

Free Will Is Dead. Long Live Free Will!

The moment of decision has finally arrived. It's now or never. He has weighed all the pros and cons, and sought the counsel of his closest advisors. He has even appealed to a Higher Authority.

To invade or not to invade? That is the question. And the answer comes as if from a lightning bolt.

We all know what George W. Bush decided to do. But if we could turn back the hands of time and give the President a second chance, with everything exactly as before, might he chart a different course? Could he choose otherwise?

With the help of free will, surely he could.

Or could he?

With everything as before, *including* Bush, why would he?

Indeed, were Mark Twain, Abraham Lincoln and Albert Einstein alive today, they would laugh at the very idea. Not a one, you see, believed we have free will. Here's what Twain, for his part, had to say:

Where there are two desires in a man's heart he has no choice between the two but must obey the strongest, there being no such thing as free will in the composition of any human being that ever lived.

Unfailingly frank, Mr. Twain didn't hedge on the subject of free will either.

Such a claim is shocking enough, perhaps, but surprise, surprise, this august trio has plenty of company: Thomas Jefferson, Charles Darwin, Bertrand Russell, Clarence Darrow and Francis Crick, to name but a few. In fact, the great majority of philosophers and scientists who think about free will today have come to the same conclusion. We simply don't have it.

Now, if this is news to you, you're not alone. By no means are you alone. But let's begin at the beginning, shall we? What exactly *is* free will anyway?

Despite what you may think, these free will skeptics would nonetheless agree that most of the time we do things "of our own free will." We're generally free to act as we choose, uncoerced by anyone or anything. Without a gun to our head or mind-altering drugs in our veins, we act *voluntarily*.

But most of us believe free will means much more than this.

We believe that Bush *could* have opted for peace rather than war. We believe that nature and nurture don't decide our choices—we do. We believe that, ultimately, for most at least, The Buck Stops Here.

Sorry to say, it's *this* kind of free will that Twain, Lincoln, Einstein and all the rest deny. But why?

Science, of course, is largely to blame. Over the years, it has inexorably chipped away at the idea that we have a non-physical mind apart from our physical brain—a self, a soul, a ghost in the machine—telling the brain what to do. The brain can manage quite nicely on its own, thank you very much. Though the whole is greater, and freer, than the sum of its parts, at bottom the mental *is* “just” physical. As psychologist Steven Pinker puts it: “Brain tissue shows a staggering complexity that is commensurate with the staggering complexity of human thought and experience.”

What, then, is left for the mind to do?

This is disconcerting to say the least. If there isn't a freely willing mind controlling the brain, if the brain is all there is—our choices a consequence of physical processes alone—the prospects for free will appear bleak indeed.

Even so, many have sought a way out.

Science generally assumes that physical causes completely determine what happens next in nature. That determinism holds sway. But inside the atom, *indeterminism* reigns. So-called “quantum events,” physicists believe, are inherently random. Inexplicably, physical causes fail to determine their outcome. Instead, by default, their outcome is left to chance.

So the question arises: is quantum indeterminism nature's escape hatch for free will?

If brain activity isn't strictly determined, there would seem to be reason to hope. However, should the reach of quantum events exceed the atom's grasp, something most physicists doubt, there'd be no cause for celebration. Yes, the quantum-induced firing of one of your brain's neurons might cause you to choose differently, but this hardly qualifies as an act of free will. Reasons, not randomness, should motivate our choices.

Ironically, then, though free will founders in the natural world when determinism's at work, indeterminism is a cure far worse than the disease. At least a deterministic world gives us the predictability we need to make reasoned choices. Choosing depends on who you are and the circumstances of your choice, but choosing becomes futile if your circumstances change at random, and choosing becomes arbitrary if *you* change at random.

Oops, there goes that neuron again!

Unfortunately for free will, its problems go much deeper than this. For what would it mean to have a will so free it's uncompelled by causation and dares to choose otherwise? Alas, something seemingly impossible. In philosopherspeak, your will would be a "first cause"—a "prime mover unmoved"—something that causes your choices without being caused itself. Science notwithstanding, uncoupled from causes but, somehow, not reasons, your will would be *supernaturally* free.

Suspending disbelief, an uncaused will—a supernatural will—could be just what the doctor ordered. Residing outside the physical world but still a force within it, by quantum manipulation or other means a supernatural will could tweak the brain this way or that, just as it pleases and for its own reasons, without being compelled in its choices. But be careful what you wish for. The problem is this: if causes aren't enough, what *does* your will base its choices on?

Regrettably, we can never know. A supernatural will is a black box, beyond scientific scrutiny. As philosopher Tom Clark says, it "stops the search for reasons." Possessed of an unknowable will that dictates all matters of choice, when asked why we did what we did, we can only reply: "I don't have a clue. My free will made me do it!"

Still, if ignorance is bliss, could a supernatural will have allowed Bush—somehow, someway—to choose peace and not war? Could he have actually chosen otherwise?

Let's return to that fateful moment of decision when Bush's supernatural mind-brain ziggged (chose war) instead of zagging (choosing peace). If his mind-brain could have zagged instead, if it could have chosen otherwise, the same mind-brain conditions that allowed it to zig must also have allowed it to zag.

Why, then, did it zig rather than zag?

The answer appears inescapable. There *is* no reason. How could there be? If the mind-brain conditions for zigging and zagging—whether natural *or* supernatural—are exactly the same, you can't explain why one happened and not the other. Whichever happened could only have happened by chance.

Where's the free will in that?

In the end, despite all the hype, a supernatural will appears no more capable of choosing otherwise than a natural one does. We're back to square one.

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It's time to get real.

Chance aside, if science and reason tell us anything at all, whatever we say, think, feel, choose or do is utterly determined. And if it isn't, the alternative is unthinkably worse.

Heaven forbid, if everything's determined, what then?

Well, let's see.

If everything's determined, choosing isn't what we thought it was, but it's still real choosing. It's still up to us. Given the circumstances, we weigh our choices and choose accordingly. We get one choice and we make it. Choosing otherwise isn't an option.

If everything's determined, we're still responsible for what we do. Just not *ultimately*. We couldn't have done anything different, it's true, but *we* did it, and no one else. When there's a reason for everything, reasons aren't excuse enough.

If everything's determined, responsibility isn't a birthright born of free will; like most things in life, it's something we learn. Amazingly, holding people responsible actually makes them that way.

Who knew?

If everything's determined, we can't do otherwise, nor can anyone else. Dealt another's hand, we'd feel and do exactly as they do. A little empathy, please.

If everything's determined, we can't get all the credit or take all the blame. Often warranted, neither is deserved. Stay humble, and have compassion for others, and yourself.

If everything's determined, what we do makes a difference. What we do really matters. What we do helps *determine* what happens. If Fate had her way, what we do wouldn't matter at all.

And, yes, if everything's determined, we choose just as well.

We do as we want, and there's nothing we can't do.

We will freely...not supernaturally.

So let the trumpets sound! And the bells ring!

Free will is dead. Long live free will!

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