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How Are We Free?

The following answers to this central philosophical question each win a random book.

To be completely free, or to do something of your own free will, it is essential that you could have acted otherwise. If you cannot avoid acting in a particular way, then your action is not free. While it is generally understood that human beings have the ability to think and act freely as rational and moral agents, the common causal laws by which all human activities and responses are governed are incontestable. It is this conflict that provides the real problem of how we are free.

It is hard to refute determinism in a world where almost all scientific disciplines depend on physical cause and effect. Scientific and philosophical views seem to object to the idea of indeterminism, and Hume's compatibilism (we're simultaneously both determined and free) does not seem to work either. Original agent causation through the power of the will is also no solution, offering only the even more difficult problem of mind and body dualism. With no clear answer, and only garrulous analytical disputation in sight, it is easy to see why the mainstream media redefines 'freedom'. *It has an answer.*

Timothy Hatfield, Tamworth, NSW

We are free in some respects and not in others. If I am imprisoned then obviously I am not free physically in any significant way. I can't choose to go out for stroll, eat a pizza or go to the cinema. But on the other hand, I am still free to think, and free to write whatever I like.

Actually, freedom consists of three main principles:

- 1) The absence of human coercion or restraint preventing one from choosing the alternatives one would wish.
- 2) The absence of physical constraints in natural conditions which prevent one from achieving one's chosen objectives.
- 3) The possession of the means or the power to achieve the objective one chooses of one's own volition.

We don't live on individual islands. If I were Robinson Crusoe, I could do all the things that are physically possible for me. But we live in society. In society we are (or ought to be considered?) free to the extent that our actions do not harm others.

Rashan John, Pathanamthitta, Kerala, India

The moment I consider freedom, I think of myself as trapped in an elaborately locked cell:

I have a job I cannot leave

I have children I love

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I have a wife I love even more

I have a mortgage

I have an injured knee

I am scared of change

I am ignorant of many things

I believe in God

I have friends, family, and an elderly neighbour

Each of these is a lock I have placed on my cell. There are hundreds more I have not mentioned. Given this, how am I free at all? In fact, have I not spent my whole life choosing to not be free? Is life just a path into a more and more restrictive cell, until I am unable to make any choice and am trapped forever?

In its purest form *freedom is having the largest amount of potential experiences, and having the greatest physical and mental mobility to be able to choose from those experiences*. Before I decided on all the things that locked me up, and decided on who I was going to be, I had this freedom. At the point where I reached adulthood I was able to look at the world and decide how I wanted to be a part of it. I could go anywhere, do anything, and be accompanied by anyone. The moment I thought about this critically, as to what I wanted or not, the keys began to turn in the locks – but before that, when I looked at the world to consider my choices, I was free.

I would thus suggest that we are free in as much as we are able to reject our own egos and preconceptions to give us the widest available potential options in our lives. If we can do this then we are free to choose anything and can amend our lives accordingly to achieve what we choose, which could then be anything our human capabilities allow. Feel free to disagree.

Ben Evans, Guildford, Surrey

“Stone walls do not a prison make
nor iron bars a cage”
(*To Althea, from prison*, Richard Lovelace 1618-58)

This question may be seen from at least three perspectives: In what ways are we free? In what does free will consist? How come we have free will, if we do? All other freedoms pre-suppose, are subordinate to, and are irrelevant without free will.

Consider one of the ways in which we may see ourselves as free: free as a bird, or as a wild animal. But do these have any power of choice? Are they not on auto-pilot, constrained by instincts, hunger, thirst, social pressures and fear? So are we also on auto-pilot, yet with a greater degree of choice and a stronger range of constraints: prison, blackmail, death threats? Humans clearly have the power of self-restraint, good manners, tact, enlightened self-interest; the ability to think through and carry out a plan of action which may or may not be benign, taking into account how others will react. But even in the most perfect world, there will be constraints.

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Where in all this constrained freedom is free will? Free will requires total autonomy in thought, or at least the power to establish for oneself one's principles of action. Even then, one's behaviour will not necessarily accord with those principles. My mind, and I suppose others', has been influenced from birth by what others

communicate. Every neuron that has fired has been a response to some stimulus. So every thought has to follow from some signal. In simple animals there's no room for free will. A man-eating tiger must be shot, clearly, even though it surely has done nothing but followed its nature and instincts?

Free will is autonomy, the unconstrained freedom to choose values and beliefs. But where does it come from? From nothing? From mass and energy? From a power beyond all science? So, if I have free will, how come? Is there something deep within me – self, id, soul, spirit that operates independently of instincts? There cannot be any explanation of free will from science. Yet to abjure free will is to abjure all responsibility, and all credit for any so-called achievements. The only possible explanation for free will speaks of a God who gives us choice even with considerable limitations on the freedom to act.

James Malcolm, West Molesey, Surrey

We are free in so far as we experience choice. Some choices are extremely important because we know that possibility A will lead to a very different outcome from that produced by possibility B. These lead to lengthy and repeated deliberation. The freedom we experience when deliberating and considering possibilities must have been acquired in a social context that has led to the emergence of language together with interests, selves, agency, and second-order knowledge. Interests consist in basic needs and long-term goals or concerns. The self has its origin in bodily recognition with the subsequent establishment of the episodic memories that provide us with a personal identity. Self-control arises because we are able to refrain from actions inconsistent with other, more-highly-valued concerns. A sense of agency occurs in the course of the action that follows deliberation, and this sense of agency has sometimes been misleadingly attributed to an entity's performing an 'act of will' – an idea which may have arisen as a result of the mistaken belief that our thoughts are the exclusive cause of our behaviour.

Second-order ability enables us to categorise our experience, including those interests that we describe as the reasons for our actions. The pursuit of individual possibilities may be constrained by both natural inheritance and exposure to specific social environments. Liberal values and freedoms probably originated in the tolerant attitudes and willingness to negotiate established in predominantly commercial communities, and the desirability of such freedoms has been strongly espoused in Western democracies, especially by those with unfettered capitalist economies. These, however have produced considerable inequalities of wealth between social classes with the inescapable result that the more affluent are able to pursue interests and enjoy freedoms unavailable to the less affluent.

Maurice J. Fryatt, Scarborough, Ontario

We are free to the extent that we are knowingly and intentionally able to make choices. To do so depends upon a), our choice-making capacities, and b), our awareness of the possible options. Both are inevitably limited. Our choice-making capacities may be impaired and can malfunction, but even in optimum condition our capacities are influenced by, if not the result of, our individual histories and environments – biological, social and cultural. These also affect our awareness of possible alternatives, and predispose us to veer toward some in preference to others. Of course we can reflect, attempt to compensate for limitations, but we cannot step outside of ourselves.

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Thus, how we are free will fundamentally be affected by the equipment on which consciousness depends: our physical being, including crucially, our brains. Evidence from neuroscience supports the notion that apparently *conscious choice* is *preceded* by neural activity. So rather than bringing about choice, our consciousness registers and monitors events of ‘apparent choosing’, which actually involves neural activity selecting from alternative

pathways. This activity typically leads us to believe that we have conscious free will, although Blackmore, in her *Conversations on Consciousness*, “concluded long ago that free will must be an illusion...” For her “the feeling of making free conscious decisions simply melts away.” (p.8)

It seems clear that we do not possess free will in any dualist sense; that is, through a mental faculty independent of the physical, yet somehow controlling the physical. Any freedom exists rather at the physical level, and only in the sense that the physical organism continually selects from available options in response to a hierarchy of changing needs, ranging from those of basic evolutionary survival through to more involved and complex needs, wants and aspirations engendered in societies and cultures, from the benevolent to the malevolent.

Colin Brookes, Woodhouse Eaves, Leicestershire

Many philosophers, including Thomas Hobbes, have claimed that man cannot be the original source of his actions. All desires and inclinations proceed from some cause. For Hobbes, universal causation is a brute fact, therefore we do not have the power of creating new causal chains by free choice: we do not have the power of origination, which means that ‘freedom of will’ is beyond us. The very fact that I was created is beyond my origination. A new series of consequences (that is my life) was originated by something outside of me, utterly disconnected from my ‘self’.

Hobbes argues that despite the absence of ultimate freedom, man is still free, if we mean has a power of acting or not acting according to the determinations of the will. We are free (what we may call the freedom of action) insofar as we follow our own desires and inclinations, and implement our own decisions. A free action is where there is an absence of external impediments, and in the plainest sense it must be voluntary or willing. This may be described as a *compatibilist* definition of freedom.

It seems that a great deal of our value and dignity is based on a notion that compatibilists refute: that we are the original source of a causal connection leading to decisions and actions. In a debate with Hobbes, the Bishop of Derry, John Bramhall, said of Hobbes’ and his fellow compatibilists’ conception of freedom, “Is not this a childish liberty, and such a liberty as in brute beasts, as bees and spiders? Is not this a ridiculous liberty?” Maybe so; but perhaps it’s the only liberty we possess.

Benjamin Rochelle, By Email

The source of our freedom is language. Language enables us to depict alternatives and to understand our choices. Physical processes are inevitable and predictable: chemical A plus chemical B causes reaction C. Instead of being driven by such relentless causal sequences, thanks to language we can see alternative possibilities and choose one path of action from among them.

Some will object to that libertarian view. They will say that language, choices etc are brain processes, and since brains are physical objects, the same causality applies to human behaviour as to any other physical process. I

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disagree. The fact that there are brain processes involved does not entail that action is solely the product of physical causes. It is over-reaching to insist that everything must be explicable in physical terms, particularly when human action is the product of decisions, not causes.

Consider this thought experiment: Y has to choose A, B or C. Scientist X has total knowledge of Y (chemical composition, brain structure, behavioural history, etc), including total knowledge of the physical processes

involved. Having done all the calculations, X states what the outcome will be: for example, A. Y is told this prediction, and chooses B. Thwarting such physical predictions is a way both to exercise and demonstrate freedom.

Critics will say that the experiment was compromised once Y heard what X's prediction was. They say that giving Y that information changes the brain state and so ruins the experiment. But X would treat the physical results of his revealing his prediction as part of the initial conditions. If Y's behaviour really is physically causally determined like a chemical reaction, then it should be predictable even when Y knows what the prediction is. The critics have therefore conceded the point that I as a libertarian wanted to make: that human action is not the product of relentless physical causal sequences, but is instead freely chosen on the basis of our understanding and intentions.

Conclusion: you can choose whether to agree or disagree!

Les Reid, Belfast

I am a determinist, so in my eyes life isn't free-roaming, it's more of a complex roller-coaster. As such, we aren't free to make choices; but we are free to experience what goes on around us. We don't have freedom to act, but perhaps we have the experience of freedom. Is this really freedom? So as long as determinism is largely true, we may as well be stuck to a roller-coaster with our eyes taped open. We have no choice at any point in our lives. But, if you live your life in ignorance or in disbelief of determinism, you can 'experience freedom', even if you don't actually have it. I certainly meet enough people who believe themselves free. It seems that is the closest we can get.

Edwin Howard, Wanstead, London.

We may ask if there is any purpose in knowing how we are free. The point of freedom is making good use of it, regardless of how we may analyse it. Indeed a portion of us may feel that we must take freedom of some kind for granted or go crazy thinking we are some kind of machine.

However I do believe I am free. *My freedom is the inherent ability to transcend my existence in a material world where causal determinism rules*, in my physical body and in the behaviour of my psyche. Therefore I am free only as a spirit.

The history of much of the world centers around the quest for the common person to get free from the many forms of tyranny man creates. But what if we were to ask "Mr Revolutionary, could you please tell us exactly what freedom would mean when applied to a politically-liberated human race?" I'm sceptical he could answer. And of the creators of culture, I could ask "Mr Enlightened, can you tell me how those countless of books, systems of thoughts and form of arts can make me free?" Well, he could add one more book to the collection.

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It is my belief that political and personal freedom come about together. We are not truly free until all people are free (with the proper respect for animals). And to find freedom as a race we must know what freedom means within ourselves.

Jai Wax, Toronto

Philosophers have contested the question of whether or not we have freedom since the dawn of materialist science. Like many problems, the disagreement exists between the levels within which you look at it.

Consider asking: “Is matter really full of empty space?” In a normal human context we might say, “Of course not, otherwise we’d fall through stuff.” Due to the way our brain presents visual sensory data, it is usually useful to think of space in the ‘normal’ way. However, in the scientific context, we know that atoms are mostly empty space. But to suggest that we should double the thickness of pavements in case we fall through the gaps is rightly seen as a wild misunderstanding of the science. So why do we not employ such considerations with free will and determinism?

Thus, free will exists within a human context: we perceive ourselves and others as making unpredictable decisions. It’s often useful to evaluate actions according to this framework. By contrast, if you look at it on a physical level, free will doesn’t exist. Actions are determined by continuous physical causality: there is no law which says these so contingent units of brain cells are allowed to elude the physical laws of causality when arranged specifically in neural networks. Contrary to some suppositions, not even quantum physics gives us free will.

Neither of these facts undermines the other, because they exist on different planes of truth, or different meanings of free will: they do not necessarily even interact. Just because we have no free will in a scientific (physical) context, doesn’t mean we should go around acting as though humans did not consider options and choose according to preferences, or that we should accept any of the wide range of the perceived implications of determinism. I suggest that we have difficulties in applying this logic because it seemingly affects our status as free people. Of course, we must translate between levels with care, and be wary of hasty conclusions.

Oliver Beatson, Eastbourne

Nietzsche saw that this question is a psychological one, not a philosophical one. I do not think that we are ‘free’, at least not as this word is generally understood. We are certainly not autonomous, unconditioned agents separate from the world. Yet the clear inner perception of the thinking ‘I’ or ego is self-evident and needs no justification (at least not for me). The problem is in reconciling these truths. The connecting concept is the idea of levels of description. Both aspects are true, yet neither is strictly relevant to the other.

This idea can be expressed in different ways; from a mechanistic view such as that of Douglas Hofstadter, to Hannah Arendt’s interpretation of Kant as delineating truth (intellect) from meaning (reason). The point though is that *we are as free as we perceive ourselves to be*. The Existential concept of self-creation, or at least self-choosing, provided some excesses are disregarded, seems to most adequately describe a pragmatic approach to the problem of human freedom. It seems to be the case that it is possible for a person to detach or deobjectify themselves by refusing to identify with phenomena: to draw back from direct engagement in existence and to conduct oneself as if we are free, and thereby remain surprisingly resistant to many of the situations arising out of biology and culture. Unfortunately, very few desire even this level of relative freedom, and are in general

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uncritical, being subject to material and cultural forces that they do not understand, rendering them essentially unfree – not merely *conditioned* as we all are, but actually *determined*.

John Smith, By Email

I would argue that freedom can be based upon a scale that can easily be reviewed, namely Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. The least free in the world locate themselves around the base of the pyramid. This can be represented as the

need for food, shelter and personal security. They want to be free from war and persecution, and to have a stable family environment where they can relax and have a meal with loved ones. In this light we are free. Most of us do not worry that the present day shall be our last, or that a group of marauders shall come and lay waste to all we know. Instead we struggle with issues not located on the base of the hierarchy, where we suffer far less dangerous opposition. Here we struggle to fit in and keep up with the Jones's and try to figure out where we fit into this world. We struggle against mass advertising and the insatiable pressure to buy buy buy! Social pressure causes us to worry, not where our next meal will come from, but how our lives compare to others in our society. However, in our neediness, is dignity and self-respect not like safety and stability? Once we move up the pyramid, is there not another step, and another step? Who's to say if each step becomes easier? Fighting our way up Maslow's ladder is physically challenging for the first few steps; but then, aren't the mental challenges just as difficult a fight?

Samantha Jenkyn, Ottawa, Ontario

Freedom is the absence of constraint. The kind of constraint that intrudes on our freedom is exercised by outside factors. *Self*-constraint does not diminish free will; it augments it. Starting from this standpoint, here are some thoughts about how to make outside contingencies lessen their grip on our freedoms.

We are free if we attach value to our ideals and tackle them relentlessly. We have to be able to identify who we are, what we stand for and what compels us to do something.

We are free if we lose our programming and start afresh. We must question everything inside us that seems to have been put there by our upbringing or by our environment and replace it if necessary, with values we've established by our own reasoning. Without deep and constant introspection we can't hope to be much more than automatons doing what our tribe's customs declare fit for a person to do. To quote Aristotle: "I have gained this by philosophy: I'm doing what needs to be done not out of fear of the law but because I think it right." We're free if we strive for knowledge every day. The constraints of the world manifest themselves mostly on the uneducated.

Freedom is a path not a destination. It is more often than not the most difficult path we can choose. It is a constant battle with conventional wisdom, with society and its huge inertia, and most importantly, it is a fight against our own nature. We want to conform and fit in with our tribe, and we feel inclined to give up our freedom for a sense of security and comfort. To be free is to be constantly on the alert against your own impulses, therefore; and reason is the tool for freedom.

Sebastian Fisher, Wien, Austria

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Although we commonly believe that we have chosen our attitudes, desires, and beliefs, and that we are hence ‘self-created’, if we reflect on the causes of our character, we ‘discover’ we are the product of forces totally beyond our control. From our evolutionary heritage, through the culture we are born into, and finally to the circumstances of our family and social life, we are molded by forces that make us who we are: we seem to be no more than living robots, manufactured by history and culture to act in a certain way. Is there any way, then, that we can create an authentic self that is free from the power of these controlling influences?

Though our physical bodies, our emotional drives, and our place within the world all seem to be determined, there is a way in which we can be free. Although our minds will be shaped our whole lives by ideas from others, we may be lucky enough along the way to develop a critical facility. *Criticism* is the function of understanding ideas,

comparing them, working out their implications, seeking experiences against which we can test their claims, and constantly winnowing out the contradictory and the unverifiable. Freedom is not a just a lack of physical constraint; nor is it a mind independent of history and culture. Rather, freedom lies in our willingness to engage and criticize the conventional and to seek the truth.

How can this critical facility be developed? In the beginning it starts with luck – a good teacher, a book we read, a challenging conversation, a cross-cultural experience – each of these may begin to erode the grip of convention and authority. With care, the critical facility can be nurtured, and the dogmatism which lurk in every fascinating new experience and idea can be challenged and tested. There will never be an end to the play of new ideas upon the mind. Since no overall reliable criterion of truth is available to us, we can only seek our freedom in trying and testing the whirlwind of ideas that comes at us each day.

Greg Studen, Novelty, Ohio

There are degrees of freedom, and to demonstrate some of these I am going to take us to a golf course. Any other fairly ample land area, like a farm, would serve just as well.

Golfers are bound by the Rules of Golf. To play in a safe, controlled way, Ruleplayer submits to a set of regulations. Trudge carries Ruleplayer’s golf bag, full of clubs: he needs the job.

Some time later, owing to the world food and water crisis, a group of people arrive on the golf course with a view to grazing animals or planting crops. The Hungrymasses have come because they need to: they have no other suitable land.

How is all this likely to play out? The first person affected is Trudge. He can’t get any more work carrying golf bags, so he joins up with the Hungrymasses. Ruleplayer is both furious, and afraid of the wider implications. His financial security and sense of well-being depend on structures that he has helped to put in place to ensure that his various ‘rights’ and ‘freedoms’ flourish and remain intact – especially on the golf course.

So both Ruleplayer and Trudge are both feeling substantially less free. But how about the Hungrymasses? How free are they? Remember they are each in this for individual survival, any way they can. But they still have freedom of choice on the method for this – banding together being one of them.

Some 40,000 years ago the Neanderthals became extinct. We may have helped. They remind us that you can’t be free if you cease to exist. So that is one limit on freedom. Some nine years ago I was scratching around with a stick

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in a midden (or waste heap) below a cave in a sandstone cliff at Knysna on the Cape in South Africa. The cave had been inhabited a long, long time ago. I found some shards of flint, which I now have on the table beside me. Were they produced by the hand of *Homo sapiens*, or by some species that went before? From this I am persuaded to expand Descartes' dictum into 'I am thinking, therefore I exist, and am free to become extinct'.

John Crosthwaite, Bramley, Surrey

Although we can do what we want, we are not free to choose what we want. Our wants are dictated by what we like or dislike, and our likes are programmed into us by nature and nurture. Just like the birds, which are programmed to like and therefore want certain foods and habitats, we too are programmed to like and want what

our genes and our cultures deem acceptable. Furthermore, it is impossible to want to do anything other than what we want to do. There is no way to turn it off. Our wants are a constant driving force, as persistent as gravity, compelling us to do what we do day after day. So we are all slaves serving the force – the force of our own free will.

Kevin Andrew, Tadcaster, North Yorkshire