

An Argument About Free Will

Luke Pollard and Rebecca Massey-Chase

dialogue about freedom vs determinism.

The free will argument is complex and diverse. Both of us recognise that the debate about freedom can be responded to by arguing that we may be free and also determined. As Craig Ross said in [PN 62](#), *compatibilism*, the view we may be both free and determined, leaves much room for improvement. He finished his piece claiming that we must choose between two polar-opposite opinions – freedom or determinism. We shall attempt to make this choice here.

Our debate will not attempt to cover all areas of this topic, but will simply offer two opposing answers to the question: ‘Are we free or are we determined?’

Luke Pollard:

The debate over free will has developed into a web of arguments and counter-arguments. On the one side we have philosophers such as Ren é Descartes, who once described the will as “so free in its nature that it cannot be constrained.” This view is called *libertarianism*. But in science, and unfortunately, in much of philosophy, the dogma of *determinism* – that our actions are causally determined by previous events – is more often assumed. I am for libertarianism.

Determinism is the view that we cannot decide, or even think, freely, however it may appear otherwise. We are instead constrained to act only as we are pre-ordained to act. Whether our will is dictated to us by an ordered universe, a chaotic universe, or God, depends upon which position you take. Libertarianism is the opposite to determinism. It is outlined in its extreme form above by Descartes, but I wish to support a less radical position. I shall argue that it is immediately apparent to us that we are free, and that, while we may be pressured and bullied by our surroundings, it is clear that ultimately the *choice* is ours – and the responsibility also.

On first impressions, it appears that we have various capacities and abilities, and that it makes sense to apply certain terms to us, such as ‘responsible’, and ‘accountable’. We seem to be morally responsible for our actions, at least partly. But how can one hold someone responsible for their actions unless they are free to choose what to do? If we are completely determined in our actions, say by our surroundings, and thus have no real *choice* in the matter, we cannot validly be held responsible for our actions. But we *are* validly held responsible for our actions; therefore, it appears that we are free. And if we appear to be free, we must assume that we are free, until reason can show us otherwise. Indeed, Rebecca has a far harder job than she might at first imagine, for she must not just show that *some* of our choices are determined, but that *all* of our choices are determined. For if we have just one free choice, this is enough to say that free choice is a reality.

Rebecca Massey-Chase:

Let me first present what I take to be (roughly) our situation regarding freedom:

Our characters are determined by our genes, biology, environment, etc – all factors which are essentially beyond our control. We may take steps to change our situations, but this decision is a manifestation of characteristics in us which have been cultivated by the aforementioned factors: for instance, a decision to move house may be necessitated by one's socio-economic situation. Consequently, I assert that our 'choices' are in fact *illusions* of choice, and that we therefore do not have free will.

I suggest that every time we make a decision we could not have chosen differently if the situation was exactly the same, because every choice we make is for a reason; indeed a great number of reasons, only some we are conscious of. I hope that those advocating free will agree that we make choices for reasons, or their definition of free will must then entail arbitrary decisions. If we act according to our will, whether under the libertarian or determinist conception, we surely must have reasons for our choices or else they are capricious. However, if our decisions *are* founded on reasons – reasons that are a product of our character and our environment – then if our character and situation remain constant, how could our decisions be different? For example, I buy a cake on my way to meet a friend. The libertarian might argue that I could have not done so. However, if I still have a partiality to cake, the right change in my pocket, feel hunger... The decision to buy the cake is determined by those factors. Luke might still argue that I could have not bought the cake: the decision was free and not determined. I could have acted otherwise. Yet how could he ever demonstrate this? Every time I make a decision I can never actualise the alternatives, so how could I ever know that those alternatives are not illusions?

Essentially, my argument is that our actions form part of a causal chain that operates ultimately on a sub-molecular level. At this level events are in fact deemed undetermined, ie purely random (at a submolecular level, quanta adopting one state rather than another is indeed undetermined, truly random): but this makes them no more *free* than if they were determined. Yet above the level of quantum pure randomness, every event has a cause. Every *act* is an event, and thus has a cause. These causes exist independently of the choosing agent and so cannot be influenced by the agent. Hence, the acts of each agent are caused (determined) by something beyond the agent's control.

Luke's view requires that there be a special category of agent causation: that we have free will which can act (choose) independent of any influence. But what is this posited agent, the 'you' who makes choices freely? It is apparently not in any way determined by character – which is a sociological and biological phenomenon – or context. So in what way would this 'you' be grounded in anything at all, so that there continues to be something that is 'you'?

Luke argues that the burden of proof for determinism falls on my side because we appear to be free, and we often use words like 'freedom', 'responsibility' and 'choice'. It seems he assumes that these words must have real referents because they are used: poor logic. I argue instead that these

words have an important role in our discourse, but the ambiguities that they contain essentially mask the fact that their concepts are not actually well-defined. What is responsibility? What is freedom? If we cannot say what it is, how can we claim it? In order for Luke to even successfully maintain that the obvious truth lies with the advocate of free will, he must be able to at least offer an adequate definition of the word 'freedom', and then explain how a special category of agent-causation works. I understand freedom as 'being able to act in another way'. But to me this does not mean being able to act in another way had one chosen to do so, because I believe that one would not choose to act differently were all the conditions the same.

Luke Pollard:

Rebecca's argument appears to me to be in two parts. First, she seems to be saying that free will makes a nonsense of our actions, causing them to be meaningless and capricious. All actions, to be meaningful, must have reasons, and our actions are meaningful, and do have reasons. But, claims Rebecca, if our actions have reasons, they cannot be free!

Second, Rebecca claims that I hold a position which entails that we are free 'independent of any influence', and I know this because of our everyday language, which embraces freedom. This, she claims, is an insufficient reason for holding my opinion.

Before answering these objections, I feel I must clarify my position. I do not claim that we act entirely independently of any reasons or influence. I do not even hold to Descartes' view that the will is 'perfectly' free. We are not unqualifiedly free: we *are* influenced by our surroundings, our upbringing, and the facts presented to us when we must make a decision. We *are* swayed by the circumstances. But ultimately, it is us who choose in which direction we sway. To define it further: we are self-causing agents – free and responsible.

Now let me respond to Rebecca's first objection; that without reasons (from which reasons determinism apparently follows) our actions would not be meaningful. We must distinguish between sufficient and insufficient conditions. A *sufficient* condition would be where the causes *force* the person to act in a particular way – there is no way it could have been different. An *insufficient* condition would be where there are causes, but they are not overwhelming – one could choose differently. In the words of William Hasker, "If you offer to sell me your old car, and I decide to accept, then your making the offer is certainly a condition of my accepting it, and it may qualify as a partial cause of my acceptance. But it is not a sufficient cause, because it does not necessitate my acceptance." This second 'insufficient conditions' form of reason allows for causes without determining the outcome. The action still has *meaning*, because we choose to make it on the basis of the facts presented. In fact, one may argue that if determinism, and thus 'sufficient conditions' were always the case, actions would not be meaningful, because there is not real choice behind them.

Rebecca's second objection is that simply because we use words like 'responsible' and 'free' in everyday talk does not mean that we *are* free. Look at my argument again, Rebecca. I did not say this. I simply argued that we appear to be *morally responsible*, and moral responsibility entails freedom.

Furthermore, on 'the principle of credulity', we should accept as a starting point what undoubtedly appears to be the case. Therefore, as appears to be the case, we should say we are free, until Rebecca can show us otherwise. I do not need to say anything on the definition of freedom, apart to say that we are free to make choices. Nothing more needs to be said for the argument to be valid. And Rebecca so far has not lived up to the burden of proof for determinism.

Rebecca Massey-Chase:

In reply to Luke, I will again speak about the issue of language. Luke fails to clarify what he means by 'freedom'; by 'choice'; by 'responsibility'. These, I argue, are not words with clear definitions. How can Luke meaningfully state that we are free, but not be able to define what he means by this? He surely cannot show that we are free if he is unable to say clearly what freedom is. I don't even propose that he should answer why we are free, only *how* we are free: in what *way* we are free. If he cannot define freedom, then I challenge him to answer how it can be so apparent to him that we are free.

With regards to the issue of moral responsibility, I recognise that here a determinist like me faces many hard questions. If a person's actions are determined and could not be other than they are, then how may they be responsible? And if a person is not ultimately responsible, should they be rewarded/punished? I believe one's answer to these questions are almost invariably personal. My answer is that you are responsible for your actions insofar as those actions are your own, but that reward and punishment should be part of socialisation rather than retribution. However, this is more conjecture than conviction, and my main point to Luke would be that 'moral responsibility' is not necessarily a *fact*. The world still makes sense without this concept, even if this does not concord with the way many people think. What reason do we have to believe in freedom or moral responsibility other than an inclination rooted in our psychological and cultural evolution?

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