

# Manchester Lit&Phil

## Philosophy Forum



## Free will – reality or illusion?

Focus paper

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Are we free to make our own decisions or is everything pre-determined for us? Can we exercise our free will to make choices or are our choices subconsciously limited by aspects such as our genes, environment and culture? The question of whether we have free will has challenged philosophers across the ages and recent developments in neuroscience have added additional aspects into the debate. This paper looks at the main positions adopted in the free will debate with a view to engendering an engaging discussion in the Philosophy Forum.



# 1 Introduction

If someone decided to take a straw poll of the passengers on the top deck of the Clapham omnibus about their view of whether humans had free will or not, I would suggest an overwhelming majority agreeing that we have free will and we exercise it all the time (unless the bus was full of philosophers!) This paper reviews the basic concept of free will together with some of the opposing arguments suggesting free will is just an illusion.

## 2 Free Will

2.1 We all have the ability to choose between different options, don't we? Given the choice between cake or fruit at a café, what we decide is completely up to ourselves and, if we wanted to, we could make a different choice the next time, even if all the conditions were the same. This is what free will is about – within certain limits we are free to choose what we want, when we want; and it seems like common sense that we have it.

### Free Will

The power of acting without the constraint of necessity or fate; the ability to act at one's own discretion (OED)

2.2 When choosing between the cake and the fruit, the concept of free will suggests that up to the point of you making the choice, you have the control to have chosen either of them or nothing at all. Nothing prior to you making the choice determines what your choice will be. It remains an open possibility that you will choose the fruit until you actually choose the cake with nothing determined in advance. This intuitive feeling of exercising free will is confirmed by the philosopher G. Strawson when he stated that there is 'a feeling of radical, absolute, buck-stopping up-to-me-ness in choice and action'.

2.3



Free will as a basic concept seems to have originated with the early Christian theologians such as Augustine as they tried to come to terms with the concept of sin and evil in the world. The claim was that God had given human beings free will, the ability to choose for ourselves what to do; otherwise why would an omniscient, omnipresent and benevolent God construct a world where people sinned. The argument is that evil is seen as a consequence of having free will, otherwise it would not be genuinely free will and we would be no better than robots with no choices of our own. This approach firmly allocates moral responsibility to the individual.

2.4

In support of individuals having free will, philosophers such as Spinoza, Descartes and Hegel proposed the concept of '*causa sui*' — that is, something generated within itself, is self-caused, or the cause of itself and independent of any other event. It is neither determined nor undetermined, but self-determined. The argument

### *Causa sui*

The Latin name for a self-caused event, one that is not the result of prior events.

suggests that individuals can create their own thoughts and initiate actions without any external influences

2.5 The philosopher Julian Baggini neatly summarises these traditional views on free will in 5 points:

1. A free choice must not be determined or conditioned by past causes
2. Free choice must be entirely the result of a conscious decision
3. That to choose freely it must always have been possible that you could have done otherwise
4. To be free requires being ultimately responsible for being the person you are
5. Being free requires a complete absence of constraint on what we do

2.6 Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-80) looked at the degree of freedom that humans have with his existential proposal that 'existence precedes essence', the idea that by just being human we can *choose* our fate rather than our nature *determining* it. Whilst he acknowledges that past events led to our existence, he suggests we are alone in the world and are fully responsible for who we are and what we decide to be. This aspect of freedom includes an ability to exercise free will no matter what the world around us puts in our way. Sartre does not necessarily think this is a good thing as this "abandonment consists simply in the fact that I am condemned to be wholly responsible for myself" with all the subsequent challenges this brings.

2.7 Many other noted historical philosophers have voiced their opinions on the ability of humans to exercise free will. For instance, Baruch Spinoza (1632-77) suggested that:

"Experience teaches us no less clearly than reason, that men believe themselves free, simply because they are conscious of their actions, and unconscious of the causes whereby those actions are determined."  
Baruch Spinoza, 1677, *Ethics* (original title: *Demonstrated in Geometrical Order*)

This proposal that we are unconscious of the causes of actions initiates doubt about some of the truth of free will. Where these causes come from, and whether they influence our ability to make true choices, question whether our choices and actions are really self-generated and opens up the debate about whether they are predetermined, challenging the intuitive view that free will exists.

### 3 Causal Determinism

3.1 Determinism is one of the major challenges to the argument that humans can make free choices. Its main proposition is that we cannot do anything other than what we ultimately do and that our choices and consequential actions are predetermined for us.

3.2 This argument focuses on the view that all actions have a cause in line with the natural laws of physics, and that as humans are part of nature and as our brain is made up of physical matter, we are subject to these fixed laws. Effectively brain states = physical states and as a

#### **Determinism**

The world is governed by (or is under the sway of) determinism if and only if, given a specified way things are at a time *t*, the way things go thereafter is fixed as a matter of natural law. (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy)

consequence we are caught up in a causal chain stretching back to the start of the universe. As Einstein stated:

“Everything is determined, the beginning as well as the end, by forces over which we have no control.”

- 3.3 As ever in philosophy, there is a thought experiment that demonstrates the concept of determinism fairly well. This was proposed by Pierre-Simon Laplace (1749-1827) over 200 years ago and concerns what would happen if a vast intellect were able to know every law of nature and the state of every object in the universe. The vast intellect is now referred to as Laplace’s Demon and for it nothing would be uncertain: the future



would be just like the past because of its ability to model everything down to individual atoms. This has led some to conclude that if everything that happens in the physical universe is the result of prior causes and effects, then everything we do must also be the result of prior causes and effects. Hence, given the way things have gone in the past, all future events that will ever happen are already destined to occur. Therefore, as we are in the physical world and subject to its natural laws, free will does not exist and our choices are determined before we actually think we have made them.

- 3.4 Whilst acknowledging our part in a physical world, the neuroscientist Anil Seth identifies what free will is *not*. He suggests that free will is not an intervention in the flow of physical events in the universe, more specifically in the brain, making things happen that wouldn’t otherwise happen. He calls this spooky free will and it would demand we are free from the natural laws of cause and effect which is difficult to conceive.

- 3.5 Considering how the brain works, recent developments within neuroscience have added further weight to the determinism argument by providing a more detailed understanding of how neuron networks and synapses work when the brain processes information. Experiments by Benjamin Libet (1916-2007) and others have identified the possibility that our subconscious triggers movement before we are consciously aware of the choice to move. This has been interpreted by some as the subconscious brain processing sensory information and preparing the conscious brain for voluntary action without us consciously thinking of doing the action. So deterministic subconscious processes are the causes of actions, not free will. This subconscious, involuntary action is also evident within reflex actions such as pulling your hand away from a hot stove, it happens automatically before you think about it. However, Libet’s experimental design is widely regarded as flawed, so the conclusions he drew are thus unsupported. (Cf eg: Steve Taylor, 2017, [Benjamin Libet and the Denial of Free Will: How did a flawed experiment become so influential?](#), *Psychology Today*)

- 3.6 Besides neurological theories of determinism, others propose that our choices are limited by our genes, the environment we live in and the culture we follow. This approach suggests that the sum total of a person’s experiences, desires and knowledge, their genes, social environment and the nature of choices facing them, together with other factors that we may not be aware of, combine together to make a particular action in the particular circumstances inevitable.

3.7 The philosopher and neuroscientist, Sam Harris, a strong advocate of determinism, proposes that you are the totality of what brought you to where you are today and that you are continually open to all the aspects of life, often subconsciously, and this can change you. He suggests that you can't take credit for the choices you make, and that whilst you may feel that you are the prime mover in your inner life, the next choice you make will come out of a wilderness of prior causes that you did not see or initiate yourself. This is the effect of the brain acting subconsciously and being the cause of actions that are not caused by conscious thought. Harris emphasises that you are not a stable entity and that external influences continually change who you are and what choices you make, but all this happens beyond our conscious control. Harris sums this up in the following way:



“Our conscious self is riding on top of a whole host of subconscious processes and external events”

The end result of the determinist position is that free will is an illusion and no one can do otherwise than what one actually does.

## 4 Free Will and Moral Responsibility

4.1 Whichever position is adopted on free will, each argument has implications for moral responsibility: if we don't have free will, then how can we praise someone's good actions or blame them for when they did something wrong? From a legal perspective, modern society attributes an element of free will to individuals so they can be held responsible for crimes they commit, because it would be unjust to penalise someone if they did not have any control over actions they undertook.

4.2 So how do determinists justify punishment if they acknowledge that individuals don't have free will? Harris suggests that it is only a matter of luck that determines whether someone creates a crime or not. If you had the same genes, the same life experiences and an identical brain to someone who had committed a murder at a certain time then you would have acted exactly as they did in the same circumstances. As a consequence, punishment should not focus on the backwards looking blame and retribution aspects but take a forward looking approach to mitigating harm and minimizing risk by trying to deter criminal behaviour in others. However, as philosopher Ted Honderich points out:

“The moral objection to justify punishment by the satisfaction of grievance remains overwhelming.”

## 5 Theist Predestination

5.1 Some theologians, particularly in the early church, propose that God has a plan and that whilst we may not understand it, events are predestined. This helps to explain events such as earthquakes and other disasters and why individuals act in ways that

appear at first glance not to be understandable – things happen for a reason. This idea of a master plan to explain events still gets mentioned, particularly in the aftermath of a major disaster, but I would suggest it currently has limited attraction apart from within fundamentalist religions.

- 5.2 For this paper the main question around predestination is do humans participate in or contribute to their own salvation and damnation, or is God's will the sole cause? If you take the predestined view then this surely negates or limits the availability of free will.



## 6 Compatibilism

- 6.1 So, is it possible to reconcile free will and determinism? Compatibilism offers a compromise and suggests that whilst the causal deterministic aspects of cause and effect are accepted, there is still room for individuals to make considered choices and the truth of causal determinism poses no threat to our status as morally responsible agents. Compatibilists believe, like determinists, that the universe operates with law-like order, and that the past determines the future, but they also believe that there is something different about some human actions and that some of the actions we take really are free. This highlights a difference between event causation where we have no control over actions and agent causation where we make things happen on our own.
- 6.2 As the philosopher Patricia Churchland argues: 'am I free?' is the wrong question. Instead we should be asking 'how much control do I have?' and the more control I have, the more responsibility I also have. This moves the free will debate from a 'yes or no' answer to one suggesting that we have degrees of freedom. But here freedom is redefined as nothing more than an agent's ability to do what she wishes in the absence of impediments that would otherwise stand in her way.
- 6.3 As a consequence, compatibilism claims that a person has moral responsibilities over their own actions where they show the intent to carry them out (rather than being influenced by another person) even if this intent is determined prior to the individual considering their choices. As Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) argued:  
"That I am free to do something when I can do it if I so will and that this kind of freedom we undisputedly have, whether or not there is some chain of prior causes that necessitate our willing as we do."  
The German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860) summarised this in the following way:  
"Man indeed can do what he wills, but he cannot will what he wills."



## 7 Summary

7.1 The debate around whether we have free will or not has raged amongst philosophers for centuries. It is difficult to argue against the intuitive feeling that we do have free will and that we are solely responsible for our own actions. Alternatively you may go along with the 18th Century French/German philosopher Baron D'Holbach (1723-89) who stated:

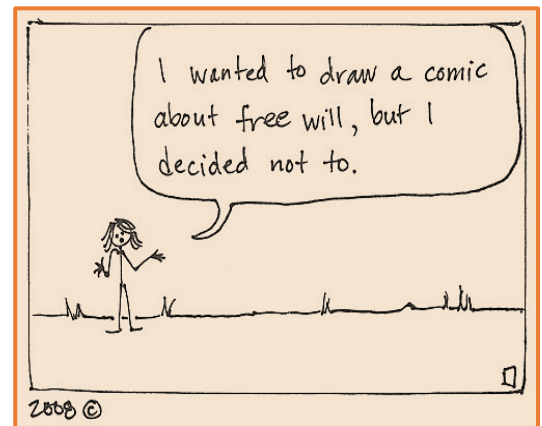
“We are all just cogs in a machine doing what we were always meant to do with no actual volition”

7.2 Anil Seth highlights that the free will discussion hinges around 3 points in a mental process:

1. **What** – which actions to take
2. **When** – the process determining the timing of the action
3. **Whether** – a late-breaking decision point which allows for last minute cancellations or interventions

The ‘What’ process incorporates all aspects of the physical world, environment, genes, culture and personal beliefs and values to generate a single action out of many possibilities. The ‘When’ process is closely linked to the subjective urge to move and can appear prior to a conscious decision being made. The ‘Whether’ element is an intentional inhibition mental process that may call off an action. Each of these brain states could be considered as determined physical states and subject to metaphysical laws. Alternatively a free will supporter would agree that we *are* swayed by the circumstances, but ultimately it is us who choose in which direction we sway. To clarify it further: we are self-causing agents – free and responsible.

7.3 Looking back at Baggini’s 5 points on free will he argues that these seem to be tough conditions to fulfil when defending complete free will and he proposes that unfettered freedom is an illusion; in fact it would make no sense. He argues that choices are not meaningful unless they reflect an individual’s values and values cannot be easily chopped and changed but need to be in place to start with. These values come from a variety of places: our culture, social environment and genes. Combined with our own experiences, we build them up and fine tune them over a lifetime and we then use them to help us decide whether to act or not. This aligns with the proposal that there are degrees of freedom as per the compatibility view and allows for individuals having moral responsibility.



7.4 So what’s your view on the problem of free will? Do we have unfettered free will or is this an illusion? Are our decisions and actions determined by nature and/or nurture or is there some form of compromise that enables us to make some choices within constraints. You decide ... or do you?



## 8 Areas For Exploration

Below are some areas to explore in our Forum. The discussion groups can choose one or more ... or completely ignore them if you have other ideas:

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- Q1 Do we have free will or is it just an illusion?
  - Q2 Can you support the Determinist view that our actions are the result of previous causes outside of our control?
  - Q3 How do we continue to support punishment for individuals who commit crimes if they don't have free will?



## 9 Supporting Information and Further Reading

For those of you who have found this topic interesting I have provided below references to information that I have used in producing this paper:

### Books

Anil Seth, 2021, *Being You: A New Science of Consciousness*

Nigel Warburton, 2013, *Philosophy: the Basics*

Julian Baggini, 2016, *Freedom Regained; the Possibility of Free Will*

John Paul Sartre, 1943 (English translation 1956), *Being and Nothingness*

Ted Honderich, 2005, *Punishment, the Supposed Justifications Revisited*

Thomas Hobbes, 1656, *The Questions concerning Liberty, Necessity, and Chance*

### Websites

*Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*

<https://plato.stanford.edu>

An Argument about Free Will, *Philosophy Now*

[https://philosophynow.org/issues/66/An\\_Argument\\_About\\_Free\\_Will](https://philosophynow.org/issues/66/An_Argument_About_Free_Will)

*You Tube* interview with Sam Harris on Free Will

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OFazP2nBlqQ>

*You Tube* lecture by Sam Harris on Free Will

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pCofmZIC72g&t=292s>

*Crash Course Philosophy Videos*

- Free will vs Determinism <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vCGtkDzELAI>
- Compatibilism <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KETTtiprINU&t=301s>







Your notes