Free Will: Could We Have Acted, Or Even Thought, Otherwise Than We Did At That Particular Time?

I have divided my talk into three sections.

1. What is meant by ‘free will’?
2. What are the arguments for and against it?
3. What are the implications if we do not have it?

Each of the words in ‘free will’ need exploring separately before attempting the phrase itself.

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary lists fifteen different definitions of the adjective ‘free’, ten of which have subsections. Four seem relevant here.

2(d) Enjoying personal freedom: not subject to the control or domination of others.

4(b) Not bound, confined or detained by force.

14 Not allowing slavery.

These all come under the umbrella ‘free from’.

3(a) Not determined by anything beyond its own nature or being: choosing, or capable of choosing, for itself.

3(b) Determined by the choice of the actor or performer.

These all come under the umbrella of ‘free to’.

Now why have I included ‘free from’ here? Well, compatibilists believe that ‘free will’ can be reconciled with determinism. By ‘determinism’ compatibilists mean everything has a cause, and they argue that the contrary of ‘free’ is not ‘caused’ but ’compelled’ or ‘coerced’. For the compatibilists then, a free act is one which is in accordance with the actor’s will, desires, intensions or wants. So, if you have freedom from, you could, even if determinism were true, have made a different decision.

Sam Harris, in his book ‘Free Will’, cites the case of a person wanting a second scoop of ice-cream and no one is forcing them to eat it. Then eating a second scoop is, for the compatibilist, fully demonstrative of their freedom of will. Presumably, the compatibilist would say they might have chosen not to have had the second scoop. Well, of course, they might have. That is, history could have been different. But it was as it was and for very specific reasons.

Of course, the compatibilists concept of ‘free will’ does resonate with many of our linguistic uses of it. If, for example, someone performs an extremely magnanimous gesture and we say, admiringly, that it was done of their own free will, we are using the term in the way compatibilists do, that they have a warm heart, generous spirit etc.

So, compatibilism seems to me to defy any reasonable interpretation of ‘free will’ and we can disregard 2(d), 4(b) and 14. But 3(a) and 3(b) fare little better. For, they do not say anything as to the operation of nature or being, and making choices. This could be pre-determined or not. So, the ‘free’ in ‘free will’ is somewhat problematic.

What about ‘will’ then? The medieval concept of will was that every action is preceded by an action of the will itself, a decision or choice, which causes voluntary action to occur. This only applied to humans. It follows from this that action can only be free to the degree that will is free.

Hobbes changed this idea of the will. It became, for him, no more than basic appetites or wants, that humans and animals can share. He wrote: “I acknowledge this liberty, that I can do if I will, but to say I can will if I will, I take to be an absurd speech.” And also, that the liberty of man is “that he finds no stop, in doing what he has the will, desire or inclination to doe.” A compatibilist stance, which I disagree with.

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary has seven definitions of the noun ‘will’ under one heading – call this A – and six under another – call this B. There are six which seem relevant to our discussion of ‘free will’.

A2 Used to express desire, choice, willingness, consent, or, in negative construction, refusal.

A6(b) Used to express determination, insistence, persistence or wilfulness.

B2(c) Choice, determination.

B3 The act, process or experience of willing: volition.

B4(a) Mental powers manifested as wishing, choosing, desiring or intending.

B5 The power of control over one’s own actions or emotions.

These definitions contain quite a number of words, so ‘will’ does seem to be a rather difficult concept to pin down. They contain four different ideas, desires/wants, determination, choice and control. Your average person would, I feel sure, plump for determination as nearest to what they believed, while Hobbes would go for desires/wants.

The definition that stands out is B5, in that it does mention control. However, I am rather sceptical of the idea that we have control over our emotions. What we mean by control does not necessarily imply freedom. Wouldn’t we allow that a computer has control over its actions? The central part of the computer is actually called the control unit! So, we need to preface control by something like ‘free’. But what does this add to the word ‘control’? We have seen that there are problems with the term ‘free’.

So, basically, I am saying that ‘free will’ is difficult to pin down. In fact, does the idea of ‘will’ itself imply it being free, and therefore ‘free will’ is a tautology? I propose to approach the problem in a different way by looking into the question, “Could we have acted, or even thought, otherwise than we did at that particular time?” My definition of ‘free will’ is then ‘what we do have if this question is answered ‘yes’.

It is crucial to stress that ‘at that particular time’ means with exactly the same conditions as then. Not “Could we have acted differently if perhaps even some incredibly minor difference was in place?”. Furthermore, ‘thought’ is important here. When people talk of free will they essentially mean the freedom to make decisions. Some actions themselves may not, even to the most ardent free -willer, be free. The eye’s reaction to a very bright light comes under this category. And so, I suppose that, strictly, I should rephrase my question as “Could we have decided otherwise than we did at that particular time?” I will be using the term ‘free will’, in what follows, as I mean it in my question.

What are the arguments for or against my interpretation of ‘free will’ then?

OK. For it. Most philosophers hold that some beliefs are epistemically basic, i.e., reasonable without requiring independent evidential support, on pain of having no justified beliefs whatever. But just what criteria must such a belief require for it to be ‘basic’? It is perhaps necessary that a basic belief be ‘instinctive’ (unreflectively held) for all or most human beings; that it be embedded in regular experience; and that it be central to our understanding of an important aspect of the world. Our belief in free will seems to meet these criteria, but whether they are sufficient is debateable.

Other philosophers defend a variation on this stance, maintaining instead that belief in the reality of moral responsibility is epistemically basic, and that since moral responsibility entails free will, or so it is claimed, we may infer the reality of free will. In a similar vein is the argument for effective agency, presupposed by all scientific enquiry and so cannot rationally be doubted.

It seems to me that what is being argued here is that the concept of ‘free will’ is a practical view to take in life, rather than living according to its negation, and not an argument supporting my definition of ‘free will’.

Agent causation theory proposes that the ‘self’ makes actions happen, not our wants and desires. But what is the self? Is it

1. Physical?
2. Non-physical?
3. Neither?

If a) then it must follow the laws of science.

If b) then we have dualism, which doesn’t work.

If c) then what on earth does this mean?

In a similar vein, Simon Blackburn, in his book ‘The Big Questions; Philosophy’, offers a somewhat similar proposition. He says, “If you are willing to settle for the constitutional government of a massive neurological and anatomical system working in harmony and responsive to reason” then you can have your ’free will’.

I think this confuses complexity with freedom. It has to be admitted, even by the most ardent determinist, that we cannot predict, in general, what the outcomes of extremely complex situations will be. But that does not mean there is not some extremely complex pattern in play. As Einstein put it (quoted by Oerton in his book ‘The Nonsense of Free Will’):

“To be sure, when the number of factors coming into play in a phenomenological complex is too large, scientific method in most cases fails us. Nevertheless, no one doubts that we are confronted with a causal connection whose causal components are in the main known to us. Occurrences in this domain are beyond the reach of exact prediction because of the variety of factors in operation, not because of any lack of order in nature.”

Another approach is via quantum mechanics, in which the prevalent theory is that quantum events are undetermined. As the brain, at its most fundamental level, is a quantum engine, it too has undetermined outcomes. The problem with this is that purely random actions don’t sound much like free will anyway. On this basis, we might just wake up one morning and, for no particular reason, decide to top ourself. Also, quantum effects at the macro level do seem to smooth out. Again, I find this approach untenable.

A variation on this, as cited in the book ‘The Nonsense of Free Will’, is proposed by Robert Kane (Professor of Philosophy at the University of Texas and editor of a book entitled ‘Free Will’.) He defines self-forming actions (SFAs) as those actions which have been torn out of us by incredibly difficult choices. Those actions, he claims, are taken as a result of quantum indeterminacy, which operates in the brain at such times only, and not normally. Such actions, he says, then form our character, which then causes us to take the future actions we do. So, he does accept that our ordinary, everyday acts and decisions really are determined by our personalities, but free because of the undetermined acts previously made. Apart from the question of why quantum indeterminacy should only come into it at such critical times, there are questions too about the exact relationship between the SFAs and future actions. Do these have to match up in some way? An SFA may help create a character for which there is no corresponding future action, and vice versa. In any case, this appears to be an extremely strange definition of ‘free will’.

Libertarians claim that, as far as humans are concerned, determinism does not hold for our actions. They claim that our ordinary awareness discloses some kind of unfettered freedom, time out from the usual march of cause and effect. We can intervene in events without ourselves being caused to do so by these events. It feels like we are making a free choice.

This implies something like Gilbert Ryle’s Ghost in the Machine. Because this ghost does not consist of matter, it does not have to obey the usual laws of science. Nature presents its energies to the ghost and the ghost then pushes the chemical and physical brain about, altering its course of action. But why this particular choice? Also, this idea comes up against all the usual problems with dualism, so I have to dismiss this too.

Thomas Pink (in Free Will: A Very Short Introduction) argues that freedom is a non-causal power, and that, though not causally determined, the action is not an event of pure chance, but of the exercising of control over whether or not it occurs. This seems to me very unsatisfactory, as it seems just to be saying that free will is free because that is the definition of free. When you lift up your arm, to say there is no cause for this, seems false. Pink himself says it is the result of exercising control. Isn’t this, therefore, a cause?

There may be more arguments for free will which I have not come across. If any of you here know of any others, please let me know at the end.

What of the arguments against ‘free will’? I think one of the most compelling is that of the many cases where injury to, or operations on, the brain, or being drugged, results in dramatic changes in behaviour. For example, in a telephone conversation with Jonah Lehrer, related in his book, ‘The Decisive Moment’, Ann Klinestiver described how, after she was treated for Parkinson’s disease with the drug Requip, that imitates the activity of dopamine, she began to gamble completely recklessly, to the extent that she lost almost everything, including all her savings and her husband. She was taken off Requip and the gambling stopped, though she did go back to trembling.

Some philosophers jumped on Libet’s work as showing we are governed by our unconscious and so probably don’t have free will in the usual sense. However, Moaz and his collaborators have criticised this conclusion. Libet’s experiment was about random decisions and not those made after deliberate consideration. They showed that sub-conscious – conscious delay only occurs with random decisions, as in Libet’s experiment. Arbitrary decisions were, they found, largely determined by spontaneous sub-threshold fluctuations in neural activity. Different areas of the brain are involved in arbitrary and deliberate decision making.

However, other experiments seem to indicate there is some way in which the consciousness just ‘rubber stamps’ decisions made unconsciously. Ammon and Gandevia found that it was possible to influence which hand people move by stimulating frontal regions that are involved in movement planning using in the left or right hemisphere of the brain.

Right-handed people would normally choose to move their right hand 60% of the time, but when the right hemisphere was stimulated, they would instead choose their left hand 80% of the time Despite the external influence on their decision-making, the subjects continued to report believing that their choice of hand had been made freely. In a follow-up experiment, [Alvaro Pascual-Leone](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alvaro_Pascual-Leone) and colleagues found similar results, but also noted that the transcranial magnetic stimulation must occur within 200 milliseconds, consistent with the time-course derived from the Libet experiments.

All in all, though, I do not believe that, as yet, there is sufficient concrete evidence to use neuroscience in the free will argument. But the trend certainly seems to be pointing to there being little free will, if any at all.

In many ways, arguments against ‘free will’ come down to saying it cannot be made conceptually coherent. One such argument is based on the AI which played Go, the most complicated of all the board games. AlphaGo, a Google Deep Mind program, won a tournament against the world’s top Go player, Lee Sidol, by 4 games to 1. In the second game, at move 37, AlphaGo made a move which stunned all those watching, as well as Lee Sidol himself, who left the room, returned after a few minutes and then took 15 minutes to make his next move. AlphaGo went on to win the game.

AlphaGo was NOT programmed to make this, or any other of its moves. It was told to play itself millions of times to find its own strategies. So, this move was entirely under AlphaGo’s control. Do we then say that AlphaGo has ‘free will’? Indeed, do we even say it has any will at all?

At this point I have to confess that, although I do not believe in ‘free will’, I am not, at least in the usual sense, a determinist. I cannot see that there is such a thing as cause and effect. Einstein’s theories about time would seem to me to deny that. Also, some sub-atomic particle experiments seem to have sent effects backwards in time. Rather it seems to me that the whole universe, including us, are all a part of a ‘Game of Life’. In his book, ‘A New Kind of Science’, Stephen Wolfram argues that we are living in a universe evolving according to some rules which govern what happens to each cell of space – which is digital, utilising the Plank length, not analogue – according to what is happening in adjoining cells. In other words, the universe is like a cellular automaton.

This approach gives us some reason why we feel so strongly that we do have ‘free will’. Wolfram himself puts forward the idea that the feeling of ‘free will’ arises from computational irreducibility. That is to say, even though a system may follow definite underlying laws, its overall behaviour can still have aspects that fundamentally cannot be described by reasonable laws. The only way to work out how the system will behave is essentially to perform the computation. He suggests that the brain, although it does follow definite laws, its overall behaviour corresponds to an irreducible computation, the outcome of which can never in effect be found by reasonable laws. This gives the impression of free will.

Right, so there is no such thing as free will. We could not have decided otherwise than we did at that particular time. What are the consequences? For most people, most of the time, I don’t think there are many. We feel as if we have free will and so act as if we do. If you think more deeply about it, you may see causes for your behaviour in the past which you now regret.

But it does mean that your behaviour is controlled by a mixture of your genes and your experiences in life. So, there is a clash here. If our decisions are not freely made, how can we change ourselves – hopefully for the better? I am afraid to say that you can’t, at least, not in the way we normally understand. Some people, because of their nature and nurture, will indeed be programmed to seek experiences which will modify their behaviour, others will encounter such without being programmed to do so, while others may never encounter them at all. What’s more, any such encounters can have good, little or no or bad, outcomes.

The big consequence relates to morality. Many of the ‘free will’ supporters come at the problem from this angle. The concept of sin is vitally connected to having free will. The ‘blame culture’ thrives on this. But many of those of us who do not believe in ‘free will’ see ‘sinners’ as not to blame for their ‘sins’. We see them as being ill. So rather than punishing them, we should be treating them. We would, of course, need institutions for sickness of the mind, just as we have hospitals for sickness of the body. And, just as we compulsorily isolate those who have a highly contagious disease, so we should compulsorily isolate murderers and the like. But not as a punishment. No one, I hope, would seek to punish someone with a highly contagious disease!

This standpoint, it seems to me, would be a more humane and, I am certain, more effective, treatment of offenders, than the current prison system. The Scandinavian countries have gone some small way along this route and are finding it is paying dividends in lowering the rate of recidivism. Clarence Darrow, the lawyer who defended in the Leopold and Loeb case (two highly intelligent teenagers who murdered for the hell of it) raised, in this well-publicised trial, his lifelong contention that psychological, physical, and environmental influences—not a conscious choice between right and wrong—control human behaviour.

I do have to admit to a problem here, however. There is some experimental evidence that shows the idea of ‘free will’ does encourage wrongdoing. The problem is of course, that it is impossible to do experiments to see if anyone will commit murder as a result of this belief. However, it does seem that morals are very powerful, even though we do not have ‘free will’. That is, most of us are programmed by social interactions to behave in a reasonably moral fashion. And, of course, I do favour the deterrence principle of shutting away murderers and the like to protect society from their actions. Just not as a punishment.

**Terminology**

Causal determinism: - everything that happens – including our own actions has been causally determined to occur.

Indeterminism: at least some human actions do not have causes and are therefore free.

Incompatibilism: freedom is incompatible with causal determinism.

Libertarianism: incompatibilism + indeterminism.

Scepticism: freedom is impossible (under either causal determinism or causal indeterminism).

Compatibilism: the up-to-us-ness of our actions is perfectly consistent with causal determinism and in fact requires it to avoid the trap of our actions being merely random. But it does assume that any such causes are purely internal to the actor.

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