

Does it really matter whether we have free will or not?

In this essay I will be arguing that yes, it does matter, completely and utterly so. I will discuss the implications of both cases, of humans having or not having free will, and highlight their crucial distinctions. But the argument is twofold, for it is not just key which case is true but which case humans *believe* to be true. The objective truth regarding free will would not change our everyday lives, however the beliefs we have about free will have immense influence in shaping our decisions, moods, our laws and our politics – both the internal and external worlds we live in.

Free Will is the power of self-determination, the quality of being independent of fate¹. In other words, it is the freedom of humans to make choices that are not determined by prior causes². Free will is a property that many only attribute to humans, the idea that we are somehow special in some nature-defying way, inexplicably different from every other creature. It is the soul that is often credited for this capacity to somehow make decisions that denounce cause and effectuality – the idea that our own willpower transcends all that is natural and reasonable in this world.

It is likely clear from this explanation that I disagree with the notion of free will. However this is not about whether free will exists or not, but the implications of each.

The reason that humans having free will is so significant is that if it is truly the case that humans have free will (whilst plants, fungi, rocks, and other animals don't), it would make humanity intrinsically special. And if humans were to be intrinsically special, this calls into question all that existed before humanity, and makes illogical the notion that anything can exist after it, for in a universe centered around humanity's unique capacity for free will, a world without humanity would be redundant.

To prove that humans have free will and free will alone would be a momentous religious tool. The basis for judgement after death, the entire notion of an afterlife, is dependent on free will, for how can our lives on Earth be a test if we are not free agents? And if humans are intrinsically special, the holy scriptures in which the creation of man is specifically noted would be verified. Moreover, it gives weight to the solution to the dilemma of human suffering under an omniscient, omnipotent, omnibenevolent god – the solution regarding that god loves us, yet he gave us free will, and that suffering is of our own accord.

If free will is valid, it means that the universe is an intrinsically uncertain place. And the whole idea of science, of finding the causes of things, is in vain, for some things – humans – could act independent of causes, independent of fate. Free will makes

¹ definition from Oxford Languages

² definition from Merriam-Webster

reality a whole lot more bizarre, illogical and incomprehensible. If free will exists, the universe is not what we think it is. If decisions can be made independent of reasons, if actions can be independent of causes, then what we nowadays think of as magic, would be reality.

Adverse to believing in free will, the ideas of determinism are as follows: all events have a cause, many causes, infinite causes, which themselves have infinite other causes, all the way back to the dawn of time, and that humans are powerless to act outside of these predetermined causes and effects. Under determinism, what you believe to be 'free' choices are actually choices as determined by particles moving around under the physical laws organised into immensely complex structures as per abiogenesis followed by Darwinian evolution over billions of years. Under determinism, we are effectively passive agents in a vast and complex universe. This does not mean that we don't *feel* like we are making choices, but that 'we' as independent entities do not exist in the way we think they do; 'we' are the product of cause and effect that extends beyond what many would think of as 'themselves'.

The implications of determinism are as follows: if humans do not have free will, then humans are not special. There would be no afterlife; you can't judge people on predetermined choices. There would be no god who specifically made humans 'in his own image', because humans, remember, are not special. Without free will we are just like monkeys or ants or trees or fungi, or rocks or stars. We grow, we exist, we die. And when we die we become something else – a corpse, fuel, food, carbonates, energy – in a continuing circle of creation and destruction. Everything we ever know will one day be eradicated without a trace: the earth will crash into the sun; the universe will tear apart. Without free will, humanity is perishable. This is science.

A belief in free will isn't always tied up with religion. Some atheists that I have talked to have a different stance. They believe in free will but not in god. I have one friend who believes in science. They understand the physical laws in which causes and effects are fundamental, that anything that contradicts that is illogical, yet he still believes there is something else, something more, something spiritual, and cannot accept determinism. Another friend believes that other animals as well as humans have free will, but definitely not plants, for they act according to different variables and stimuli. Where are these lines arbitrarily drawn? How can we contradict ourselves in this way? Why must there be something special about the fauna over flora, something special about humanity despite accepting causality? It is because the belief in free will is inherent and stubborn and powerful. The next section is not about why us having free will or not is important, but why the belief, either way, is important, why the debate on the matter is important.

To establish why the belief in free will matters so much, it is useful to understand how our current beliefs have been formed and how free will already plays a crucial role in our societies. And to do that, we need to realise why so many humans so staunchly

believe in free will in the first place. I think it is because of the need for individuality and personal responsibility in operating successful societies.

We do, have and always will have an intrinsic sense of individuality. Whether it is an evolved property, or a general predisposition, many animals which operate in social groups possess the ideas of individuality of its members. This is because, if people are individuals, they are personally responsible for their own actions. And if people are responsible for their actions, they can be held accountable for those actions.

In the case of actions destructive to society, the perpetrator who is responsible for their actions can be blamed. They can be punished. And doing so makes society a safer place, inhibiting the individual from reoffending as well as deterring others. In the case of actions beneficial to society, the do-gooder who is responsible for those actions can be accredited. They can be rewarded. And doing so makes society a better place, encouraging the individual to continue the good work and encouraging others to do the same.

The concept of individuality, and thereby personal responsibility are as beneficial to the people of a prehistoric settlement (and indeed to a group of primates, elephants or lions) – where punishments would involve shunning, expulsion or killing – as to a modern settlement, where punishments involve fines, surveillance or imprisonment. I would even say that personal responsibility is vital for any society to operate safely and effectively.

So where does free will come into this? Free will is our justification for individuality, and thereby personal responsibility. Individuality is the *what*, free will is the *why*. Other animals are willing to accept individuality as they innately believe in it. But humans like reasons, and so the idea of free will was created. We can only be individuals if we can make decisions independent of all the workings and causes around us (free will). And we can only be personally responsible if we are individuals.

Whether or not free will is an objective reality, I am sure you can see how at least the belief in free will plays a crucial role in human societies. And this crucial role is why we so desperately cling onto the idea of free will, in spite of overwhelming scientific evidence to the contrary, supporting the idea a deterministic universe: physics tells us that we are all just particles with mass and momentum, abiding physical laws; biology tells us that the line between individuals is a blur, and symbiosis is essential to life itself. In fact, the entire basis of scientific enquiry is based on the notion that there must be a reason for things. And an entire industry – magic tricks – thrives of this belief; we are such intense believers that events must have causes that when a coin materialises out of thin air, seemingly disobeying all that we know, wonder prevails.

What are the consequences of believing in determinism? Unfortunately for many, a lack of free will means they feel that their lives don't matter, that their decisions are unimportant because they are predetermined.

The lack of individuality will be a crisis for many, but I believe with support they will come out the other side more empathetic and connected people. The reveal of the mirage of personal responsibility does not mean it's demise, the demise of law and order, but for us to appreciate it as what it is – a mechanism, an important part of social functioning. All of society is built of free will, the entire criminal justice system of every country lies on personal choices.

For many, free will is a way of connecting to a greater power. Their free will is often the product of the Divine, and that is comforting to them. However I think that determinism has the same potential: it connects us to the universe, and all its component parts of which we share the basic elements. Determinism is humbling. It states that we are not special. And I think the more people that accept that, the greater good. We can forget about faith and focus on science which will extend the life of our species under the impending doom of an increasingly uninhabitable world that does not care for us or our ancestors.

There is more than just personal outlook and the legal system in regards to the issue. The whole basis for western meritocratic society – the American dream – is based on free will, that anybody can earn their way to the top and that they deserve their achievements. The lack of free will is the opposite: a person's success is based on infinite socioeconomic, biological factors other than their own 'will'. And so they don't deserve their achievements, in the way that no one 'deserves' anything. There is just good fortune and bad fortune: if you are fortunate to be hard working and that makes you successful then that's great; if you are unfortunate to be hit by a train then that's not great. Determinism does not mean as humans we could predict the future, or others actions, because of the infinite complexity and paradoxes that would involve. Under determinism, life is a game of chance, except we are not the players but the subjects. It is not hard to see how in a world where this is widely accepted, a much greater impetus and compassion would go into supporting the people on the lower echelons of society. Instead of blaming homeless people or beggars for being lazy or undeserving, it would mean recognising their bad luck, and recognising that action can be taken to change that situation. The same for criminals and prisoners, who are not bad people of their own will but have been formed that way by all the causes that influence and contribute to one's life, who are unlucky.

So, does it matter if we have free will or not? Does it *really* matter? Yes. A world with and a world without are completely different places, where humans are special or humans are not. I have even gone so far as to link free will with the existence of god and an afterlife.

But what about the belief in free will? If we accept determinism to be true, some would say that it doesn't matter what we think, for all is predetermined, and all will ultimately be destroyed. I disagree. It matters in terms of compassion within the justice system, in terms of our view of the wealthy versus the poor, our view of ourselves, of

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regret, of guilt, of luck, in terms of religion and of science. There is a reason why the debate on free will is such a hot one, why so much intellectual thought and impassioned discussion has fed into the debate. It's because free will is the basis on which we live and interact. Free will is a keystone; It is our justification for individuality and thereby personal responsibility. In doing so it lays the foundation for societies without which would not be able to function. And so the belief that humans don't have free will would have widespread consequences. We need personal responsibility for society to function, but we would be doing away with free will as the justification. There would be two possibilities: to be rid of personal responsibility, and societies would collapse; or we find another reason, another *why*, to justify personal responsibility. The new *why* would be a scientific, biological, evolutionary one: we need personal responsibility to survive, despite personal responsibility having no basis in fact. And that will be hard to swallow.

Bibliography:

Books that have contributed to my view on the matter:

Jim Al-Khalili, Paradox: the Nine Greatest Enigmas in Physics, 2012

Merlin Sheldrake, Entangled Life, 2020

Jon Ronson, The Psychopath Test, 2011

Akala, Natives, 2018

Useful in my research were the following articles:

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Helen Steward, <https://www.philosophersmag.com/essays/38-do-animals-have-free-will>, 2015, the Philosopher's Magazine

I also wish to credit Oxford Languages for providing definitions, through google, of many loaded words such as 'free will', 'fate', 'determinism' and the like.