

You can't swim without water. Free will: a defunct religious concept

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The deterministic universe is *essential* for freedom of the will, but has profound implications for how we view personal responsibility and accountability.

How can the will be exercised without the deterministic universe?

In certain circles there is the view that free will is illusory due to the recognition that brain damage affects brain function and the observation that unconscious mental activity can precede conscious decision (Libet's [2] experiments). The rationale is that we do not have free will because it is incompatible with the deterministic universe; that is, that our thoughts are a product of physical processes of a physical brain, beyond our control, and that our conscious self is the end of a chain of cause and effect events rather than the initiator.

However, this rather austere perspective that paints us as akin to automata can only be meaningful, and valid, if we can give a meaningful answer to the above question; how could our will, our desires and goals, be exercised without a deterministic universe? In other words, how could we do, or achieve, what we want, without the physical laws of the universe?

Undeterminism

Even a cursory look at this question reveals that it cannot be answered meaningfully.

For example, suppose that your usual tippie is beer. So you walk (using your leg muscles to counteract the effects of gravity) up to a bar and open your mouth to speak (by manipulating the tongue to vibrate the air producing the set of intended sound waves) to say the words, "I'll have a beer please," but what actually comes out of your mouth, in violation of your intentions and the physical laws of the universe, are the words, "I'll have a Campari and soda please." If this happened

you would, I suggest, be a tad disappointed, as well as very surprised!

Suppose you were leader of the free world and rather than giving a press conference on the need for gun control, as intended, you press the big red button initiating nuclear obliteration, then we'd all end up being a tad disappointed (in our last four minutes). If things just happened without any reason, or pre-existing foundation, and in violation of physics and our intentions and desires we could not get anything done; we would die out very quickly.

Uncaused causer?

This view of the origin of thoughts seems somewhat ludicrous, and unrealistic, but appears to be just what is proposed by the religious camp who hold the libertarian, view of free will, as exemplified in this video [3] of Professor of Philosophy J.P. Moreland from the Talbot School of Theology, Biola University, a private Christian University in California, USA.

Notice that he has to jump through convoluted philosophical loops in order to retain libertarian free will, otherwise the whole concept of an interactive God disintegrates. He concludes (time 05:05) that you are the “first mover, the uncaused causer of your own actions”. It is not exactly clear what an uncaused causer is, or even could be. One implication, though, is that, as above, thoughts and actions have no cause, that they are not based upon previous experience, and come from nowhere. If, on the other hand, thoughts are based upon previous, cognitive, events then Moreland's conclusion of first mover is not valid. In either case the conclusion that free will exists does not follow; either thoughts are “determined” or they pop into existence spontaneously.

Dualism

Both the religious view and the “scientific” view as espoused by Libet, are based upon an assumption that is dualistic in nature, that the mind can exist independently of the physical universe. Libet talks about the conscious mind being able to “veto” what comes from the unconscious mind, in a similar view to Moreland's “first mover”. Apart from the fact that scientific research and evidence is categorical that the mind is a product of the brain, the dualistic argument does not give a coherent account of where the mind comes from, that is, who we *are*.

The Self

Those who view the conscious mind as paramount are too quick to discount the unconscious companion, or even to make a strict distinction. Although there are some outcomes of the nervous system that are entirely unconscious and beyond our control, such as the opening and closing of the iris, which regulates the light

falling on the retina, much of what is now unconscious was once conscious. Take, for example, playing a guitar. An experienced player does not need to think about the finger positions or movement sequences, they just happen naturally. However, at some point, when starting out, it was necessary to think about them consciously, and practice them over and over again until they became laid down in the unconscious mind as “second nature”. The same applies to concepts such as honesty and justice, that are more commonly associated with our personal identity. The position we take on them is learned over time until we no longer need to think about them, and they are an integral part of our psyche.

Who we are, our Self, is not just the fleeting thoughts currently in our mind, but the sum of all our experiences and memories throughout the history of our entire existence.

Not determined

There seems to be a curious misunderstanding amongst those who oppose determinism’s role, that they take it to imply that we are compelled by forces beyond our control. Philosopher John Searle [4] takes determinism to mean that our decisions were “forced by antecedently sufficient causal conditions” (1:28) and that “we are completely at the mercy of causal forces” (2:35).

The misunderstanding comes down to the subtle semantic difference between the usage of the words *determined* and *deterministic*. Because some process is deterministic does not mean that the outcomes of the process are *determined* by the process, in the sense that there is some agency forcing those outcomes. Your actions are not *determined* by the physical universe any more than water forces you to swim.

Essentialism

It would appear that any way we look at it the only way we can achieve anything (exercise our will) is by way of a universe that has a consistent set of physical laws, and that we are an integral part of that universe.

So, rather than determinism being at odds with playing out the intentions of our will it is actually *essential*. The deterministic universe is the medium by which we exercise our will; we achieve what we want by way of the deterministic universe; we *are* determinism.

Stating that free will is incompatible (or compatible even) with determinism is as meaningless as saying that swimming is incompatible with water. The deterministic universe is the medium necessary to us exercising our will just as water is the medium necessary for swimming.

The main relevant implication of this unification of the will and determinism is that the outcomes of *all* the “decisions” we make are *precisely* what we want them to be, at the time of making them (though they may turn out later to have been poor decisions).

Superpowers

There is something special about humans (and all other animals) that differentiates us from inanimate objects and puts us outside of the realm of being purely at the mercy of determinism. We have special powers.

We may not be able to leap tall buildings in a single bound, but we can take the stairs. We may not be able to fly unaided through the air, but we can design and build flying machines to whisk us across the world or even into space.

We can also build cars and trains to transport us faster than deterministic nature intended. We can make clothes to keep us warm and build shelters to protect us in hostile environments. We can chase after animals for food or run away from danger.

Rather than being like tumbleweed blown around at the whim of causation we can *defy* determinism, counteracting its effects. Though, of course, we do it in a deterministic manner. The deterministic universe acts upon us and we act upon the deterministic universe. Rather than being at the end of a long chain of cause and effect events what makes us special is that we are an integral part of a causal loop where the world affects us and we affect the world. We can counteract, or compensate for, undesirable world effects and we can maintain those that we find desirable.

Purpose

And there, within our abilities to hold the world at bay, or to let it in, we see the essence of the illusion of what we call “choice”. Those abilities, and related actions, are driven by the internal goals that we all have. Human beings act in the world intrinsically for comfort, security and replenishment which, in turn, are realised by a multitude of sub-goals such as walking to the shops, getting a good job, raising a glass of water to your mouth, building a house, seeing friends, going to the gym, picking your nose, making a pizza, taking a degree course, voting in elections, joining a religion and having sex.

Freedom

Humans (and animals) by way of their purpose-driven, evolution-derived [1] abilities to resist the effects of the deterministic universe, by deterministic means, have the freedom to achieve their goals; to exercise their will. No actual choices are

made, nor need they be as the concept of choice merely reflects a present goal; and the fact that other paths would have been *possible* if the purpose had been different.

If an object comes flying towards your head, and you see it in time, it is a trivial matter to stand aside and avoid it, if your goal is not to be hit. On the other hand, if the object is a ball and you're in the middle of a soccer match your goal is likely to be different; to take it on the head and knock it into the back of the net. What we think of as conscious deliberation is just the mentalisation or vocalisation of the, often conflicting, goals that we have in our mind at any one time. Although, one goal will become dominant, no actual *choice* is exercised. After all, given exactly the same circumstances and the same goals why would we have "chosen" a different path?

Slaves to Faith

At first glance the view of achieving whatever we want by way of the deterministic universe (within its limits) may seem liberating. And it can be, but it depends, crucially, upon what are our goals and how we came by them in the first place. That is, on how our beliefs and perspectives were acquired and developed from birth. The nature of those beliefs can apply severe restrictions on the freedom of behaviour that a person has, as a person's goals are the result of those beliefs. Some restrictions come about from social and cultural influences, but those are largely to aid conformity within a society, and may change over time. The most severe form of restrictions are those of a religious nature and are acquired by way of a religious upbringing and indoctrination. Unlike social and cultural beliefs they are more intransigent to change due to their claim to divine (and absolute) origin.

Such religious faith restricts goals to such things as not eating certain types of food, having to attend church, having to worship and pray five times a day, giving money to religious groups, feeling shame and guilt or not using electricity on certain days. The more faith people have, that is, the more seriously people take the beliefs, then the more restrictive are their goals, and the more dangerous they are to others; persecuting homosexuals, oppressing women, countering criticism and blasphemy to the point of murdering transgressors, coercing adherence to religious rules and dogma on threat of execution and seeking martyrdom and eternal bliss with 72 virgins by suicide attacks.

Religious faith represents the most obvious way by which human beings restrict their own freedom. Liberation from such beliefs would free the human race to strive for and achieve goals limited only by our imagination and the constraints of the physical universe.

Responsibility

If choice is an illusion and the actions people take are the only ones available to them, reflecting their current make-up and that their goals are a result of antecedent nurture (and nature) then there are profound implications for personal responsibility and how people are held accountable.

A cornerstone of the justice and penal system is that perpetrators could have chosen not to commit a crime. However, as we have seen this is based upon false assumptions arising from an invalid concept of free will.

That someone is unable to make a choice not to pursue a life of crime is probably more clear in the case of a drug addict. In order to feed his habit the addict has a high-priority goal to acquire money to buy drugs even if it means committing burglary. However, this applies to all criminals, whether addicted or not, the only difference being the mix and priority of the goals that they have. Someone who is brought up in an environment deprived of opportunity or education, and mixes with others who see limited options for achieving prosperity by legal means may well end up with the goal of acquiring money by joining an armed gang to rob a bank or jewellery store.

A central aspect of the justice system is that of punishment for crimes. But is there any point to this, if people could not have acted differently, apart from vengeance and some desire to see criminals suffer. There is the deterrent factor, of course, in that most people have the goal not to go to prison, but for those who have been caught deterrence has clearly failed.

It would be far more beneficial to society if the focus of the justice and penal systems were to prevent future crimes and recidivism rather than merely punishing people. This is not to say that incarceration should be totally avoided, it is may be necessary to stop anti-social behaviour and to protect the law-abiding public.

However, the overriding emphasis of the penal system should be, not on punishment, but on rehabilitation, and changing the goals people have such that they do not have the desire to commit crimes and that they see the benefit to themselves and those around them to follow more productive, less destructive goals.

Knowledge is Freedom

The discussion of faith and of responsibility highlights why some people are able to exercise a wider degree of freedom than others and what is the key to enabling that freedom in others; awareness.

If people are not aware of the options available to them or hold beliefs that are contrary to fact, then they will not be able to form goals that will enable them to

act in certain directions. For example, not knowing how to read cuts off the whole of literature. Likewise, believing the world is a few thousand years old and was created as per the book of Genesis omits the entirety of the beauty and wonder of the scientific endeavour of understanding the reality of the universe.

The key then to maximising the freedoms people have is by enabling awareness and the acquisition of knowledge, through education, and by rejecting false and restrictive beliefs that are acquired as a result of religious faith.

The point arises, though, that if we do not have free will in the conventional sense then people cannot change their goals willy-nilly to acquire this greater knowledge and greater freedom. This is true, but perhaps, from reading this *you* may be more aware than you were before of the relationship between knowledge and freedom and now have a more determined goal to raise that awareness in others and to challenge the restrictive nature of religious faith.

There may be doubts as to whether or not this is pointless given the prominence of religion throughout the world, but if we look back throughout history we can see that previous times were less educated and more fundamentalist in nature.

Arising from the purposive nature of living systems is a fundamental motivation for curiosity and exploration. In humans this emerges as a thirst for knowledge, for understanding ourselves and the universe around us. The results of this motivation are inevitably progressive in nature and has, so far, led the human race, largely, away from superstition and ignorance into a more enlightened, and compassionate, era. As long as the influence of self-imposed restrictions on freedom of thought and action do not become overwhelming there is no reason why that should not continue.

Summary

- Scientific knowledge points to the universe being deterministic.
- Brain function, related thoughts and cognitive processes and subsequent actions adhere to deterministic physical laws.
- Thoughts and actions without any causal context are not compatible with any coherent view of the freedom of the will.
- Free will is a dualistic concept; determinism and the will are treated as separate and independent.
- This libertarian view of free will is nonsensical, as well as being contrary to evidence.
- There is, therefore, no place for gods.

- The will and determinism cannot be segregated.
- Determinism is *essential* for exercising the will.
- Thoughts and actions are deterministic not determined.
- Humans have special powers to defy determinism.
- Humans act upon the world to bring it in line with their desires and goals.
- Interaction with the world is one phase of a continuous *loop* of causation.
- The behaviour of humans is goal-directed.
- Choice is an illusion.
- At any moment in time humans have the freedom to exercise their will.
- The Self is the sum of the conscious and unconscious mind.
- Humans' abilities are a product of nature and nurture.
- Freedom is limited by the physical laws.
- Freedom is further restricted by acquired beliefs.
- Criminals require rehabilitation not punishment.
- Freedom is increased by awareness and education.

The crux of the argument in favour of the conventional view of free will is the feeling that different choices could have been made at the point of decision. However, as has been pointed out in this discussion, that view is contrary to scientific evidence, is nonsensical and, even if it somehow did make sense, is undesirable.

Humans are, though, purposive agents with the freedom to exercise their will, to achieve their goals and desires, in a dynamic, chaotic, deterministic universe; within the limitations of the physical laws of the universe, without any need to invoke supernatural beings.

What should we call this type of freedom of the will? Well, we could call it “free will”, I suppose.

References

- [1] Daniel C Dennett. *Freedom Evolves*. Penguin, 2004.

- [2] Benjamin Libet. Do we have free will? *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 6(8-9):47–57, 1999.
- [3] J.P. Moreland. Do humans have free will? <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zYLnNPYT5pk>, August 2012.
- [4] John Searle. What is free will? http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_rZfSTpjG18, January 2013.