

Free Will, Determinism, And Choice

Blithering Genius

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1 Introduction

Every now and then, I encounter someone who raises the free will | determinism paradox in a discussion about a choice. It usually goes something like this:

Me: We have to make a choice. Either we regulate our population and genome ourselves, or nature will do it for us, with war, disease and famine.

Joe Shmoe: Your assumptions are wrong. There is no free will, so we don't really have a choice.

I imagine Joe delivering this brilliant insight with a smug little smile, as if it is the ultimate "gotcha".

In this essay, I will explain why Joe's comment is an absurd non sequitur. I will also talk more generally about the relationship between free will and determinism.

2 Denying Free Will Is A Paradox

First, what is the point of bringing up the free will | determinism paradox in the middle of a discussion about something else? The real motivation is to derail the discussion, while asserting one's intellectual superiority. The intended meaning is something like this:

You idiots think you have free will, but you don't, so there is no point having this discussion. I am on a higher intellectual level than you. I understand that choice is an illusion.

It's also usually a call for apathy. If everything is predetermined, then nothing we do matters, so why bother? Like other forms of nihilism, denial of free will can be used to rationalize failure and laziness.

Joe Shmoe doesn't understand that denying free will is a paradox in itself. Discourse presupposes that we can make choices. His critique of choice applies to his own comment. If we can't make choices, then what's the point of his comment? Is he saying that we should end the discussion? That would be a choice. If we have no free will, then we have no free will to end the discussion, or not end it, as the case may be. Joe's comment is absurd. It negates its own significance. If it is true, then it is irrelevant.

Ironically, Joe Shmoe is suggesting that we are free from the burden of choice. He is suggesting that we don't have to do the difficult job of making choices, because fate will make them for us. But we have no such freedom. We can't escape from the burden of making choices. We are forced to make choices. That is part of the human condition. The brain is a choice-making machine, and consciousness is the perspective of a choice-making machine. As Sartre said, we are condemned to be free.

Joe's comment is a kind of trick. It presents a philosophical limitation on free will as if it were a physical limitation, and thus relevant to making a choice. If we had been discussing whether or not we should shift the orbit of Jupiter by 10,000 km, then it would be relevant to point out that we don't have the physical ability to change the orbit of Jupiter, and so the discussion is pointless.

3 The Philosophical Context of Free Will | Determinism

Our freedom of action is very limited by the laws of physics and by our circumstances. Physical limitations are relevant to choices of action. It is important to know what we can and cannot do, so we don't waste energy on futile efforts. By contrast, a philosophical limitation on choice is not relevant to any actual choice, because it provides no reasons for or against any course of action. It is only relevant in a philosophical context, when we are talking about the human condition in very abstract terms. It could never be relevant to an actual choice.

Now, let's consider the free will | determinism paradox in a philosophical context. Is it an actual paradox? Does determinism conflict with free will?

Both determinism and free will are metaphysical assumptions. In other words, they are presuppositions of thought. They are built into the way that we view the world. The denial of free will uses one metaphysical assumption to negate the other. But there is no reason why one assumption is philosophically superior to the other.

As it is usually presented, the free will | determinism paradox involves a tacit assumption that

determinism is correct and beyond doubt. This is only an assumption, and it is either hypocritical or naive in this context. If we can question free will, then we can also question determinism. That is one problem with the free will | determinism paradox, as it is normally presented. It takes one metaphysical assumption for granted while using it to deny another.

4 Free Will And Determinism Depend On Each Other

Are these metaphysical assumptions in conflict? Are we (ironically) forced to choose between them? I will argue that free will and determinism are not only compatible, they are inextricably linked. Free will depends on determinism, and determinism depends on free will.

Free will depends on determinism in the following way. A choice must be determined by your mental processes, knowledge and desires. If choices arose out of nowhere, as uncaused causes, they would not be choices.

For example, suppose that someone offered you chocolate ice cream or vanilla ice cream. Let's also suppose that you prefer the taste of vanilla, and you know that you are allergic to chocolate. Naturally, you would choose the vanilla. That choice would be based on your pre-existing knowledge and preferences. It would have prior causes, and some of those prior causes would be in your brain. If an uncaused cause arose out of nowhere and made you pick the chocolate, that would not be a choice. It would be a strange, supernatural event.

5 Choices

A choice is not an uncaused cause. A choice is when thought generates an intention, based on pre-existing preferences and knowledge, and that intention generates action toward making the intention real.

Free will is not "free" in the sense of being uncaused. It is "free" in the sense that *you* are the cause. You are free to choose between A or B if your choice will determine the outcome.

I am not free to change the orbit of Jupiter, because there is no causal pathway from my brain to Jupiter's orbit. By contrast, I am free to make a cup of coffee right now, because I have the power to turn that intention into a reality. If I choose to make a cup of coffee, I will get up, walk across the room, fill the kettle, etc, etc, and the end result will be a cup of coffee. Some unforeseen events could prevent that outcome, of course. There could be an earthquake or a power outage. I could have a sudden heart attack and die. But those events are unlikely. Thus, I believe that I have the power to make a cup of coffee in my current situation.

6 The Limits of Freedom

I'm back with my coffee.

I believe in determinism. I believe that the past causes the future. I was fated to make the coffee. But it was still a choice. It was freely willed because my will was the determining factor. It was not forced *on* me. It was forced *by* me.

There are internal limits to our freedom, and those are interesting from a psychological and philosophical perspective. Sometimes they also have practical relevance.

For example, short-term impulses can conflict with long-term desires. A person might want to stop smoking, but be unable to do so. A man might want to ask a girl out on a date, but be overwhelmed by anxiety when he tries.

Intentions and actions emerge out of many different and often conflicting desires. Reflexes and habits can override choices. In a sense, we don't have total control over ourselves. The will is limited.

Our freedom is also "limited" in the sense that we can only intentionally do what we *want* to do.

For example, there is no external constraint that prevents me from killing myself right now. I could get a knife and plunge it into my heart. I have the physical power to do that. But I won't do it, because I have no desire to do it. That is not really a constraint on my will. That *is* my will. I choose not to die. It would be a mistake to think of the will as a constraint on itself.

7 Determinism And Science

Determinism is often presented as scientific and objective, while free will is dismissed as mystical and subjective. This is naive.

First, let's be clear that determinism is not a scientific claim. Science does not tell us that reality is deterministic. Determinism is a presupposition of science, and of thought in general. Scientific theories describe the world in terms of cause and effect, and so science depends on the assumption of determinism. However, science also depends on the assumption of free will.

We can only test scientific theories by experiment, and experimentation presupposes free will. In an experiment, the experimenter manipulates one variable and observes the effect on another variable. In other words, he observes the effect of a choice. Some theories can't be tested by experimentation (such as the laws of planetary motion), but deeper physical laws (Newton's laws of motion) are established by experimentation, and then applied by analogy to things beyond our control.

Science is ultimately about action, and thus about making choices. We don't create scientific theories just to explain what we observe. We use those theories to act in the world. We may not shift the orbit of Jupiter, but we do put satellites into orbit, and send space probes to Jupiter. Ultimately, all knowledge is about action.

8 Subject | Object Dissonance

Why does there seem to be a conflict between free will and determinism?

The free will | determinism paradox is one of a family of paradoxes created by thinking about the self as an object. This creates what I call "subject | object dissonance". Normally, we take our mental processes for granted. We don't think about them, and we don't think of ourselves as mechanisms. It seems odd to think of one's feelings, thoughts and choices as "just" neurons firing in a blob of jelly.

There are three reasons for this:

- A psychological model cannot capture subjectivity “from the inside”. It cannot tell us what it is like to see the blue sky, or choose a flavor of ice cream. It can only map those experiences to events in the brain. The model of the experience is nothing like the experience itself.
- There is nothing subjectively “beneath” subjectivity. We aren’t directly aware of the mental processes that construct subjectivity. My choices have no prior subjective causes. But they do have prior objective causes.
- Subjective experiences and choices exist at a certain level of description. Below that level, there is a psychological level (mental processes), a biological level (neurons), and a physical level (molecules). Things that exist at higher levels don’t exist at lower levels. It isn’t consciousness “all the way down”.

To resolve the apparent paradox, some people reject the psychological view of the self as a mechanism. Instead, they believe that consciousness is non-physical, and that mind-stuff is some other “substance”. They think of the self as inhabiting the body, but not a manifestation of the body. This view fits well with the traditional religious notion of the soul.

Others go the opposite way. They reject the introspective view of the self. They believe that experiences and choices don’t really exist. “The self is an illusion”, they say. But this is incoherent. To whom is the self an illusion? There must be a self to experience an illusion.

9 The Best Resolution To Subject | Object Dissonance

There is no need to choose between the introspective and psychological views. We can understand them for what they are: two views. Experiences and choices exist, subjectively and objectively. They are the primary constituents of subjectivity. But that doesn’t mean they are primary constituents of objectivity. Objectively, they are events with prior causes, and have a deeper structure. Their prior causes and deeper structure are not accessible to us introspectively, but we can understand them psychologically.

Introspectively, the subject is hidden from itself. Psychology reveals the self to itself, as a mechanism. Subject | object dissonance is created by the subject thinking about itself.

Introspectively, your choices seem to not be determined, precisely because you determine them. Choices must be predetermined. If they were not, they would be random events, not choices. To be *your* choices, they must be predetermined by *you*. A choice is not the creation of new causality out of nothing. It is the causality of the universe flowing through you.

Knowing this does not lift the burden of choice from your shoulders. You are a choice-making machine, and you cannot escape from that fate, except by death. You are forced to make choices, because that is your nature.

So, the next time someone says “there is no free will” or something like that, just tell him that your free will is part of the determinism of the universe, and so you are forced to make choices. You cannot do otherwise.