

Thoughts on Free Will

As a dilettante philosopher, the subject of free will poses a consternating yet delicious slice of thought-food. My personal take is that the world doesn't have much of an interest in this, although studies show that those who believe they have free will behave differently from those who think they don't, regardless of whether free will can be proven to be so. So society really does have a stake in the matter.

So recently I started taking some notes on things that I've studied and thought about related to free will, which is an ancient, universal, and well-trodden topic. What follows are some of those notes presented in better prose (I hope) than the originals.

We awaken to experience. We presume that babies are almost nothing but self-centered vortices of experience. Experiences lead us to what goes up must come down, $2 + 2 = 4$, and to countless cause and effect relationships that just always seem to hold. There are also universal perceptions of logical laws that ring true in the mind, like a thing cannot be in two places at once. Early in life, there is also an inherent acquisition of the concept of self and volition; that we are actors freely writing our own scripts to play out in the world. These are deeply embedded in identity.

There is also the knowledge, pressed home by science, that simple animals with brains made out of the same substance as ours (but less of it), function like clockworks. Put a certain stimulus in and here comes a predictable response. These are the sorts of things that lead one to entertain the strange and disconcerting idea that outside forces that stamp shapes on the mind are really utterly in control of the mind, meaning that volition, or free will, is an illusion. So in a way experience has come around to bite us.

If you are inclined to hang on to free will, you could adhere to the somewhat solipsistic philosophy that experience is the primary reality. And you wouldn't be alone (humor aside). The physicist Erwin Schrödinger, a pioneer of quantum mechanics, said this about dualism, which is the concept that self and other are distinct:

"These shortcomings can hardly be avoided except by abandoning dualism. This has been proposed often enough, and it is odd that it has usually been

done on a materialistic basis.But it strikes me that ...surrender of the notion of the real external world, alien as it seems to everyday thinking, is absolutely essential.”

Speaking of quantum mechanics, which is physics at a very small scale, the theory says two things that might be optimistic for free will proponents:

1. Things are not deterministic on a small scale. In a sense, outcomes are the result of throws of unknowable dice.
2. An “observer”, often synonymous with an experiencer, can force the dice to be thrown, meaning that you have some “say” in what happens and that the world may not be such an inexorable engine after all.

But sadly, if you exist in the world that deflates things somewhat, since whatever you do as an observer might be the result of some previous dice throwing.

Can determinism, i.e. no free will, be proven? If you try to show this by experiment, you need to separate yourself from the subject in order to control the input and output variables. The second point above indicates that this might be problematic. But what is more, there is one experiment that cannot be done, which is proving that the universe as a whole is deterministic, for two reasons:

1. Observers by definition contained within the universe, and thus are part of the experiment.
2. The results of an experiment also part of the universe, thus changing the state of it. This means that experiments on a universal scale are never repeatable.

Pantheists who are believers that they are part of god-as-universe might find this lack of provability to be favorable news, whether free will fans or not.

Consider if determinism were to be proven, it would be an interesting but academic point, as exploiting that knowledge would of course be coerced by destiny. Predicting some events might turn out to be less than hoped for as well. For example, suppose the stock market becomes predictable with a new algorithm. The algorithm will quickly become part of the stock market, leading down a tail-chasing path that might be essentially unpredictable.

There is also the cat version of free will: whatever happens, that's what I meant to happen (from George Carlin joke about a cat running into a glass door).

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