

A Phenomenological Sketch

Free Will

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[<http://www.ship.edu/%7Ecgboree/freewill.html>]

The concept of free will has undergone some hard times lately. The obvious success of science, and the materialistic, deterministic, reductionistic assumptions that usually accompany it, have made free will seem old-fashioned, associated more with scholastic theologians than modern men and women. But I find the concept impossible to ignore, much less dispose of.

Let's begin by saying what free will is, and what it isn't. Free will is not the same as freedom of action. Freedom of action refers to things that prevent a willed action from being realized. For example, being in prison means you are not free to paint the town red. Being in a straight jacket means you are not free to wave hello. Being paralyzed means not being able to move your limbs. These are not issues of free will. Free will means being free to try to escape (or not), to try to wave (or not), to try to move your limbs (or not).

Neither is free will the same as political or social freedom (better known as liberty). Just because you will be executed for taking the local dictator's name in vain, doesn't mean you aren't free to try, or even free to actually do so. You'll just wind up paying for the satisfaction.

On the other side of the argument, I need to point out that determinism is not the same thing as fatalism, destiny, or predestination. Determinism means that the way things are at one moment is the necessary result of the ways things were the moment before. It means that every effect has its cause, and that nothing, not even the will, is exempt. It does not mean that the future is already established.

It might also be useful to define will. As I understand it, it is a matter of intent: The perceptual, cognitive, and emotional processes we engage in when confronted by a choice result in an intent to engage in certain actions or non-actions. I have before me a cheese danish and a poppy seed muffin. I look, I sniff, I consider past experiences, I feel good about both prospects, and then I decide. I intend to eat the cheese danish (or the muffin, or neither, or both...). Whether I am free to actually eat it, or whether I can expect severe punishment for doing so, is irrelevant. I have made up my mind!

Let's run through some arguments for free will, followed by the determinist's responses. Since the free willist is making a claim, and an exceptional one at that, the burden of proof is on him or her.

First, there is the experience argument. I experience something within myself that I understand as making choices, and that those choices are not determined by anything other than myself.

The determinist will respond that you are simply not aware of the causes of your decisions, and have labeled that ignorance "free will." There were no doubt neurons firing and chemicals sailing across synapses and so forth, all very deterministically resulting in my choice of the danish.

The free willist might suggest that belief is a crucial part of free will. If you were to set me up with the danish and the muffin, knowing that I tend to choose danishes, you might very well say the end result was determined. But if I knew you were trying to prove your point, I would simply choose the muffin instead, or neither.

The determinist would simply say that this extra tidbit of knowledge – that I am trying to fool you – has replaced your usual causal factors. Instead, you are reacting, quite mechanically, to a threat to your beliefs.

Maybe so, says the free willist. But you must admit that I can be awfully random at times. I can suddenly jump out of my chair and scream "Tippecanoe and Tyler, too" at the top of my lungs. Let's see you predict something like that!

The determinist would respond that indeterminism is far from free will. If that's all there is to free will, then a roulette wheel is better at it than you are.

But I am unpredictable, says the free willist.

The determinist would point out that that is merely a practical problem, not a philosophical one. The fact that I cannot pin point the precise location and velocity, say, of all the particles in the universe, doesn't mean that you aren't determined by them. In fact, even if that were theoretically impossible (as suggested by the Heisenberg uncertainty principle), it only means I can't predict, not that you have free will!

The free willist may point out that, without free will, morality has no meaning. All the best things about people – generosity, bravery, compassion – have no meaning. If we are as determined as

falling bricks, then Adolph Hitler could no more be blamed for his evil actions than Mother Teresa could be praised for her good ones. What then of our world?

Simple, says the determinist. We will have to live without morality. Many people are already moral relativists, or even moral nihilists. Our societies can get along just fine with laws and judicial processes and prisons using nothing more than tradition, majority self-interest, reciprocity, and the rule of cover-your-ass. Maybe that's all morality has ever been!

Another argument a free willist can make is that we have this unique ability to stop and think about a decision-making situation. We can exit the stream of cause-and-effect for a moment. We pause before the high-calorie meal to consider the advisability of diving in. Animals rarely do this: If a hungry lion has an antelope before her, she eats. And we can postpone the decision as long as we like. Even if the actual choice we make at some particular moment in time is determined, the length of time we wait for that moment to arrive is not.

Or is it? says the determinist. What caused you to wait exactly one minute before choosing? Or what caused you to stop your pausing and jump into things at just that moment? Besides, isn't this pause just a matter of two forces of equal strength short-circuiting the normal processes?

Jean-Paul Sartre came up with an interesting free will argument. He said that we can ignore something real and we can pretend something unreal. For example, I could imagine that there is no danish before me – something I often need to do in the service of dieting. Or I can see the poppy seeds in the muffins as maggots. This imagination is a powerful thing! But the determinist would just say that imagination is just one more neurological mechanism, explainable by deterministic principles.

I must point out that, although the free willist has not exactly won any arguments so far, the determinist has put himself in a somewhat more defensive position. Some of that "burden of proof" is moving over to the determinist side. For example, he has claimed that imagination is something physical. That is a claim that we need not just accept: We can challenge him to demonstrate the validity of the claim.

Another possible foundation for free will is creativity. I can create a new option. I am not stuck with the cheese danish or the poppy seed muffin. I can throw them both and choose a bag of cheesy puffs. Or I can literally create a new concoction: Get out my mixing bowls and bake something no one has ever seen before, such as a poppy seed danish or a cheese muffin. Or I can get out my blender and make a muffin and danish slurry.

Of course, the determinist, becoming rather tiresome by now, would just say that creativity is just a word we use to label unconscious neural events that surprise even us – an accident. If someone steps on your danish and muffin by accident, no one would think to call the wad on the bottom of his shoe a new creation!

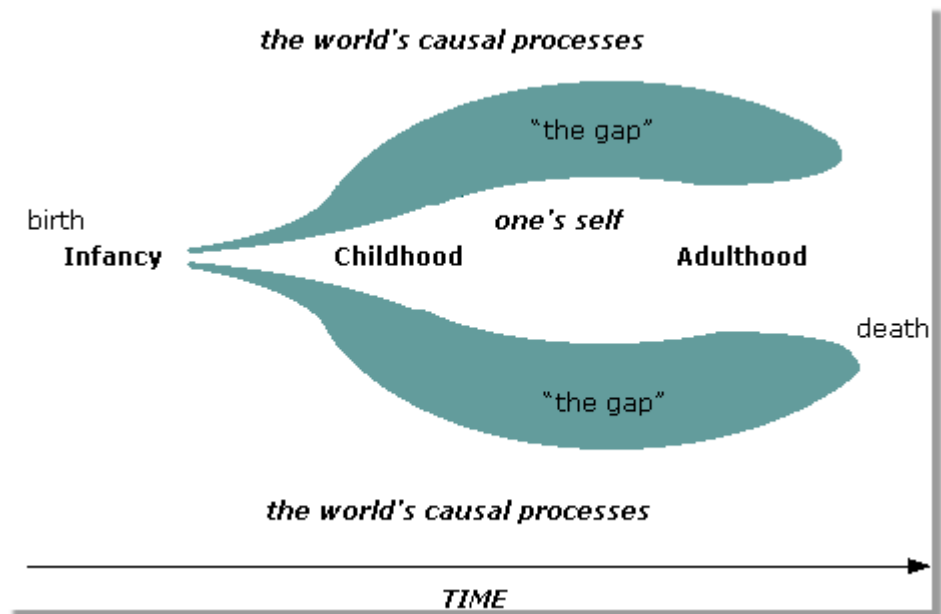
(Of course, the determinist is claiming now that creativity is mechanical – something he could be challenged to defend.)

So, how about differentiating between causes and reasons? When I get myself a Big Mac, is it cause-and-effect determinism that led me there? Did the growling in my stomach force me into my car, the sight of the golden arches make me jerk my steering wheel in their direction? Or did I notice my appetite and conceive a plan: Look through my repertoire of gastronomic delights, I decide on a Big Mac, drive purposefully to the golden arches, and order what I want? Was I, in other words, “pushed from behind” by causes, or did I follow my reasons?

This is called teleology. Instead of reacting to stimuli, we project a future situation which we take as a goal. The connection between cause-and-effect is one of necessity. There is nothing necessary about purposes. They can be accomplished – or not.

But the determinist would respond with the same argument he made with imagination and creativity: Your perceptions and cognitions and emotions, your past experiences, inevitably lead to your projecting that goal and working toward it. It only appears to you to be free of necessity. But note how quickly we give up our goals when other, more powerfully supported forces push in upon us.

One last try for free will: I suggest that, as we develop from babies into adults, we separate from the world. Our causal processes become increasingly independent of the causal processes outside of us, especially in the mental realm. A gap develops that allows us to be influenced by outside situations, but not determined by them. This gap is like a large river: The man on the opposite bank can wave and jump and yell all he wants – he cannot directly affect us. But we can listen to him or interpret his semaphore signals. We can treat his antics as information to add to all the information we have gathered over our lives, and use that information to guide our decisions – influenced, but not caused.



The baby begins life nearly as intimately connected with his or her world as in the womb. By the end of life, some of us are impervious to what others think about us, can rise above any threat or seductive promise, can ignore nearly any kind of urge or pain. In one sense, we are still determined – determined by that developing person we are, determined by our selves. But nothing else in our

present circumstances, or even in our past going way back to some time in childhood when that gap was first fully realized, is more than information to utilize in making free decisions.

I know very well that the determinist can respond to this idea as well. But now he is as much on the defensive as the free willist has ever been. In fact, the undecided listener may begin to conclude that it is the deterministic stance – nothing is free! – that is the more extreme, less reasonable one.

Addendum

Some students have complained that I have left the job unfinished, and that I should continue the argument to a conclusion. In other words, they want to know what students always want to know: What is the answer? Or at least, what do I think is the answer. Although I would rather see students come up with their own answers, here is how I see the issue:

The argument of free will versus determinism is in some measure a false one. Both sides have been reduced to straw men (easily destroyed arguments) by oversimplification. For example, free will has never meant freedom to ignore the laws of nature, and determinism does not mean everything is predictable. Perhaps the best thing we can do to get past the stalemate is to develop a new concept that points to the complexity of the person and his or her interaction with the world. Instead of free will versus determinism, maybe we should adopt Albert Bandura's preferred term: *Self-determination*.

As a middle-aged man, I have dozens of years of experiences – my childhood, my cultural inheritance, the books I've read, conversations with friends, my own thoughts – that have made me who I am today. All this is on top of my unique genetics and other physical realities of who I am. The things that happen to me *now* are experienced *through* this mass of uniqueness, and my responses depend, not only on my present situation, but on all that I *am*. This may not be "free will" in the absolute sense, but it is certainly self-determination.

If we possess this (somewhat limited) freedom, we also possess a (somewhat limited) responsibility for our actions. For most adults, it can be legitimately claimed that who we are includes basic moral concepts and a rational respect for the law conveyed to us by our parents and others. These things are a part of who we are, and are available to us when we make a choice to behave one way or another. We are therefore culpable if we disregard these moral and legal concepts. This dovetails nicely into the legal tradition that asks whether or not a person actually *knows* right from wrong, and whether the person has the maturity or the cognitive wherewithall to *choose* right over wrong.

In other words, we don't have to be "above" the natural world in order to have a degree of freedom within that world.