

SOME ARGUMENTS FOR THE EXISTENCE OF FREE WILL AND SOME OBJECTIONS ANSWERED



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1. FREE WILL — WHAT IS IT?

At the outset, it is necessary to get a clear understanding of what exactly “free will” is. A being has free will if given all other causal factors in the universe (genetic and environmental, physical and chemical are two popular current pairings) it nevertheless possesses the ability to choose more than one thing. The word “freedom” has many other uses — political freedom being the foremost among these — but the kind of freedom that I am talking about could be exercised even if a person lay encased in chains, or had a gun aimed at his head. It is the freedom of the mind from causal determination, not the freedom from physical constraints or threats of violence.

2. THE OBJECTION FROM THE LAW OF CAUSALITY

Now there are some immediate objections to the idea of free will. To begin with, it seems to violate the law of causality: “Every effect must have a cause; the same cause always produces the same effects.” The

reply here is fairly simple: it simply denies that a free choice is an *effect* of anything else. Since a choice is not an effect, the law of causality is simply irrelevant here.

Another formulation of the law of causality says that “Every *change* must have a cause.” Now this does indeed conflict with my notion of free will. And hence I ask: why should we believe that every change has a cause? I simply deny that this is so. I observe uncaused changes during my every waking moment, whenever I contemplate my own choices. Why should I discard this observation in favor of one formulation of the law of causality, however plausible?

3. THE QUANTUM CONFUSION

A further confusion identifies free will with randomness, probabilism, and (of course) quantum mechanics. But I say that free will and randomness have nothing whatever to do with each other; indeed, a probabilistic theory of choice is just as contrary to the freedom of the will as a fully deterministic one. The argument here is extremely simple. Imagine that my action is determined by the roll of a six-sided die; if it comes up six, I raise my arm. Now suppose that *all six* faces have a six on them. Now it is clear that in this case I have no free will. But suppose we put six different faces on the die, each one determining a different action. Am I any freer than before? On the contrary, I am fully a puppet dangling from the proverbial strings. The point is simply that if my actions are determined by any outside process, then I am as fully unfree whether those processes are deterministic or have a random element in them. To uphold free will then, we must deny that either of these theories describes the etiology of the mind.

4. CHOICES, ACTIONS, CAUSALITY

To face a final preliminary issue — what is the relationship between causality and free will? To put the question more clearly: in some sense, causality is necessary for free will, because an essential part of

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free will is the idea that I *cause* my actions. The answer is that we must distinguish actions and choices. Actions are effects of a cause known as the free will. Free will causes actions by making choices. But choices are not effects.

5. WHAT WE CHOOSE

I move now to my substantive notion of free will. I claim that we choose a large number of things. To begin with, we choose our beliefs. Secondly, we choose many of our bodily movements. Thirdly, we choose many of our mental processes (by analogy, mental movements) such as whether we will think and what we will think about. A more precise breakdown would be difficult, but fortunately everyone already has a pretty clear idea of the boundaries: the pumping of the heart is involuntary, whereas speaking is; accepting a belief is voluntary, but having an emotion is not; thinking about free will is voluntary, but seeing what is in front of my face when my eyes are open is not. The thoughtful reader will surely see that even these boundaries have exceptions and irregularities: supposedly some people can control their heart beat with training, and sometimes thoughts spring into our minds involuntarily. Philosopher Mike Huemer hinted as a provocative distinction: “A choice is something one *does*, whereas the involuntary is something that *happens* to one.”

6. FOUR ARGUMENTS FOR THE EXISTENCE OF FREE WILL

I believe that the main objection most people have to free will is just that it conflicts with the law of causality. I have addressed this problem above: on one interpretation, there is no conflict, because free will is not an *effect*; on a second interpretation, there is a conflict, but there is no reason to believe that the second formulation is even true.

This section will go further and offer four positive arguments for the existence of free will, deriving from an earlier paper of mine on John Searle’s philosophy of mind.¹

A. The Argument from Observation

First, there is the simple fact of observation. I observe that I choose freely, at least sometimes; and if you introspect, you will see it too. There is no reason to assume that these observations are illusory, any more than there is reason to assume that vision or hearing is illusory. I frequently hear scientists declare that real science (as opposed to bogus Aristotelian science) rests on observation; that is, they take the observed facts as a given, and work from there. The insistence that free will does not exist has more in common with the worst a priori scholasticism than with modern science. The latter demanded that the facts fit the theory, while the

essence of science is supposed to be that we make our theories fit the observed facts.

I would like to see a single argument for rejecting introspective evidence in favor of the other senses, because any argument against the validity of introspection might be applied, *ipso facto*, to sight, hearing, touch, taste, and smell. In other words, I maintain that introspective evidence is just as good (and no more subjective) than any other sort of empirical evidence. And it is not the place of science to determine that our perceptions are fundamentally in error, but rather to develop a consistent explanation of *all* of our observations. Of course, if an experiment comes out one way a thousand times, and a different way once, then the scientist will rationally conclude that there was problem a problem in the experiment. But our observation of our mental freedom is not an occasional fluke, but an empirical fact as repeatedly and continuously confirmed as the existence of the external world itself.

B. The *Reductio Ad Absurdum* to Skepticism

My second argument consists in a *reductio ab absurdum*. I shall begin with the assumption of determinism, and show that it leads to the self-contradictory position of abject skepticism.

Now it is a fact that people disagree on many questions; this leads us to wonder if on any given issue we are correct. How is the determinist to come to grips with this? If the content of my mind is determined entirely on the level of micro-particles, how would I ever double-check my views? I would be determined to believe them; and if arguments convinced me, then they would be determined to convince me. The crucial point is that my views — correct and incorrect alike — would be the result of inexorable causal forces. And these forces determine people to error just as inexorably as they determine them to truth. Of course, I might be correct by coincidence. But knowledge is *justified* true belief; and when we are pre-determined to believe whatever we happen to believe no matter what, it is hard to see what the justification of our beliefs is.

Put succinctly, if we have knowledge we must accept beliefs only because we understand them to be true; but if determinism is correct, then we automatically accept whatever beliefs that our constituent micro-particles impose on us, since as Searle says, scientific explanation works from the bottom up. It might be the case that those micro-particles coincidentally make me believe true things, but the truth would not be the ultimate causal agent acting upon me.

Determinism, then, leads to skepticism, the denial of the possibility of justified true belief. This is a controversial issue, but I hold that skepticism is necessarily false. For suppose we affirm skepticism. Then we may wonder if we know that skepticism is true. If we

do know it, then at least one item of objective knowledge exists, which contradicts the premise. But if we don't know that skepticism is true either, why should we accept it? To recap: Determinism implies skepticism; Skepticism is necessarily false; Hence determinism is false.

C. Moore's Proof of the External World Extended

Third, I bring G. E. Moore to my defense. In his "Proof of the External World",² Moore refuted skepticism about physical objects merely by saying, "Here is a hand, and here is another hand." Critics accused Moore of begging the question; and the critical reader of this paper might object that I am merely repeating my first argument. Both of these complaints simply miss Moore's point, which was this: In order for any argument to work, it is necessary that the initial plausibility of its premises have greater initial plausibility than those of the denial of its conclusion. Since no premise has greater initial plausibility than "This is a hand," said Moore, it is in principle impossible for that claim to be overturned. I think that the same is true of the existence of free will. Nothing has greater initial plausibility than the premise "I have free will"; no scientific or philosophical argument will ever have greater initial plausibility. So how is it even coherent to argue against free will? Any valid argument showing that free will does not exist serves merely as a *reductio ad absurdum* of that arguments' premises, not a disproof of the freedom of the will.

As a side note, it is interesting that John Searle, a reluctant opponent of the doctrine of free will, says that he continues to believe in free will no matter how many arguments against it that he hears. This shows quite well that Searle finds the initial plausibility of "Searle has free will" to be greater than that of his arguments against free will; for if the arguments against free will were really that powerful, Searle would do what we usually do when overwhelmed by convincing arguments: namely, change his mind. Since he can't change his mind, the initial plausibility of his free will must exceed the plausibility of the apparently conflicting scientific arguments. Given this, he should re-examine the propositions of science and his philosophy of mind and see if they are really harder to doubt than the existence of free will.

D. A Thought Experiment Showing the Freedom of the Will

Fourth, try the following thought experiment. Our brilliant neurophysiologists come up with an equation that they claim will predict all of our behavior. The equation is so good that it even incorporates our reaction to the equation, our reaction to knowing that it incorporates our reaction, and so on indefinitely. Suppose that the equation says that the next thing that you

will do is raise your arm. Do you seriously believe that you couldn't falsify this prediction by failing to raise your arm? But if you can falsify any prediction about your arm, and if the prediction is derived perfectly from a comprehensive knowledge of your body's constituent micro-particles, then your mind must be free. In a crucial sense, then, the denial of free will is predicated on our ignorance of the very causal laws that supposedly show that free will is impossible. For once these allegedly binding laws of nature were compiled and capable of making falsifiable empirical predictions, it would be child's play to falsify them forthwith. Surely if human behavior were un-free, then science could in theory at least predict when I am going to raise my hand. And why should the equations be unable to compensate for the subject's knowledge of the prediction? And yet, it is very hard to believe that upon the proclamation of these alleged causal laws, that I would find it any harder to falsify them than I would find it to falsify e.g. the reader's prediction about when I will raise my hand.

Nor would it help if these scientific laws were probabilistic rather than deterministic. It is child's play to falsify the prediction that I will raise my right hand now with certainty. Is it any harder to falsify the claim that I will now raise my right hand with probability .3? Simply by deciding not to raise it, couldn't I instantly make the probability equal to zero?

7. SOME OBJECTIONS TO AND MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT THE FREEDOM OF THE WILL

A. Are some choices more difficult than others?

There is a rather common view which admits that the will is free in some of the cases I assert, but denies that it is free in other cases. For example, it may be conceded that the normal person is free to use or not use alcohol; but certain people are not free to not use it. The choice is "too hard" for them to make. There are many variations on this theme, and I have a common objection to all of them.

Now the underlying image here seems to be that the will is kind of like a muscle. Just as the ability to lift weights depends on the strength of the lifter and the heaviness of the weights, the ability to make a choice depends on the will power of the willer and the difficulty of the choice. People make choices only within fairly narrow bounds; beyond these, apparently, they are fully determined.

My objection to this is basically that it just contradicts experience. Imagine that there were a button in front of you, the pressing of which would instantly exterminate all human life. You would not (I hope) want to press this button. But can you really say that you do not feel just as *free* to do so as you would to dial a

phone number? Suppose someone pointed a gun at you and told you to push the button. Would you not be free to refrain? But if you are free in these extreme cases, how could you be unfree to refrain from drinking alcohol or taking any number of choices which appear to be much “easier”?

The essential confusion, I think, is between the emotional experience of a choice vs. the choice itself. The emotions associated with a choice may range from incredibly pleasant to incredibly unpleasant. Pleasant choices are “easier” not in the sense that they are more free than other choices, but in the sense that we are more inclined to freely choose it because it is pleasant. To talk of the difficulty of a choice can be very misleading, because it conjures up the image of there being some definite probability of succeeding at making a choice despite genuinely trying; but this just brings us back to the probabilistic misinterpretation of free will which I have already shown is just as contrary to the freedom of the will as all-out determinism.

B. Is Choice Limited to a Select Few?

A variant on the above doctrine affirms that certain people (such as fellow philosophers) have free will, but that the mass of people don't. Free will is apparently a byproduct of intelligence and education. Generalizing from introspection to the whole human race is simply mistaken; the sensible induction extends only to a narrow elite of one's fellows.

I answer that the broadest induction is indeed justified. Almost all humans use the language and concepts of free will. They blame and praise each other for their actions in a way suggesting moral responsibility. And most plausibly, they do so because they are generalizing to other people from *their* own experience of freedom. To suggest that they are merely aping the vocabulary of philosophers is quite absurd; it is philosophers who picked up the concepts of free choice from ordinary language, not the other way around. Actually, it could easily be argued that the experience of free will permeates the lives of ordinary people to a greater extent than it does intellectuals. An intellectual might buy the murderers excuse that his life in the slums drove him to brutality, but the non-murderers who grew up in the same slums are likely to think of his action as a willful choice to do evil.

C. The Objection from Regularity

One fairly common objection to the doctrine of free will is that different groups behave consistently differently than one another on matters that I say are free. But if they are really free, how could these systematic differences be explained?

The explanation, of course, is simply that members of some groups make different *choices* than members of other groups *on average*. There is nothing amazing

about this. The typical criminal makes a long series of brutal choices over his life; there is a systematic pattern to his choices. Does this show that each of his actions was not a choice? But if there is no conflict between an *individual* making systematically different choices than other people and the doctrine of free will, why should there be any more of a conflict between a *group* of individuals making systematically different choices and the doctrine of free will?

D. The Objection from Inexplicability

Another objection to the doctrine of free will is that it renders a persons choices inexplicable. And in a sense, this is correct: a choice is necessarily, by definition, impervious to a causal explanation. If there were a causal explanation, then the agent would have been determined to take his actions, and then they would not have been free.

But there is really no paradox here, anyway. Of course it is possible to “explain” a choice, in the sense of describing the actor's motives, goals, impulses, and so on. But we must remember that these were simply the factors that the agent chose to go along with; we are explaining which factors out of the cosmos of possibilities that the actor drew upon when making his choice.

8. CONCLUSION

In a way, it is strange to even write about the freedom of the will. The issue is not one of abstract concepts or *a priori* reasoning, but simply a matter of empirical fact. The most telling proof for the existence of free will is that we all observe it during our every waking moment. The only basis for the denial stems from the arbitrary exclusion of introspection as a valid source of empirical knowledge, coupled with one unpersuasive interpretation of the law of causality. And while I do not choose to address the related issues at length within the confines of this essay, they cannot be overlooked. Free will is perhaps more than any other the distinctively human attribute which sets us apart from everything else. The denial of our freedom leads to the denial of virtue and vice, individual responsibility, and the value of political freedom. And ultimately, this denial of our free will leads to the dehumanization of us all.

EDITORIAL NOTES

1. Bryan Caplan, *Solving the Mind-Body Problem: Dualism Versus John Searle*, Philosophical Notes, forthcoming from the Libertarian Alliance.
2. Proof of an External World” is Essay No. 7 in G. E. Moore, *Philosophical Papers*, George Allen and Unwin, London, 1959, pp. 127-151.