

# Is Society Accepting That Free Will Is an Illusion?

Jonathan MS Pearce

**T**he debate has been around for ages. Literally. From Ancient Greek times through the Dark Ages and the medieval period—only to be reignited with vigor in the last decade—the argument over whether we have free will or not has never been far from the minds of philosophers, and now scientists too. Indeed, the last few years have seen a whole tranche of books written on the subject (not least my own), including many by people who do not confine themselves to the discipline of philosophy. Most readers will have at least passing knowledge of books such as *Free Will* by “New Atheism” cavalier Sam Harris.

But why this renaissance? Is there new philosophy that has been lying undiscovered only to be picked up, somewhat tardily, by modern thinkers? No, this does not appear to be the case. We are still faced with the classic dilemma of determinism, summed up by Paul Russell so well in his 1995 book, *Freedom and Moral Sentiment*:

One horn of this dilemma is the argument that if an action was caused or necessitated, then it could not have been done freely, and hence the agent is not responsible for it.

The other horn is the argument that if the action was not caused, then it is inexplicable and random, and thus it cannot be attributed to the agent, and hence, again, the agent cannot be responsible for it.

In other words, if our actions are caused, then we cannot be responsible for them; if they are not caused, we cannot be responsible for them. Whether we affirm or deny necessity

and determinism, it is impossible to make any coherent sense of moral freedom and responsibility.

In simple terms, something is either caused or random, and neither situation seems to easily allow for moral responsibility as convention understands it. While a great deal of (really quite dry) philosophy can be called up to the stand to testify in this matter, most average people, and many philosophers, understand free will as the ability, in a given situation, to do otherwise—that I can, indeed, choose to pick up this cup of tea right now, or choose not to. But hang on: what could make me, in a particular situation, do something, and then if we could hypothetically rewind the universe, do something different *in that exact same situation*? Houston, we have a problem.

Granted, we can redefine free will as something like self-determined volition, or some such other notion whereby determinism (the idea that the universe adheres to strict deterministic laws of cause and effect) and “free will” are compatible with each other. But on this aforementioned simple understanding of free will—our common-sense intuition of the concept—there are fundamental problems. It simply makes no logical sense. The agent needs to have ownership over a causal chain; the causal chain needs to originate in the agent such as an uncaused cause. Sound familiar? Yes, we all become rather godlike.

However, I don’t buy this understanding of libertarian free will, as it

is coined. And it seems that a growing number of people from all walks of life deny it too. Certainly there is a swelling tide of people in the skeptical community who are beginning to do so with consummate ease.

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Second, apart from the *feeling* that we have free will—that we *can* decide to do either this or that—there is no evidence that it exists. None. Nada. Zip. (Though there is an interesting question as to what such evidence would, or even could, look like). And so scientists, with their pesky demands for evidence, tend toward the idea that free will is, like the sense that the world is flat, an illusion.

It is not just a negative case of there being no good evidence for free will; there is a whole plethora of scientific evidence for determinism (or adequate determinism, if you adhere to “random” interpretations of quantum mechanics)

across a gamut of scientific disciplines. Let me run through just a few. In all cases, we can predict these things with much greater accuracy than chance:

1. We can predict criminality based on children's ability at age three to show fear conditioning (that is, if they show no fear responses at age three, they appear to be less likely to worry about consequences and end up being more likely to be convicted of a crime some twenty years later).
2. We can predict achievements (SAT scores, life outcomes, body mass index, and the like) of adolescents based on whether they could delay their gratification at ages five and six (whether they can put off eating one cookie now to get two cookies when the experimenter returns).

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3. Certain autistic people are less likely to believe in God than neuro-typical people, and men less likely than women;
4. We know that two-thirds of students who cannot read proficiently by the fourth grade will end up in jail or on welfare.
5. We can predict who one will vote for based on one's threshold of disgust.
6. We can show that priming can heavily influence one's "choices" in any given situation.
7. There are umpteen genetic markers for behavior (such as psychopathic and sociopathic behavior) and so on, *ad nauseam*.

In fact, there is so much evidence from social science, psychology, neuroscience, genetics, and biology demonstrating that free will is an illusion that we hardly need call on philosophy to make this case.

Indeed, social science and psychology implicitly understand that causal determinism underwrites reality. The whole discipline of psychology implicitly accepts determinism. For instance, a psychologist might say, "You exhibited this behavior because of X and Y. We need to work on this by using cognitive behavior strategies," rather than, "You exhibited this behavior because, well, you chose to. I can't evoke any antecedent causes because it's just you. I also can't evoke your own brain patterns and biology. It's just some 'mind-y' you that decided to carry out that behavior without recourse to any other reasoning. I cannot give you any strategies or reasons to change because they themselves will become antecedent causes of future effects, and we don't believe in them!"

As Baer, Kaufman, and Baumeister state in their introduction to *Are We Free?* (a book about psychology and free will): "Free will can't really mean that at any moment a person's behavior is totally unpredictable (and therefore entirely unconstrained). Such a universe would be, from psychology's perspective at least, the same as one governed entirely by chance, which is just another way of saying it is not governed at all. For psychology to make any sense, the universe must be, to some degree at least, predictable. A psychology that doesn't accept causes of behavior or the possibility of prediction is no psychology at all."

With regard to social science and its connection to biology and genetics, simple and obvious statistics such as those pointed out by David Eagleman in his book *Incognito* are powerful. The carrier of a certain gene is 882 percent more likely to carry out violent crime than a noncarrier. As Eagleman says, being a male makes you "eight times more likely to commit aggravated assault, ten times more likely to commit murder, thirteen times more

likely to commit armed robbery, and forty-four times more likely to commit sexual assault." This correlation suggests that causation lurks somewhere herein, however complex the variables may be.

Science, as a method and in its many guises, is doing a good job of defending the philosophy. Things don't make an awful lot of sense without universal causality.

Obviously, people will argue against this vociferously. No one likes to lose something so cherished, to have to admit that they (we all) might have been wrong, and, well, change. Enter stage left cognitive dissonance, and stage right, confirmation biases. However, strive though we might to hold onto free will with white knuckles and gritted teeth, I think its days are numbered.

I am not the only one who thinks this way. Consider the ever-growing role that the discipline of neurocriminology is playing in sentencing.

In Italy in 2007, an Algerian man by the name of Abdelmalek Bayout confessed to the murder of one Walter Perez, who had racially taunted Bayout. He received a sentence of nine years and two months. This was a low sentence due to mitigating factors: Bayout was mentally imbalanced and had a history of psychiatric illness. In 2009, an appeal court judge reduced this sentence by a year. Why? In simple terms, some of Bayout's moral responsibility for committing this crime was judged absolved when it was discovered that he had a gene variant linked to aggression. His counsel maintained that he had five genes linked to violent behavior. As *The Times* of London, reporting on this case, noted: "Some believe that the link between antisocial behavior and genes is so strong that genetic information should be accorded the same status as mental illness or an abusive childhood in deciding punishment. In a 2002 report, for example, the influential Nuffield Council on Bioethics [a UK-based independent charitable body, which examines and reports on ethical issues raised by new advances in biological and medical research] concluded that the use of genetic informa-

tion to help determine custodial sentences (along with other information such as previous convictions) should not be ruled out.”

Of course, the danger here lies in assuming that genes = behavior = causation, when we all know that it is a combination of any number of factors (though a deterministic combination at that) which results in a given behavior or action. Behavioral genetics has been invoked in over two hundred cases, most of them in the United States.

With a greater understanding of the human genome, one imagines that this number can only rise vigorously. When we couple this with rising acknowledgment of biological, as opposed to genetic, influences on causation, we can see that the legal system is adopting a more deterministic framework—to the point that in a recent paper studying such cases, Deborah Denno reported, “Overall, courts today appear far less skeptical about accepting behavioral genetics evidence, and they do so in the majority of cases in which defense attorneys attempt to offer it.”

One can approach the findings of neurocriminology in two different ways. This was patently obvious when I was having a chat about Bayout with my partner over a cup of tea. Most people might well pass the time of day talking with their partners about what they are going to buy from the supermarket that week or where to go on vacation. Not me, I prefer to discuss the outcomes of deterministic research in the field of crime over a brew and a cookie! Discussing this matter, I concluded in agreement with the judge of the crime that, knowing Bayout’s genetic makeup (to a degree) and understanding his psychological condition, it would be unfair to incarcerate him for so long because he was less than fully responsible for the crime he committed—it wasn’t so freely willed.

My partner, on the other hand, had a completely different approach. She declared that since we knew that Bayout had a predisposition for violence, and since he had a history of psychological issues that meant he was less likely to be able to deal rationally and

calmly in certain situations, he could actually be predicted to be *less* safe in society and therefore should be incarcerated for a longer period. Letting him out earlier would lead to a greater likelihood of his committing similar offenses, irrespective of responsibility. In her eyes, it is society’s responsibility to safeguard its own safety by ensuring that people such as Bayout are kept away from situations in which they would be able and likely to cause harm.

If such a deterministic outlook absolves responsibility in any way (and philosophers happily argue over this), then do we incarcerate for longer terms or shorter ones?

As far as I am concerned, I see criminal punishment in much the same way as I would see a dangerous contagious disease. When infectious disease strikes, what do we do in a humane and compassionate society? We quarantine the victims, keeping them away from others until we have cured them. We hold them in comfortable conditions, being the good humanists we are, and our thoughts are on rehabilitating them.

The situation is identical with criminals being punished. We quarantine them for the good of society, in humane conditions, working hard to rehabilitate them. In extreme situations, sometimes this sadly does not occur. But we don’t give up on them. When we are sure (and we should be very sure) that they have rid themselves of the illness—of that which caused the crime—then we allow them to rejoin society. We don’t cause unnecessary harm and we concentrate on rehabilitation. Retribution plays no part in a deterministic approach to crime and punishment. Giving criminals their just deserts in a vindictive manner is inconsistent with the understanding that someone did what one did because one was “who one is” in a given situation. Our job, as a society, is to try to ensure both that the criminal does not do the crime again in similar situations and that others are deterred from doing likewise.

In many respects, it is difficult to know what to do with an encroaching

acceptance of determinism. We have challenges ahead of how to deal with what we are finding out through the revelation of the ever-increasing map of the human body, of the universe, of causality. As we shuffle off free will and with it jettison (at least the Abrahamic) god, we must have some kind of backup plan, some kind of glue to hold society together in the absence of two of the greatest illusions humanity has known. I think losing free will, though, will create many more headaches than losing God (he’s been on an extended holiday for a few thousand years, anyway; perhaps he emigrated) since it has more pragmatic ramifications within our legal, educational, and social contexts.

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There is something fundamentally useful about knowing that the world is, in some way, deterministic (whether one buys into quantum indeterminacy or not). When I see or hear of a criminal committing a crime, a child misbehaving (which I regularly do as a teacher), or a machine doing something unexpected, I know that there is a reason, or a set for reasons, for these outcomes. I don’t throw my hands up and wonder about the fickle universe we live in, with its unfathomable penchant for free will. No, there is causality at play, and by knowing this, we can, as a society, seek to understand what drives us and seek to know what changes to people’s causal circumstances will bring about a better world for us all.

I know from my own talks to skeptic groups that there is a much more comfortable acceptance of free will as illusory. I cannot imagine this to have

been the case some thirty years ago. Perhaps this is a result of the Internet- and science-savvy world we now live in. But we get *that* far, and then are left with a big question mark and a furrowed brow. This is why organizations such as the Center for Naturalism—which conducts advocacy and public education on the position that free will is unreal—are so useful, so necessary. People need the tools, philosophical and pragmatic, to be able to deal with a changing understanding of the world around us. No longer is the magical concept of free will good enough to explain why we do things. Further, the notion of free will seems to be struggling to provide enough robust explanatory power to suffice for courts of law and discussions of moral responsibility.

The more we talk about issues of

free will (and the lack thereof), the easier the transition will be to a society in which its illusory character is part of the accepted explanation of reality.

Despite the predictability of the future, in theory, it is unknown to us. And perhaps we have evolved the illusion of free will because it is more useful to us than its denial. If this is the case, then the road could be rocky as we discuss whether we should all be *illusionists*. But we're a resourceful lot, and these philosophical, political, and social challenges are ones that are ripe pickings for the new age of secularism, when it comes. And yes, it will come. **FI**

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Jonathan MS Pearce is an author, philosopher, blogger, and public speaker who has written *Free Will? An Investigation into Whether We Have Free Will or Whether He Was Always Going to Write This Book* as well as *The Little Book of Unholy Questions* and *The Nativity: A Critical Examination*. He blogs under the name "A Tippling Philosopher." Working as a teacher, he lives in Hampshire, U.K., with his partner and twin boys.

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## The Faith I Left Behind

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## Why I Retired from Religion John Compere

**M**y paternal ancestors were French Huguenots, persecuted by the Roman Catholic Church, who fled France for the New World and freedom from religious oppression. My maternal ancestors were Irish Protestants who left Ireland for the New World to be free from violent religious conflicts between Catholics and Protestants.

Notwithstanding this ancestral history, it was my privilege to be born and raised on a small family ranch in rural Texas where I spent my early years outdoors with nature and ani-

mals, free from repressive religion. My parents were casual, cultural Christian Protestants who did not belong to or attend a church regularly but who said grace over meals and prayed some nights expressing gratitude for our lives and blessings. In our extended family, women were the spiritual leaders, and they encouraged reverence and gratefulness for God's creation. I was taught that God created all of us in her own image, provided the beautiful Earth to sustain all of us, and declared all of it to be good. Experiencing the goodness of God and her creation, love of fam-

ily, relationships with animals, sunrises, sunsets, seasons, clouds and rain, moon and stars, fauna and flora, cycles of life, the miracle of birth, and the reality of death confirmed family values and sustained early development. My life as a young ranch kid was indeed very good.

A severe and prolonged drought caused a continuing struggle for financial survival. My hopeful mother often said that if we prayed for rain, God would answer our prayers. I recall asking my stoic father if she was right about praying. His response was "Yes, Son, but make sure your horse is unsad-