

Examine the claims that freedom of the will is incompatible with determinism, and also incompatible with indeterminism.

Christopher Coyle

We all have a very intimate understanding of our own free will. If anyone attempted to convince us otherwise, we could simply raise our hand to prove the point. This is an action that we have undertaken voluntarily: We decided to raise our hand, and up it went. If we so desired, we could have just as easily kept our hand down; the only thing that prevented us from doing so was our own autonomous will. All of this seems so obvious that it is hardly worth mentioning.

However, our visceral sense of free will becomes problematic when we attempt to reconcile it with another idea that also strikes us as intuitively obvious: causation. When we observe the world around us, it appears to operate in a regular, consistent manner. A ball that is travelling through the air can't just change its direction or speed on a whim according to its own internal nature. Instead, its path is completely determined by Newton's laws of motion.

Most people are not troubled with the consequences of causation when applied to a ball or a bird. Indeed, we seem to take it for granted that every effect has its cause. However, when we apply this principle to our own actions, the consequences for free will become unsettling. If we do happen to live in a deterministic universe, then the decision to raise our hand was not some uncaused act of will. Our choice came about as an effect of some particular cause, such as our specific mental state or the environment in which we found ourselves.

Of course, these things are themselves the effects of some other causes. If we follow this line of reasoning to its logical conclusion, we find that the decision to raise our hand was the inevitable effect of a long line of causal relationships that can be traced all the way back to the beginning of the universe. In other words, our entire life was already predetermined when the universe came into existence. If we have knowledge of the initial state of the universe along with the rules that govern it, then we can predict all of our future actions with perfect accuracy as if we were just like another ball or bird. In short, all of our actions are ultimately out of our control, meaning that free will is simply an illusion.

What do we do when we have two deeply held, intuitively obvious beliefs that don't seem to play well with each other? Well, as is typically the case, we hope to have our cake and eat it by finding a way in which free will and determinism are actually compatible. For philosophers like Hume, it is enough for us to act in accordance with our will, regardless of whether we could have ever done otherwise. In other words, we are free as long as we are not under some form of compulsion – perhaps from a brain tumor or a man holding a gun – to act against our own wishes.

Of course, this only begs the question: What determines our will? Even if we were not compelled by some external force to raise our hand, it is still legitimate to ask from whence this desire

came. Schopenhauer may have addressed this point most succinctly when he stated that “Man can do what he wills but he cannot will what he wills.” If this is indeed the case, our free will becomes rather superficial given that the things we desire are ultimately driven by factors beyond our control.

But perhaps our problem stems from seeking a solution from within our material world. Many have attempted to place the source of our free will in the existence of a mind or a soul that inhabits a metaphysical realm that is not bound by the deterministic rules of the physical world. However, this only solves one problem by introducing several others. First, we have no real proof that these metaphysical objects actually exist. And even if they do, it is not at all clear how these metaphysical objects interact with the physical world in a way that would grant us free will.

We seem to have reached an impasse: Free will and determinism appear to be incompatible with each other. One of these concepts needs to be discarded, but which one do we jettison? Given how attached we are to our own free will, most of us would be willing to cast determinism into the scrapheap of history. And as it turns out, there does seem to be some scientific merit for this choice. According to our most common interpretations of quantum mechanics, our universe is fundamentally random in character. And if our actions are ultimately random in nature, then we could conceivably do something other than what we actually did, and free will is thus preserved.

However, this turns out to be a rather hollow victory for the defenders of free will. When we typically consider someone exercising their free will, we think of a person making a deliberate choice between alternative possibilities. In particular, we believe that person to be in control of their decision-making process. But how can a person who is making choices randomly be in control of anything? It's no different from a person basing a decision on a coin flip or a dice roll – the decision is ultimately out of their hands, even if they can genuinely engage in alternative courses of action.

In addition, this position fails to explain how indeterminism affects people differently from other objects in the universe. If our belief in indeterminism is ultimately derived from how the world behaves at the atomic level, then our conclusions would apply to inanimate objects just as much as it does to us. Thus, if indeterminism implies that we have free will, it would also suggest that everything else in this universe also has free will. This is a conclusion that most of us would be hesitant to embrace.

So perhaps abandoning determinism was not the right way to go after all. It is at this point that we may reluctantly consider a world without free will. Although this may seem rather absurd at first glance, such a world would really not be all that alien to us. Whether it is our genes, childhood development, unconscious mind, or unthinking habitual actions, most of us already accept that many of the factors that influence our lives are ultimately not of our own doing.

Regardless, we see that the rejection of free will does come with its own set of problems. A deterministic universe is one in which all of our choices have already been decided for us – we cannot do other than what we actually did. But without the ability to make free choices, it is hard to make sense of how anyone can ever be morally responsible for their actions.

Of course, there are a few brave souls who are willing to follow the dictates of reason wherever it may lead, even if that means we can no longer hold anyone accountable for their actions. However, most of us would be understandably weary of discarding an idea that is so integral to our understanding of the world. Indeed, many of our most basic emotions only seem to make sense if we presuppose moral agency. What is the point of feeling anger or regret in the absence of free will?

People may not be responsible for what they do if they don't have free will, but their actions can still have profoundly negative consequences for us. Much like the actions we undertake to mitigate the destruction from an earthquake or a hurricane, which are also not responsible for what they do, we should still take every reasonable precaution to protect ourselves from the potential damage caused by others who wrong us. Our moral sentiments and the emotions they engender can potentially help us to either influence others to avoid pursuing actions that may harm us or influence ourselves to avoid those who habitually engage in such actions.

So where exactly does this leave us with respect to free will? On the one hand, we have a subjective, intuitively obvious view of the world in which free will and moral responsibility are innate features of it. However, an objective, rationalistic view of the world doesn't seem to have any place for free will: Determinism does not seem to allow for the possibility of alternative actions, while indeterminism does not seem to grant us any control over our choice of alternative actions. We may just have to accept the paradox between these two opposing viewpoints. Ultimately, free will is something we may never be able to prove, but we will forever live our lives as if it were a basic fact of our existence.