

Chadwick Essay Competition 2021

Johnnie Averdieck (WW2)

Evaluate the claim that humans have no free will

The irresistible allure of free will is one shared by almost all humans. It is an idea so firmly engrained in our very being that to reject its existence goes against our nature, seemingly removing all value and responsibility from life. And however intuitive freedom of action may appear, when one enters the realm of philosophical discourse, our gift is often left in tatters by the most brilliant philosophical minds. Now, the traditional definition of free will posits that, given two identical situations, same time, place, mood etc., one could act in a different way. Conversely, determinism holds that you could *not* act differently. I will argue against idea of free will in that we ourselves have no direct control over which course of action we take, so in a sense our actions *are determined*. However, I disagree with the definition of free will given earlier, as I will argue one could act differently, merely we can never actively *choose* to pursue a certain course.

What I believe to be the most convincing argument for this lack of control stems from the very nature of reality as described by physics and biology. First it was Newton who entered the scientific discussion, describing the forces that govern our universe with elegant equations and calculus. He taught us that, given enough information about a system, be it a planet or a ball, we could predict its motion and behaviour to a great degree of accuracy. In fact, one philosopher, Laplace, took Newton's ideas to a whole new level, boldly stating that a being of sufficient intellect, with all the knowledge of the positions and momentums of all the particles in the universe, for him nothing would be uncertain and the future just like the past would be present before its eyes. This view continued to be developed by the likes of Einstein with relativity, all until Heisenberg and the quantum revolution came along and shattered the determinist's dream of a perfectly predictable universe. Quantum mechanics, the theory which describes the workings of the smallest possible scale, gives a far more indeterministic vision of reality, a world of randomness and of probabilities. If we leave a particle in a box with all the information we could possibly know about it, we can only *suggest* where we believe it be after a certain amount of time as given by the Schrodinger equation.

It is important to note that this quantum weirdness may have no impact whatsoever on the real mechanics of the brain, as it is such a hot and messy entity, a process known as quantum decoherence removes much of the randomness noted in the clinical conditions of experiments, and the brain can be thought of in the classical manner. In any case, great thinkers, philosophers, physicists and even neuroscientists hell bent on restoring free will after the carnage left by determinists like Laplace, have argued that the indeterminacy of the quantum realm gives us back our freedom. I wholeheartedly disagree with this idea. Whether the brain is deterministic or a random quantum machine, there is still nothing which ties us to these processes. In determinism, we can determine that future state of the brain, and we can do nothing to alter this, hence free will cannot exist in determinism. Furthermore, quantum mechanics gives random outcomes, but do we control these outcomes? No. At the end of the day, our will – that mechanism which chooses

between desires – is nothing more than the product of the brain and the brain is subject to physics (quantum and classical) just like anything else.

Of course, there exists much opposition to this. Many religions take the stance that human will extends far beyond the mere physical, perhaps through a god given soul. For a dualist my argument is completely invalid. Without straying too far down the rabbit hole of the soul debate, I would suggest that neuroscience has attributed almost all the functions that soul used to perform as processes in the brain. Others stick to the flawed initial definition of free will I gave earlier, that in some identical situation we could act differently. To me, it seems clear this definition should not merely say to act differently, but to *choose* to act differently. Therefore, while one could act differently due to quantum fluctuations and other phenomena, (in the off chance that quantum coherence is conserved) you are not responsible as a moral agent for the action as you played no part in the decision-making process, just physics. Finally, some choose to question the reductionist philosophy here, that I am looking at the small constituents to draw a conclusion on the larger scale. However, I see no logical fallacy in this reasoning. Every system is only made up of its constituent parts and their interactions. To reject this overlooks the key principles of physics, which aims to understand the universe at the most fundamental level. It is only here that we can gain true understanding.

Nevertheless, humans are more than just the interactions of particles, of quantum uncertainty. We cannot be described purely by an equation, and so I grant that a complete case must be grounded in this plane of existence, away from this hard materialist picture. I will now turn to behaviourism, cultural and environmental determinism. Although these theories have their nuances, they all aim at the same goal, that who we are and how we live are created by our *nurture*. Such things like our education, our parents, these major influences on our lives, and even rules and expectations play a role here. Why am I writing this essay right now? Is it because I am forced to by my teachers, is it because I watched a TV show or read a book which instilled in me a deep love of philosophy? All that can be said is that every action one takes, no matter how ordinary or out of the ordinary can be traced far back down the chain of events that led you to this very moment. These theories of nurture can also work in harmony with those of nature, such as genetic determinism, which suggests that human behaviour, desires, and beliefs can be assigned to our genetic makeups. Facets like our sporting ability or physical health are extremely relevant here. A natural response to these is to question how nature and nurture can account for such routine actions as deciding on how to spend your afternoon, or maybe which type of cereal to eat in the morning. This illusion of choice is so convincing in these cases, but I believe it is because we spend so little time thinking about them that we reach this illusory state of freedom. When life is lived on default, we almost instinctively make decisions, without questioning where these come from. If one really does scrutinize every action, a clear-cut reason derived from past experiences or even genetics will be found.

Many attempts have been made to explain free will. One says that a human can start a whole chain of causes that wasn't caused by another cause. This is the agent causation of the libertarians. However, their best explanation is just that it feels as though we are free, and we shouldn't discount the legitimacy of our own personal beliefs and feelings. Simply feeling like you have real freedom is not enough to convince me or anyone of the fact, is not a rigorous enough argument to be included

in this philosophical discussion. Further attempts have been provided, but none truly provide a mechanism which fits with the definition I have provided which I believe provides a framework for true free will, that of actively choosing our own reality.

And this is the issue with the case for free will, no matter how intuitive it is and how much one wants to believe, the philosophical mind requires either strong evidence or reasoning. No matter how essential free will is for morality, ethical responsibility and leading a meaningful life, wanting or needing something to exist is just not enough. That is not to say that life should be stripped of these essential ideas, the illusion of free will is so strong that we should go on as if we do have free will, we should continue to hold people responsible for their actions and be moral people. Yes, our brains and therefore our choices and actions are still contained within the bounds of physics, and our experiences and biology truly impact on everything we do, but all these processes have contributed to us feeling freedom as though it is a tangible reality, and to let this go would be devastating. Finally, if scientists discover the mechanism for choices that involves our active input, or agent causation, I will accept free will. At this stage in understanding though, I have no choice but to follow reason and accept that free will does not exist.