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

Introduction

The notion of free will is one that lies at the core of human existence. Debate surrounding the topic has heretofore largely centred around the question of whether or not humans indeed have a free will; a closely related point of contention surrounds the implications of the above: whether our possession - or lack thereof - of a free will bears meaningful consequences. In this essay, I argue that whether or not we have a free will *does* matter in principle, but its significance in matters of practice can be called into question.

Before delving into the arguments, I will clarify the definition of free will that will be used in this essay. An agent S has a free will if either or both of the following conditions are met:

1. Up until the moment that S did action P, S had the ability to choose otherwise.
2. S' doing of action P can be accounted for by factors internal to S that are within S' control.[1]

Next, to determine whether our possession of a free will really "matters", I have established two sets of criteria.

The first determines whether free will matters in principle:

1. If there is conclusive evidence that we have a free will, then we should rationally X.
2. If there is conclusive evidence that we do not have a free will, then we should rationally Y.
3. If X and Y are different, then it matters, in principle, whether or not we have a free will.

The second set determines whether free will matters in practice:

1. If there is conclusive evidence that we have a free will, then we would actually X.
2. If there is conclusive evidence that we do not have a free will, then we would actually Y.
3. If X and Y are different, then it matters, in practice, whether or not we have a free will.

Using these, I will analyse the potential implications of free will possession in two broad aspects: moral and existential.

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[1] Harry G. Frankfurt, "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person," *The Journal of Philosophy* 68, no. 1 (January 14, 1971): pp. 5-20, https://doi.org/10.2307/2024717.

Free will and moral responsibility

The most salient implication of our possession (or lack thereof) of free will pertains to the issue of moral responsibility - it can be argued that an agent having a free will is a necessary condition for him to be held morally responsible for his actions, specifically in the desert-based sense. Based on Pereboom's definition, an agent is morally responsible in the basic desert sense if "she would deserve to be blamed if she understood that it was morally wrong, and she would deserve to be praised if she understood that it was morally exemplary".[2] Such moral responsibility arises from the agent's actions in and of themselves, and not from other considerations such as consequentialist ones.[3]

Since basic desert moral responsibility is predicated on an agent's ability to wield personal control over his choice of actions, the possession of free will is a necessary condition for such responsibility to be attributed to him.

If an agent has a free will, the basic criteria is fulfilled for basic desert moral responsibility. This holds true for both definitions of free will outlined earlier:

1. If agent S had the ability to choose another course of action, but still committed action A, then S chose A out of personal control, therefore S deserves blame or punishment for A.
2. If S committed A out of internal factors within his control, then S chose A out of personal control, therefore S deserves blame or punishment for A.

Conversely, if we do not have a free will and our actions are instead determined by impersonal or external forces, be it the laws of nature,[4] occurrences of luck[5] or direct manipulation, we would lack the personal control over our actions needed for basic desert. If S' doing of a morally wrong action were an inevitable occurrence given the physical laws of nature, or if S' predisposition to act that way arose from a series of chance happenings that are out of S' control, it does not seem justified for S to possess the moral responsibility to deserve blame for the action in and of itself.

In summary, our possession of a free will would lead to us having basic desert moral responsibility for our actions, while the lack thereof would preclude us from such responsibility.

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[2] Derk Pereboom, *Free Will, Agency, and Meaning in Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), doi:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199685516.001.0001.
[3] Ibid.
[4] Benedictus de Spinoza and Edwin Curley, *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, vol. 1 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1985).
[5] Neil Levy, *Hard Luck: How Luck Undermines Free Will and Moral Responsibility* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), doi:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199601387.001.0001.

There are several possible challenges to the above argument:

First, some may contend that desert is present regardless of whether or not the agent had a free will as the agent is still morally responsible as the source (even if not ultimate) of the action. Whether the action was predetermined, or could be traced back to factors beyond the agent, does not affect the fact that the agent nevertheless committed it, and thus is deserving of its consequences as the doer of the action.

The problems with this argument can be illustrated by a simple thought experiment: if a robot were programmed to walk straight ahead, and was placed in such a way that it went on to collide into a glass cabinet, the robot does not deserve blame or punishment even though it was the doer of the act that broke the cabinet. Control over one's actions, tied to one's possession of a free will, seems necessary for basic desert moral responsibility.

Another similar argument brings in the idea of individual character in an attempt to strengthen the case. In this view, moral responsibility is derived from the character of an individual: those of good character deserve praise, while those of bad character deserve blame, regardless of how one's character might have been determined by external or determined circumstances.[6] Even if one does not have a free will in the sense that one's actions are directly influenced by one's character, one still bears moral responsibility for the state of one's character in and of itself.[7]

This is unsatisfactory as it merely pushes the responsibility for action one step backwards from action to character, without providing compelling reasons for why character is the source of moral desert, especially if one's character is determined by factors beyond one's control. If, at birth, a neurosurgeon wired B's brain to give him a murderous tendencies and hence a murderous character, it does not seem justified to hold B morally responsible for his acts of murder.

With the above challenges refuted, we can now proceed with the premise that one's possession of free will affects his possession of basic desert moral responsibility. This fulfils the conditions for free will "mattering" in the following ways:

I. In and of itself: possession of moral responsibility

If we have a free will, it would be rational to accept that we have basic desert moral responsibility for our actions, while it would be rational to accept that we do not have such responsibility if we do not have a free will, and thus there is a clear difference between the two in-principle outcomes.

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[6] R. Cummins, "Culpability and Mental Disorder," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 10, no. 2 (June 1980): pp. 207-232, https://doi.org/10.1080/00455091.1980.10715720.
[7] Ibid.

II. Criminal justice

More practically, whether or not we have a free will directly affects the principles on which our criminal justice systems are based, and the nature of the punishments that are meted out for various crimes.

If an agent committed a criminal offence out of his own free will, then he deserves blame, and thus punishment, for his action. This provides the justification for criminal punishments to be based on the principle of retribution, where punishments are determined 'an eye for an eye'. For instance, the US Supreme Court specifies retributivism as the primary justification for the death penalty.[8]

In the absence of free will and moral desert, we ought to establish a criminal justice system that is based on principles other than retribution, such as deterrence and rehabilitation. Punishments would instead be forward-looking, and backward-looking ones like the death penalty would not be justified under these principles.

Therefore, whether or not we have a free will matters in principle as we ought, rationally, to adjust the principles and punishments in our criminal justice systems accordingly for each case.

III. Interpersonal and societal attitudes

Another practical implication of whether or not we have a free will and desert-based moral responsibility lies in our attitudes towards personal development, interpersonal relationships and societal inequalities.

Viewing the actions of ourselves and others through the lens that we have a free will would cause us to adopt a mindset that is more backward-looking than forward-looking: for instance, we would be inclined to respond to undesirable actions of our own with self-blame and guilt, thus stifling personal development.[9] In response to undesirable actions of others, one who believes that they stemmed from a free will would tend to feel emotions like revenge, hatred, intolerance, lack of empathy more than they would otherwise.[10]

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[8] Kenneth C. Haas, "The Triumph of Vengeance over Retribution: the United States Supreme Court and the Death Penalty," *Crime, Law and Social Change* 21, no. 2 (June 1994): pp. 127-154, https://doi.org/10.1007/bf01307908.

[9] Bruce N. Waller, *Against Moral Responsibility* (Cambridge (MA): MIT Press, 2011), doi:10.7551/mitpress/9780262016599.001.0001.

[10] Lynn Nadel, Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, and Thomas A. Nadelhoffer, "The Threat of Shrinking Agency and Free Will Disillusionism," in *Conscious Will and Responsibility: A Tribute to Benjamin Libet* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2011), pp. 173-188, doi:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195381641.001.0001.

Such a mindset would also manifest in perpetuating social inequalities. The premise that every individual bears full moral responsibility for their actions implies that their standing in society is justly deserved, thus legitimising large inequalities of wealth,[11] whereas us having a free will would oblige us to work to mitigate these inequalities since they result from factors outside our control.

It is thus clear that whether or not we have a free will matters in principle because there are differences in the interpersonal attitudes, attitudes towards inequality, and approaches to social policy and education that we should reasonably adopt if we accepted either case as true.

[11] Bruce N. Waller et al., "Beyond the Retributive System," in *Free Will Skepticism in Law and Society: Challenging Retributive Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp. 73-96, https://doi-org.libproxy1.nus.edu.sg/10.1017/9781108655583.004.

Free will and existential concerns

Having established the in-principle significance of free will on moral matters, the essay will now discuss its implications on our personal approaches to issues regarding our existence, specifically our views on the meaning of life and decision-making.

Smilansky asserts that the perception of having a free will provides humans with "ultimate-level grounding", without which there would be devastating consequences, such as "acute psychological discomfort".[12] Philosopher Galen Strawson, who denies the possibility of free will, recounted receiving a slew of accusatory, abusive and even violent threats in response to his work, which he attributes to the "existential catastrophe" that people derive from facing the prospect that we do not have a free will.[13]

It is not difficult to see why: if it were true that we do not have a free will, and our actions and choices are either predetermined or shaped by forces beyond our individual control, life would seem to lose its meaning - rather than being able to actively chart our lives by exercising our free will, we become akin to programmed robots living our a series of commands, or non-sentient animals that are nothing more than a series of physiological functions. Naturally, this leads to existential dread.

Furthermore, the knowledge that we do not have a free will could greatly impact how we approach decisions. If we were to buy into the belief that our choices are not ultimately ours, or that our choices and their consequences have been predetermined anyway, we might become more prone to making decisions with undesirable consequences, using its inevitability as an excuse. This plays out in both relatively harmless cases, such as giving in to the temptation of eating pizza over salad, as well as high stakes cases, like a greater tendency to commit murder.

Therefore, whether or not we have a free will matters in principle as the way in which we can rationally be expected to approach the meaning of life and decision-making is profoundly different between the two cases.

The flip side to this argument is that the implications outlined above are dependent on our *perception* of whether or not we have a free will - whether or not we *actually* do has little significance on our psychological response to these issues.

The first reason is due to our ability to manipulate our beliefs and live under the illusion that we have a free will, even if the reality is otherwise. For instance,

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[12] Saul Smilansky, *Free Will and Illusion* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2000).
[13] Oliver Burkeman, "The Clockwork Universe: Is Free Will an Illusion?," *The Guardian*, April 27, 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/news/2021/apr/27/the-clockwork-universe-is-free-will-an-illusion.

Smilansky, who is well aware of the deleterious effects of non-belief in free will, is a proponent of illusionism, a view which argues that a positive illusion of free will and moral responsibility is beneficial and should be promoted.[14] Illusionists contend that even if we were to be presented with conclusive evidence that we do not have a free will, we ought to contain this evidence such that others can go on living without the psychological disenchantment mentioned above.[15] This view supports the earlier conclusion that whether or not we have a free will matters in principle, as the expected difference in outcomes is what justifies the need to live under an illusion of free will if reality were otherwise. However, it implies that whether or not we have a free will is insignificant in practice, because we should live in accordance with the belief that we have a free will either way, and would indeed end up doing so if illusionism is widely accepted.

Another angle to this argument is that whether or not we have a free will does not significantly affect our existential beliefs due to our inability to properly rationalise and internalise the prospect of not having a free will. Even if we were to be presented with evidence pointing as such, and rationally ought to respond in the abovementioned ways, we would be unable to uphold such beliefs in the long term because they run so deeply antithetical to our existing conceptions of human life and the tendencies of human nature. A 2021 meta-analysis by a team of psychologists found that manipulating people's perceptions of free will could bring about a more anti-free will mindset in the short term, but did not alter people's core beliefs about free will and its downstream consequences, such as their approach to antisocial behavior, cheating, conformity, or willingness to punish.[16] This casts doubt on our ability to rationally respond to evidence on whether or not we have a free will. However, this will not be taken to be conclusive evidence that our beliefs on free will cannot be altered, given the limited replicability of such results, as well as contradicting accounts like the ones mentioned above by Smilanksy and Strawson.

It is therefore inconclusive as to whether or not our possession of a free will reality has significant effects on our personal perceptions of whether we have a free will or not.

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[14] Saul Smilansky, "Free Will: The Positive Role of Illusion," *The Proceedings of the Twentieth World Congress of Philosophy* 2 (1999): pp. 143-152.
[15] Gregg Caruso, "The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, January 18, 2018), https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2021/entries/skepticism-moral-responsibility/.
[16] Oliver Genschow et al., "Meta-Analysis on Belief in Free Will Manipulations," *PsyArXiv*, February 21, 2021, https://doi.org/10.31234/osf.io/quwgr.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the above analysis has shown that whether or not we have a free will matters in principle in both the moral and existential spheres. Conclusive evidence suggesting that we have a free will or otherwise, if responded to rationally, requires significantly different responses in each case.

However, it is unclear as to whether our actual possession of free will or lack thereof has meaningful consequences for how moral and existential issues play out in practice. Although whether or not we have a free will ought, theoretically, to bring about different responses, these differences may not be realised in actuality due to the inability to establish a direct causal link between the reality of whether or not we have a free will and our perceptions of it, the latter of which ultimately shapes our actions more than the former.

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