

'A computer can think and make decisions, but it cannot WILL.' - Is that a convincing argument against a materialist view of the nature of the self?

A materialist view of the nature of the self tells us we are a sophisticated biological machine with everything we need in our body to make decisions over the actions we require to live. Evolution itself determines that we develop mental states within our physical brains to enhance our survival. Such states, derived from all physical inputs from our perceptions, senses and experience of the natural world, make us survival machines. We are a natural physical phenomenon which is not controlled by a separate mind.

Physical systems as such can indeed make decisions without outside impulses that might control those actions. Computer systems make a very good job of decision making without any external source such that might come from something we could describe as WILL. Even where decision-making is apparently random, we have learned to make a decision, as no decision leads to inactivity and ultimately to no survival - just as the computer chess programme has to be given the code to make a random choice where two equally logical positions may be posed to it. People then, are functioning only as physical beings.

However, being human, we cannot get over the feeling that there is something about our self-knowledge telling us 'we thinkers' are in control of our bodies. And the concept of WILL does a good job of defining what might be the nature of the self in this regard. The soul, mind or consciousness might be difficult to trace as a defined, independent feature from our brain, whereas the WILL provides something of a non-physical entity providing a direct input into our being. In overcoming all inertia to act in the world, I have the WILL to act. Where consciousness might be allied to neuron activity, the WILL must be outside of a pure physical structure. This allows me to believe I am not just a machine, which is very important to my idea of myself. A computer does not WILL its actions and has no sense of a self to WILL. A computer does not have independence as a person has. However, saying I know I can think for myself is not enough to prove that I am not really a very clever machine. The computer *is* able to make 'independent' decisions, which, on the face of it, is all that is required to function effectively.

For the WILL to be a viable feature of a human self we might look at the failings of the WILL to then ascribe something to human activity that is not consistent with a purely materialist view of living. It is our weaknesses that make us human beings after all. (Check out Rag 'n' Bone Man's pop track – 'Human'). We may well be very good at rationalising consequences and weighing up the alternatives, only then to be wracked by indecision. Then there are depressive mental states which may inhibit our ability to act, depriving us of the necessary WILL to function as beings in the world. And, perhaps most importantly, where we succumb to temptation against our better judgement, we show we are not rational machines but living, thinking beings. A computer, as a logical machine, could not share these characteristics. 'An indecisive, depressed, weak-willed computer?'

This view of ourselves as agents in the world, proved as errant beings, maybe all very well until we try and identify this WILL. Where is it? How does it function? Is there a difference between everyday actions and the achievement of a desired goal? When closely examined, I'm not sure the deliberation involved in getting out of bed in the morning, and the apparent WILL required to make the effort to achieve rising into the world, is not clearly placed outside of my thinking, physical brain. Though I am compelled to think the failings in my ability to act make me more than a machine, there is a problem here, in that these failings could simply exemplify some of the problems of operating as sophisticated, biological humans in a complex world. These examples of the failing WILL do not prove there is a non-physical component to our being. For all we know, these failings are examples of mental states that quite possibly could be neural brain activity.

The argument seems to depend on whether we have a WILL that is free from our natural, physical, biological system. If I have an 'I', then it is that 'I' that has the ability to give intention to myself. Without that intention, or the consequent WILL to act, there is no 'I' – there is no self as a mental form 'driving' the organic machine. In this evaluation, WILL is indispensable to our sense of self, to our understanding of its nature. This is what makes us human and not animals or computers, neither of which have an 'I' to discover. My 'I' is free to make choices: sometimes illogical, sometimes creative, sometimes mysterious. In this context, there is a challenge for a materialist to explain the need for our instinctual desire for free will, as programmable computers obviously do not possess this desire.

Nevertheless, it seems to me that it is still quite possible for WILL to be part of the biological, human evolutionary process that has made self-reflective animals so 'successful'. In the same way that an appreciation of beauty and music might seem to us to be extra-physical to our evolutionary development there are good evolutionary reasons for them. Those aptitudes go on to develop their own sophisticated powers in the brain, apparently divorced from surviving on the savannah. 'Free will' as a mental state may also be a necessary condition of the brain for it to succeed. The sense of free will encoded in our brain and the ability of our brains to reflect on ourselves as having a self to reflect on could still quite easily be physical brain phenomenon. All the seemingly endless thoughts about myself become necessary illusions to my operating as a physical being in a physical world. Thinking of myself as a robot would not allow me to function in an organic world.

In trying to decide whether I am a human being or sophisticated computer makes me wonder why a sophisticated computer might end up wanting to think about that decision. If I am a computer I might as well not bother deciding between the two (or take the random option). If I am a human being then I have the freedom to make a choice. This is what I want to think, as the notion of being a computer is anathema to me. But it might just be a question of how we think about it. That computers cannot WILL is a challenge for a

materialist view of the nature of the self but I do not think it is a convincing argument for a non-materialist perspective either. It might be better for the materialist to frame the debate between the implausibility of the immaterial world and the still mysterious beauty of the biological. The immaterialist will always necessarily turn to a supernatural, external influence – the spiritual (ultimately even, the godly). So it may indeed be better for us to view ourselves as divine beasts rather than lowly angels.