

Free Will: An Introduction to the Issues

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Basic Problem

How can we reconcile free will and determinism?

Free Will versus Determinism

Free Will: Our will to act is up to us in some way; it is not entirely controlled by forces outside of ourselves.

Determinism: For every event there is a prior event (or events) that necessitate(s) it.

Three Classic Solutions

Hard Determinism: free will does not exist, determinism is true.

Libertarianism: free will exists, determinism is false.

Compatibilism: free will exists, determinism is true.

Contemporary Views in Philosophy

Galen Strawson (Hard Determinism): “it may be that the experience of freedom is really all there is, so far as free will is concerned.”

Robert Kane (Libertarianism): “you cannot separate the indeterminism from the effort to overcome temptation.”

Contemporary Views in Science

Dan Wegner (Hard Determinism): “the experience of will...might just be a loose end—one of those things, like the action, that is caused by prior brain and mental events.”

Benjamin Libet (Libertarianism): “the conscious will could decide to allow the volitional process to go to completion...Or, the conscious will could block or ‘veto’ the process, so that no motor act occurs.”

A Libertarian Perspective

Determinism now appears to be false, at least in its classic form. Does this failure make room for libertarianism?

Problem 1: “Even in a world that contains quantum uncertainty, macroscopic objects are determined to an extraordinary degree. Newton’s laws of motion are deterministic enough to send men to the moon and back” (Mele 2015).

Response to Problem 1: Should we classify neurons as microscopic or macroscopic? “Here we generate entanglement in a large atomic ensemble...of 2,910 +/- 190 out of 3,100 atoms” (McConnell et al. 2015). A rubidium atom is 258 pm, 3000 rubidium atoms is at least as large as .0007 mm, and neurons can be as small as .004 mm.

A Libertarian Perspective

Problem 2: “Assuming the truth of our best scientific theories, determinism turns out to be false. However, the kinds of indeterminacies these theories posit provide us with no more control over our actions than we would have if determinism were true” (Pereboom 1995).

Response to Problem 2: “The uncertainty and inner tension we feel at such soul-searching moments of self-formation would thus be reflected in the indeterminacy of our neural processes themselves. What we experience internally as uncertainty about what to do on such occasions would correspond physically to the opening of a window of opportunity that temporarily screens off complete determination by influences of the past” (Kane 2007).

A Libertarian Perspective

Problem 3: “You do what you do — in the circumstances in which you find yourself—because of the way you then are...It’s undeniable that the way you are initially is a result of your genetic inheritance and early experience...both the particular ways in which you try to change yourself, and the amount of success you have when trying to change yourself, will be determined by how you already are as a result of your genetic inheritance and previous experience” (Strawson 2010).

Response to Problem 3: “the 4-year-olds...said that you couldn’t simply decide to override your desires. If you wanted the cookie...you would have to eat it. The 6-year-olds, in contrast, like adults, said that you could simply decide whether to eat the cookie or not, no matter what” (Gopnik 2015).

A Libertarian Perspective

“Self-control is a skill that children need to succeed academically, socially, and emotionally. Brain regions essential to self-control are immature at birth and develop slowly throughout childhood. From ages 3 to 6 years, as these brain regions become more mature, children show improved ability to control impulses, shift their attention flexibly, and wait for a reward” (Tarullo et al. 2009)

Perhaps just as we accept that determinism cannot account for quantum phenomena, we should accept that there may be room for agent-level phenomena that cannot be captured by determinism. **In my perspective, top-down attention serves as potential evidence for this agent-level phenomena.** Understanding the source of attention is one way that I think we will come closer to solving the problem of free will.