is especially the case for those who adopt a crude empiricist approach to knowledge, since it does not provide any new empirical data about the world, and supposedly without gathering information, philosophy cannot contribute to our knowledge of the world. Moreover, avoiding the vices of dilettantism, serious academic disciplines are expected to specialize and provide knowledge within a particular domain. This cannot be said about philosophy, which has no domain over which it has authority and has no clearly defined area of expertise. In many respects, philosophers have not been doing what serious academics do within any academic discipline. Philosophers don't have laboratories and they seldom design experiments. They usually do not participate in large group research projects and they don't see the point of applying themselves to collecting empirical data and applying for research grants. At the same time, their technical and academic style of discourse limits their ability to take part in the intellectual life of modern culture. As Richard Rorty has so eloquently

and bluntly put it: for the last thirty years, “philosophy is an almost invisible part of contemporary intellectual life.”¹

“Knowledge” is a very broad term and there are different forms of knowledge, such as, for example, everyday practical knowledge (such as knowing how to sit in a chair and eat with a knife and fork), everyday propositional knowledge (such as knowing that I am supposed to buy a dozen eggs in the store), counterfactual knowledge (such as knowing that I’m not familiar with any saints in Israeli politics), and more theoretical forms of knowledge. It is only against the theoretical forms of knowledge that Ben-Yami’s claim, that philosophy has no substantive contribution to knowledge, is relevant. Furthermore, the very idea of seeking to advance knowledge, within a handful of disciplines and not just within philosophy, is not merely a matter of collecting data and adding new information.

Ben-Yami does not sufficiently distinguish between collecting information and turning this information into knowledge, through whatever form of analysis and rational manipulation one prefers. Had he made this distinction, perhaps he could have been more charitable to philosophy’s various historical attempts to contribute to knowledge by appealing to one or another familiar philosophical method of analysis, such as transcendental deduction (Kant),² logical analysis (Russell),³ or linguistic analysis (Austin).⁴ It is worth mentioning in this context that philosophy is not unique in its attempt to contribute to knowledge by providing powerful and illuminating tools of analysis, rather than by going out into the field in order to collect data. For example, it is joined today by advanced statistical and computerized methods of analysis that sift through large amounts of data in order to try and provide us with knowledge and a deeper grasp of reality.

Since from a crude empiricist conception of knowledge armchair philosophy might be deficient, Ben-Yami goes on to suggest that philosophy, nonetheless, does make a positive contribution. It provides *understanding* by

¹ Richard Rorty, “Naturalism and Quietism,” in his *Philosophy as Cultural Politics: Philosophical Papers*, vol. 4 (Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 147.

² Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (Penguin classics; rev. ed., 2008).

³ Bertrand Russell, *Our Knowledge of the External World* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1914).

⁴ John L. Austin, *How to do Things with Words: The William James Lectures delivered at Harvard University in 1955*, ed. J. O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962).

making connections between the things we know. Understanding, Ben-Yami claims, is about learning how the different pieces of the puzzle fit together and how they compose a big picture. “Understanding is about clarifying the connections between the things we know” (p. 121). Ben-Yami’s idea is that the philosopher has an ability to provide an overview and draw connections between the various chunks of the cognitive content we have. Intuitively, this seems right. The problem is that it does not become very clear what kind of *connections* philosophers are supposed to establish, let alone how they are supposed to do so. Moreover, it is certainly not self-evident that “drawing connections” is some kind of skill or task that is unique to philosophy. In point of fact, art historians and comparative literature scholars also draw connections between various phenomena, within their domain of inquiry.

Ben-Yami particularly specifies his claims that philosophy’s contribution and value has to do with making connections in the context of philosophy of science. He argues that philosophical analysis, whether done by philosophers or by scientists, can bring about a better understanding of the concepts used in scientific research. It can contribute, in this sense, to the development of scientific theories (p. 125). Moreover, he argues that some of the research done in psychology and in brain sciences involves confusion of concepts about mind and nature, misunderstandings that affect future research (p. 126). I personally do not share Ben-Yami’s optimism that philosophical analysis, specifically of scientific concepts and research, can play a significant role, or any role for that matter, in contributing to the actual development of scientific theories. However, others, such as Rudolf Carnap and members of the Vienna Circle, did agree with some aspects of this claim relegating philosophy to a “second-order inquiry.”⁵ Nevertheless, with or without contributing to the development of new scientific theories, whether we’re talking about philosophy of science, art, language, or any of the other alternatives, philosophies of the various disciplines do make sense and provide a deeper understanding of the meaning and significance of the discipline it is discussing.

The distinction between knowledge and understanding, which Ben-Yami brings into the discussion in order to distinguish the specific role

⁵ Rudolf Carnap, “The Methodological Character of Theoretical Concepts,” in *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science*, vol.1 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1956); Moritz Schlick, “The Future of Philosophy,” in *Proceedings of the Seventh International Congress of Philosophy in Oxford*, September 1–6, 1930 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1931), pp. 112–116.

of philosophy, is an important conceptual distinction. This distinction has a rich history within philosophy that is worth revisiting in this context, so as to shed light on philosophy's possible contributions. The notion of understanding (or *Verstehen* in German), has been linked to interpretation and more specifically to the understanding of meaning, specifically within the human sciences and within cultural contexts. It has played a crucial role in the hermeneutic tradition including, for example, in the writings of Dilthey,⁶ Heidegger,⁷ and Gadamer.⁸ Bluntly put, one can grasp all the facts, yet fail to see their meaning and significance. Moreover, the same piece of empirical data can be interpreted to mean altogether different things and to have different meanings in different contexts. Thus, understanding is much more than just "making connections," as suggested by Ben-Yami; understanding has to do with interpretation. Interpretation includes making sense of cultural practices, intersubjective encounters, significant texts, and visual images. Much of philosophy's contribution and value to human discourse is in the interpretive realm and has to do with articulating the many ways of grasping and interpreting the meaning of things.

I am not in any way suggesting that philosophy is the only discipline that is engaged in the task of interpreting the meaning of things. It might be argued that this is similar to much of what goes on in the rest of the humanities and to some extent also in other disciplines. However, in none of them is it rendered into a specialized task that undermines the subject that is investigated. Philosophers, it might be said, are interpreters of human discourse like many other scientists, intellectuals, and artists, only more so.

So what is the purpose of philosophy and what is the value of philosophy, aside from providing academic jobs for philosophers and protecting the legacy of the history of philosophy? Though he tries to find a positive role for philosophy in the grand project of science and the creation of experimental knowledge, eventually Ben-Yami settles for a more modest, somewhat skeptical position, which has come to be labeled "quietism."⁹ Quietism is a position regarding the purpose of philosophy that is supposedly advocated

⁶ Wilhelm Dilthey, *Selected Works* (Princeton University Press, 2010).

⁷ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (Harper and Row, 1962).

⁸ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (Bloomsbury Academic; repr. ed., 2013).

⁹ Philip Pettit, "Existentialism, Quietism and the Role of Philosophy," in Brian Leiter, ed., *The Future of Philosophy* (Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 304–327.

by philosophers, such as Wittgenstein and Rorty, both very poetic, but both very skeptical about the contribution of philosophy to knowledge in the sense of representing what the world is like. As Ben-Yami puts this, when we are confronted with confusion and misunderstanding, we are apt to build complex and extreme theories, which are quite different from the world as it appears to us. Once we get over building castles of mist, we can return to the world as we knew it before philosophical confusion set in. “Philosophy’s major value,” claims Ben-Yami, “is therapeutic” (p. 130).

However, after arguing that philosophy has an important constructive role to play, assisting the sciences in their quest for progress and scientific knowledge, it is quite peculiar to find Ben-Yami joining the quietist camp. The quietists don’t think that there is any sense to the idea of making progress, neither within philosophy nor by making use of philosophy as a handmaid to other disciplines. They think of philosophy as a kind of therapy in the sense that philosophical problems are eventually dissolved and abandoned rather than solved. They do not think that the problems (about the nature of knowledge, mind, reality, and so on) that have worried modern philosophers have fundamental significance. In this respect, Ben-Yami’s attempt to hold these two claims about the value of philosophy together is untenable.

Nevertheless, even within the quietist camp, philosophy can have a purpose, and distinctions should be made between different varieties of quietism. Not all quietists are the same. On the one hand, we find quietists like Ben-Yami, for whom the therapeutic value of philosophy is no more than psychological therapy, not much different from macramé or pétanque. On the other hand, if a quietist views language as a set of social practices, then drawing linguistic distinctions, fabricating interpretations, and building castles of mist (to use Ben-Yami’s phrase), as philosophers often do, might not be a way of making scientific progress, but it might still be a way of broadening our understanding and making sense of the world through edifying interpretations.¹⁰ Drawing distinctions and making interpretations can make a difference, with respect to what we take to be important and meaningful, within our social and cultural practices.

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¹⁰ Richard Rorty, “Representation, Social Practice and Truth,” in *Philosophical Studies* 54:2 (1988): 215–228; Richard Rorty, “Wittgenstein and the Linguistic Turn,” in *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*, pp. 160–175.

Hanoch Ben-Yami

On Free Will and on the Nature of Philosophy: Responses to Smilansky and Lurie

I am grateful to Saul Smilansky and Yotam Lurie for their papers on two chapters of my book, *Aristotle's Hand*.¹ Their papers are rich in comments and observations, and I have to be selective in my responses. I focus on the main criticisms they raise and on what I think are misunderstandings.

Response to Smilansky

Smilansky discusses the second chapter of my book, "Determinism and Free Will." Having an expert on the free will literature like Smilansky discuss this chapter is obviously an excellent opportunity to improve and clarify it. Moreover, Smilansky's view on free will is different from mine, and his paper is therefore mainly critical. Although I think that some of his criticisms rest on a misunderstanding, which I explain below, others do express significant philosophical differences.

In the third section of that chapter, "On the Nature of Free Will," I characterized a person's free actions as those that are influenced by considerations of reward and punishment, praise and blame. I also claimed that it is this responsiveness which is essential to free actions: we shouldn't look for any special 'internal' causal relation, mental or otherwise, that characterizes free action. Different free actions are done for different reasons and in different ways, some after careful deliberation, some on the spur of the moment, some without any thought but out of habit, and others in other ways. There is no uniform causal or mental description that applies to all these kinds of action. What *is* common to all is that *had* the person known

¹ *Aristotle's Hand: Five Philosophical Investigations* (Hebrew, Jerusalem: The Hebrew University Magnes Press, 2013).

that he would be punished or rewarded, praised or blamed in other ways than he thought he would be, he *would have* acted differently. This, I claimed, is what is essential to free actions. After discussing several implications of this characterization, I continued in the fourth section of the chapter to show that *if* this characterization is accepted *then* free will and determinism are compatible. Smilansky does not criticize this conditional compatibility but rather its antecedent, namely, my characterization of free will.

Smilansky argues that unacceptable consequences follow from my position. On pages 42–45 of my book, I discussed and approved the following consequence. Standards of reward and punishment, praise and blame change between societies. Accordingly, while one society might have standards that would be sufficient to deter a person from doing something, another society might have more lenient standards that would not suffice to deter him from doing it. It follows that this person acts freely according to the standards of the former society, but not according to those of the latter. A case I considered is that of the kleptomaniac, who could be deterred by the stricter punishments of a society different from the one in which he lives. Smilansky objects that this kleptomaniac, not acting freely in the society in which he actually lives, would have been free in the stricter society, a conclusion that he finds absurd.

However, this is not the conclusion that follows from my position. The conclusion is not that the kleptomaniac is actually not acting freely but *would have* acted so had he done exactly the same thing in the stricter society. The conclusion is that he is not acting freely according to the more lenient standards but *is* acting so according to the stricter ones. That is the most that can be said in response to the question, following his theft, ‘Did he then act freely or didn’t he?’ The classification of some kleptomaniacs as acting under compulsion and not freely was not introduced following a discovery about their true nature. It was following a decision on what are the appropriate sanctions for the offenses they tend to commit.

We can think of this position as follows. Normal human beings can exist only in a society; “man is by nature a political animal.”² Societies have to have norms of reward and punishments, which do vary between them but not arbitrarily or to any degree. Now some actions will be rendered voluntary by all these norms, some will be rendered voluntary by none (e.g., breathing),

² Aristotle, *Politics* 1.2.1253a2. Jowett’s translation.

and yet others will be rendered voluntary only by some. These last actions, existing on that vague borderline, are free only according to some human standards, but not absolutely. Unlike the conclusion that Smilansky draws from my views, I find this one intuitive.

Smilansky's misunderstanding, however, was partly my fault. On page 43 of my book, I had the interlocutor draw Smilansky's conclusion as an objection to my position. I then did not distance myself from it but left my position ambiguous between the social relativity that my interlocutor and Smilansky ascribe to me and the relativity to standards that I have formulated in the previous paragraphs and also on pages 44–45 of my book. I hope that the discussion above clarifies my position.

Before we leave our kleptomaniac to his misdeeds, I'd like to consider Smilansky's description of the kleptomaniac's psychology. He provides a lively description of the kleptomaniac's frame of mind when desisting from theft due to a police officer standing at his elbow. In the "struggle between the irrational compulsions and the terrifying social fear no place seems left for a free and morally responsible agent," he concludes. However, I do not think that this irrationality and swirl of emotions are a sufficient reason not to consider a person free and morally responsible. Murderers and rapists almost invariably act irrationally and while caught in a swirl of emotions, but for all that they are considered free and culpable, something I am sure Smilansky would not wish to deny. If the kleptomaniac is not acting freely, it is not because of his irrationality but because our systems of reward, punishment, praise and blame cannot affect his behaviour.

Smilansky also characterizes my position as "deeply revisionist" and claims that it "comes with a very high potential price" (note 1). This price, he continues, is because "it is likely that people would not take kindly to being blamed, if they came to believe that they did not deserve to be blamed but were merely being blamed because of social usefulness." This, however, is not a consequence of my position. People deserve to be blamed if they wouldn't have done the wrong they did, had they known that they would be blamed or punished for it. Systems of praise and blame (which are always tailored to human nature) exist because of their social necessity, but they render only those actions free which are responsive to them. I don't think that people would feel injustice is done when someone is blamed for a wrong he did only because he thought he could get away with it. I therefore think my position is not revisionist in the way Smilansky thinks it is.

Another particular difficulty Smilansky finds with my position is that, according to him, it cannot justify blaming the criminals rather than society in case the lenient sanctions of the latter are insufficient to deter the former from performing their crimes. According to the standards of that society these criminals are not acting freely, and it might be seen as its fault that it did not enforce stricter sanctions that would have deterred the criminals.

Sometimes indeed a society should be blamed for not enforcing satisfactory sanctions, but irrespective of that, let us consider an instance in which Smilansky's description does apply. I think looking at the details will vindicate my position. Suppose that the punishments, disapproval, and social sanctions in our society do not suffice to deter a particular person from acting violently towards family and friends. Perhaps if we had inflicted on him severe physical punishment this would have been effective, but we are of course not interested in that since we regard such measures as inhumane. We then indeed do not consider him a free agent but an irrevocably corrupt person. We might arrest him because he is a threat to his environment, we might even put him in an appropriate ward: we try not to *correct* but to *control* him. It is not that we think he is blameless; on the contrary, we think of him as someone who has lost some of his dignity, for human dignity lies also in human freedom.

Smilansky also raises a general worry concerning my analysis of free action. He grants that determinism is compatible with a distinction "between people who can and those who cannot be influenced by social incentives." He argues, however, that this is insufficient as a vindication of compatibilism. Compatibilism, he maintains, comes in two versions: apart from the one just mentioned there is another one, which claims—if I understood him correctly—that *responsibility* is compatible with determinism, and this kind of compatibilism he wishes to deny. We need to acknowledge, he writes, "that the compatibilist form of life is deeply unjust, because *ultimately* no one can be responsible for the sources of her motivation and concomitant actions" (italics added).

With this criticism, we arrive at a discussion of conceptual analysis in general and the question whether my account of free actions can be considered a correct analysis of the concept. In my book I proceeded as follows. I started from the common practice, both in daily life and in legal discourse, of classifying some actions as done freely and others as unfree (done under duress, for instance). I tried to specify the criteria that guide our

application of this concept of acting freely, and I found them in responsiveness to considerations of praise and blame, reward and punishment. (For the sake of the following argument, we can assume I have succeeded in doing that.) Is this enough for claiming that I gave a correct analysis of the concept?

Undoubtedly, apart from the criteria we use to apply a concept, we often have all sorts of pictures or assumptions about additional properties that the things to which the concept applies have. These pictures and assumptions, although playing no role in the application of a concept, might occasionally be mentioned in explaining it. However, because they play no such role, if they are discovered to be mistaken then this is no obstacle for the continued use of the concept. If the pictures or assumptions are what made us interested in the concept, the concept might indeed drop out of use; but not because it is incoherent but because it is no longer of interest.

How is it with free action and Smilansky's idea of 'ultimate responsibility'? According to Smilansky, this idea *cannot* play any role in the actual application of the concept of free action. Smilansky has argued that whether or not we are determinists, this idea is in fact incoherent.³ We are, he has maintained, acting under the *illusion* that our actions are free. Since an illusory, incoherent idea cannot be what determines the actual applications of a concept, Smilansky has to concede that our actual identifications of actions as free are independent of this idea of ultimate responsibility. His 'ultimate responsibility' belongs to a picture that may accompany his use of the concept, but is not part of the criteria used to apply it. Moreover, Smilansky agrees that the practices of reward and punishment, praise and blame are essential to society and should be maintained. So according to him, the 'ultimate responsibility' idea does not play any conceptual role in the application of the concept of free action; it is incoherent, and the concept shall continue to be used despite the idea's incoherence. All this seems to indicate that the incoherent 'ultimate responsibility' idea is irrelevant and should be dismissed, while the concept of free action should and will be maintained.

We come across this idea of 'ultimate responsibility' only in philosophical contexts. Reflecting on our concept of free actions and attempting to reconcile it with various views of causality and responsibility, some philosophers

³ S. Smilansky, *Free Will and Illusion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000; Smilansky, "Free Will, Fundamental Dualism, and the Centrality of Illusion," in R. Kane (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Free Will*. 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 491–507.

have been misled to conceive the incoherent idea of an uncaused cause for which we are still responsible. Perhaps this is a natural illusion, the way the sea on the horizon cannot but look higher than the seashore – although the illusion does not occur in Plato or Aristotle. Yet be that as it may, it is a *philosophical* illusion, playing no role in our practice, an idle wheel that turns nothing. The illusion that should be exposed is not one involved in our concept of free action, which is coherent and indispensable, but the one in some philosophical reflections on that concept.

Response to Lurie

Lurie discusses the last chapter of my book, “On Philosophy.” In it, I characterized philosophy as contributing not to knowledge but to understanding. I continued to describe two ways in which this can be a significant contribution, and Lurie thinks that these are incompatible. After summarizing my views, I explain why I disagree.

Philosophical inquiries are conceptual. Philosophers do not predict or expect new observations or experiments to verify their claims. Sometimes – for instance, when reflecting on some scientific theory – they engage with concepts and theories that scientists have forged in an attempt to explain various observations and experiments, but their own reflections are not hostage to further empirical discoveries.

We might then ask, what is the point in such reflections? People usually understand what they mean when they use this or that word, and if some word or concept is insufficiently clear, they consult a dictionary, not a philosopher. One answer is that we often have wrong pictures or assumptions on what our concepts involve; exposing these can be valuable in various ways, and this is something a philosopher can do.

In my response to Smilansky, for instance, we saw how some have thought that an idea of ‘ultimate’ responsibility, which might be incoherent, is involved in our descriptions of some actions as done freely. This conviction has brought some people to conclude that we are not ‘ultimately’ responsible for what we do, a conclusion they thought should or might have significant practical consequences. By contrast, I tried to show there that this idea is not involved in our identification of these actions and that it is redundant, an idle wheel that does no work. The idea of ‘ultimate’ responsibility has caused intellectual distress, which, often together with some related ideas – the

apparent incompatibility of free action and determinism, for instance – has preoccupied philosophers, theologians, and others over the generations. The philosophical work, if done properly, should relieve us from this distress. In this sense, it is a kind of philosophical, intellectual therapy. Herein lies one significant value of philosophy.

This value does not render philosophy quietist, despite Lurie's claims to the contrary. Quietism is a calm acceptance of things as they are without attempts to resist or change them. Considering the above free-action discussion, philosophical reflection indeed did not bring us to dismiss or change our view of some actions as free; however, it did bring us to resist and try to change the way people often *reflect* on free action and responsibility. Moreover, when this approach is *practiced*, certainly no calm acceptance is exhibited by any of the discussants! So no Quietism here.

I also described in my book an additional value of philosophy, this time a contribution to science. Conceptual misunderstandings of the kind mentioned above exist also among scientists, and their elimination can open up new scientific possibilities. One historical example I gave was that of Descartes' realization of the relative nature of motion: bodies move relative to each other, and there is no meaning to absolute motion.⁴ This realization made possible the developments of a variety of physical theories, among them, much later, Einstein's relativity theories. Descartes' realization was of a conceptual nature, relying on no contingent empirical fact or any specialist knowledge, and yet it opened up new horizons to scientific inquiry. I think the possibility and even need for such additional conceptual contributions, in physics, psychology, and elsewhere, still exist. Herein lies an additional significant value of philosophy.

This kind of contribution to the sciences does not reduce philosophy into their handmaid, as Lurie suggests. Conceptual, theoretical, and empirical work are here bound together, including in some of the most important breakthroughs in the history of science. I don't think this diminishes in any way the significance of philosophy.

Is there any tension between the two contributions? I don't think so. Both are conceptual in nature, exposing misleading pictures and unjustified assumptions. When philosophy engages with scientific investigation, this

⁴ R. Descartes, *Principia Philosophiae* (Amsterdam: Elsevir, 1644), book II, sections 13 and 24.

can have constructive results, leading to new theoretical possibilities; while such constructive results do not often follow when misleading pictures are eliminated from our reflections on our ordinary concepts. (A mixture of the two contributions may also occur, as I think is the case with some philosophical criticisms of recent work in cognitive psychology and neuroscience.) This difference, however, is no reason to see any incompatibility between the two contributions.

Perhaps Lurie thought that there is such an incompatibility because of a misunderstanding of a passage in my book. He quotes me as saying, on page 130, that philosophy's value is mainly therapeutic. He apparently took me to mean there that this is true of philosophy generally. However, as a rereading of that passage would show, I was talking at that place about the philosophical resolution of the sceptical dream argument and of the alleged incompatibility of free will and determinism. My claim was not on philosophy's contribution in general.

Lurie concludes with a remark on the value of philosophy as traditionally practiced. I maintained in my book that conceptual confusions have brought philosophers to construct a variety of metaphysical theories, which, once the confusions are eliminated, are eliminated with them. These are constructions whose substance is the mist of misunderstanding, and they disappear once it is dispersed. Lurie, however, suggests that these constructions might still be of interpretative significance, broadening our understanding and making sense of the world.

The metaphysical theories of Plato, Descartes, and others have certainly played a pivotal role in the development of civilization. And philosophical systems have also contributed in a variety of other ways to our conceptions of ourselves and of nature. This I did not challenge in my book. On the contrary, these contributions are the very reason a critique of metaphysics justifies the intellectual effort it requires. Interpretations are part of human nature and of culture, and with them come misinterpretations. And from the Pre-Socratics on, philosophers have developed a variety of metaphysical theories that involved misinterpretations and misunderstandings. The philosophical effort to demolish these misconstructions is necessary precisely because of the philosophical tendency to construct them. For only in this way can we get a clear view of both man and world.