

## **FREEWILL: A USEFUL FICTION**

**by Edward Jayne**

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Both Christians and atheists support the doctrine of free will, so this issue is not especially helpful in differentiating the two groups. In fact, four distinct theories of free will may be diagrammed to sort out differences: believers and disbelievers who accept the doctrine, as opposed to believers and disbelievers who reject it. More specifically, these comprise:

(I) Christians who believe in free will (Catholics, etc.)

(II) Christians who oppose free will (Calvinists, etc.)

(III) atheists who support free will (Sartre's version of existentialism, etc.)

(IV) atheists who oppose free will (Lucretius, etc.).

Me, myself, I have effectively split the issue. As a philosopher, to the extent that I can put myself in this category, I am a rank determinist opposed to the concept of free will on the assumption that everything is determined, beginning with subatomic and molecular relationships. However, as a more or less effective husband, teacher, citizen, etc., I adhere to the notion of free will as a useful fiction relevant to just about everything I do. My assumption that justifies this division is that I've been locked into my behavior pattern on a strictly determinist basis as a willful individual driven by a delusional sense of freedom, as are all other such individuals able to guide their lives based on this fiction, may we thrive in everything we do. In other words, our use of freewill in guiding our behavior has indeed been totally predetermined, and we can be grateful for this since it tends to guarantee better results in everything we do. We think free because this has been our predetermined fate. And that anybody else reads my words here and decides to take the same course in life--that, too, has been predetermined. Everybody I know is captive of delusions of one sort or another, and this free will assumption--indeed, a fiction--is therefore one of my two primary delusions that I recommend for others as well. The other delusion is that I'm a kind of "god" surrogate in the world I inhabit, surrounded by other surrogate gods and goddesses, most of whom erroneously refuse to accept their supernatural status and responsibilities.

In my opinion the ultimate advantage of determinism as an explanation of human behavior can be demonstrated by the hypothetical model of a perfect clone. Imagine two brains exactly identical. Every one of the billion neurons would be the same--every dendrite, every molecule in every dendrite, every atom, every subatomic particle within every atom, every sensation, every hormone, every enzyme, every electric potential on every surface. The two brains would beseparate, yet one and the same. If one of them could be replaced by the other inside somebody's skull, there would be no sense of anything having happened except for the

moment's transition from one to the other. I realize this isn't possible in real life, but for the sake of argument let's imagine it to be true.

What I am suggesting is that under this circumstance there would be no choice made by one of these brains that wouldn't also be made by the other. If one refrains from eating a candy bar, the other can be absolutely counted on to make the same choice. And this would apply to every other decision in life. There would be no free will in the sense that either of the two brains could make a decision that would not also be made by the other. The two brains would be completely in synch with each other.

But let's take this hypothetical model to its extreme: imagine ten thousand such brains that are totally identical, or even, for that matter, ten million such brains. Even here there would be perfect unanimity. They would all make the same decisions resulting from absolutely identical neural and environmental circumstances. There would be absolutely no exception. If any kind of variation presents itself--of a brain, for example, that does in fact exercise free will by deciding to eat a candy bar contrary to the rejection of this option by all the other brains--an autopsy would be needed to determine how this utterly unpredictable occurrence happened. If dissection is sufficiently thorough, I am confident that some kind of a microscopic difference--however miniscule, however fugitive--would be found to have produced this variation. It is thus my supposition that each choice supposedly the act of free will is instead the product of compound physical circumstances--the intricate chemical and biochemical organization of the brain confronted with a panoply of sensations produced by a necessarily unique physical environment. This is pretty much the common assumption of all deterministic philosophies, though few take the time to spell it out.

True, we have the sense of free will when we make choices, which happens with everything we do, but this is totally fictitious. In fact, we're caught up in a vast net of acts and outcomes that is only too obvious to those who know us. We think we enjoy a wide freedom of choice, but the choices we make are utterly predictable to those who know us well enough. Another analogy would be when driving a car: the driver himself is aware of every need to swerve from his course in one direction or another, but an observer standing away from the car is primarily impressed by its forward momentum. And the same with life. Harold thinks he does something new and exciting when he suddenly takes his spouse into an unfamiliar furniture store; she, however, thinks, "Poor Harold--always trying to appease me when he knows that I'm irritated by his bad manners." As far as Harold is concerned, he is venturing into new frontiers; as far as his wife and children are concerned, he's utterly predictable in his behavior. This pseudo-freedom might be harmless enough with Harold, but it bears telling results when his son, Rodney, repeatedly avoids homework by attending lively parties, and when his daughter, Phoebe, disappoints herself with a predictable sequence of dull-witted bum-of-the-month boyfriends. Free will turns out to be not so free, not even when one repents by calling on God to be forgiven for all of one's mistakes earlier in life.

On the other hand, the advantage of a fictitious theory of free will derives from the recognition that, whether one is ultimately free or not, the fiction (or delusion) of freedom is usually linked with the achievement of better results, whether among theists fearful of God's judgment or among atheists and agnostics whose pragmatism is unencumbered by eschatological

distractions such as eternal hellfire. We might be destined to make predetermined free-seeming choices by a power beyond our ability to choose (God or, more probably, nature itself), but, granted this deterministic inevitability, we should willingly comply with our destiny as beneficiaries of the free-will fiction. And we should help others accessible to the same destiny to recognize the paradox involved so they too can live better lives on the same basis, successful in their efforts because of their unfree delusion of freedom.

To sum up: as philosophers we are determinists conscious of our ultimate inability to have any impact on our destinies that were sealed well before we ever lived. But as human beings going about our business as well as possible we best perform this task by cultivating the belief in free will, able to do as we please--as we think the most fulfilling, the most appropriate, the most ethical relevant to the needs and expectations of others about us. Granted, we are dominated by powers beyond our control, whether these be physical or metaphysical, but probably the most useful trait these powers have bestowed upon our minds is our ability to take advantage of the wonderful fiction that we possess the ability to make choices on our own. And so we should take advantage of this fiction as much as possible with the recognition that we are finally off the hook, as the saying goes, as soon as all is said and done, since our destiny was in fact beyond our control. Even more useful is the ability we acquire to engage in a blatant double standard, treating ourselves as the beneficiaries of free will at the same time as we treat others as being entirely predictable. Without blaming them, we can better fathom their behavior, their needs and feelings; and without trying to escape blame as victims of our circumstances we can better confront our own behavior on a useful basis toward improvements we foolishly (but effectively) consider our own responsibility.

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