

# Hard Incompatibilism, Zany Metaphysics, and Sophistry: A Survey of Views on Free Will

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*"There is an oddity about the experience of free will  
in that we cannot get rid of the conviction that we are free  
even if we become philosophically convinced  
that the conviction is wrong."*

- John Searle

My name is Brian, and I am a hard incompatibilist. This means that I ascribe to a worldview holding that human beings are not the ultimate sources of our actions—that we completely lack free will. It seems to inexorably follow that we therefore cannot in any meaningful sense be held accountable for our actions. In essence, we are physical machines without moral bounds. This is a terribly depressing way to think about life and society, but on a daily basis it's safe to say that even the hardest hard incompatibilists among us still *feel* like they are the originators of their choices and actions. Our moral sense of right and wrong so strongly girds our lives, how could it be nothing more than illusion?

This is a discussion of free will centered around the text *Four Views On Free Will* [1], a collection of essays offering alternative approaches to the question of free will in human life. First, we must decide where we fall on the question of *compatibilism*: is free will compatible with determinism? That is, are humans free to make choices and direct their lives if the universe operates deterministically, governed by causal laws in which all future events are completely set by the initial conditions of the universe? The position known as *compatibilism* sees no problem with this: not only do humans possess free will, we do so in a deterministic world. In contrast, *libertarianism* (in the philosophical, not political, sense) asserts that humans indeed have free will of a kind that is incompatible with determinism. Hence, the universe must exhibit some kind of nondeterministic behavior that makes free will possible. Those of us that reject the existence of free will agree with libertarians that it is incompatible with determinism; however, we also agree with the compatibilists that nondeterminism as equally fatal to the question of free will. This position is known simply as *hard incompatibilism*, because it holds that free will is incompatible with both determinism and nondeterminism. And because free will is incompatible with a thing and that thing's negation, it is impossible.

Determinism is a problem for free will because of the central role of physical causality in the development of the future from the past. This is embodied in the *Consequence Argument*, and it goes something like, "If determinism is true, then our acts are the consequence of laws of nature and events in the remote past. But it's not up to us what went on before we were born, and neither is it up to us what the laws of nature are. Therefore, the consequences of these things (including our present acts) are not up to us." [2] While causal chains of events proceed from past to the future, there is no fundamental difference between the two: determinism insists that we are as powerless to change the future as we are to change the past<sup>1</sup>. This is the argument that compatibilists must somehow defeat, and that libertarians discard as irrelevant to the universe on the supposition that it is not truly deterministic. In this libertarians are correct, as our acquaintance with quantum mechanics over the past century has taught us that the universe admits a certain amount of true

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<sup>1</sup> See Richard Taylor's beguiling essay *Fatalism* [3] for an allegedly logical, not physical, version of this argument.

randomness—indeterminism—at the level of microphysical processes. While classical determinism holds sway over long timescales in the macroscopic world, the principles of quantum theory ensure that underneath it all, there is a roiling uncertainty that shakes the steady hand of classical determinism. How much I don't think is known, but any shaking at all is enough to rule out strict and complete determinism.

But this realization doesn't exactly help the libertarians, since a nondeterministic world is uncontrollably random, surely contravening any hope of free will. Instead, the kind of nondeterminism required of free will seems to be that following from the complete suspension of physical law, in the sense that the origin of our will is simultaneously certain and independent of initial conditions. Perhaps a better criterion of compatibilism then is not one concerned with determinism, but one that instead considers the compatibility of free will with *physicalism*: the claim that all physical effects have antecedent, sufficient physical causes—that all future events are completely caused by prior physical events according to physical laws, whether deterministic or nondeterministic.

It seems to me that physicalism is fatal to free will. That if we, as humans, are nothing essentially more than programmed machines, as rocks tumbling down a hill, our actions are purely governed by the initial conditions of the universe and the unrelenting hand of physical law. The seeming inevitability of this conclusion makes alternate viewpoints appear hopeless, but surely there must be some way—some nuance or detail that invalidates this logic, some way for free will to exist! Sam Harris in his book *Free Will* advances the following take: “If determinism is true, the future is set and this includes all our future states of mind and our subsequent behavior. And to the extent that the law of cause and effect is subject to indeterminism—quantum or otherwise—we can take no credit for what happens. There is no combination of these truths that seem compatible with the popular notion of free will.” (p. 30).

Now, I'm no philosopher. I'm not even appreciably well-read in this area. In short, I have not spent a distinguished career thinking deeply on the question of free will. While I admire the ingenuity and perspicuity of the libertarian and compatibilist viewpoints, I simply cannot wrap my head around these crazy ideas. The defenses are technical but specious (although I doubt deliberately so): they either quietly stray from the assumption of physicalism or tacitly consider notions of free will that might differ from the popular conceptions cited by Harris. We must therefore be especially careful in our investigations to be sensitive to the precise versions of free will that form the basis of these spirited defenses.

## The Libertarian Take

Robert Kane of the University of Texas at Austin argues for the libertarian position. He immediately clarifies the primacy of physicalist compatibility: “Genuine free will, we believe, could not exist in a world that was completely governed by Fate or God, or the laws of physics or logic, or heredity and environment, psychological or social conditioning, and so on.” (p. 11) Kane further observes that nondeterministic mechanisms of free will are problematic: “it seems that undetermined events in the brain or body would occur spontaneously and would be more likely to undermine our freedom rather than enhance it.” Right out of the gate Kane seems to be on the verge of jettisoning physicalism in favor of a metaphysical free will. He would be in good company to do so, as libertarians throughout the ages have sought to evade the implications of a physicalist incompatibilism by positing “transempirical power centers, immaterial egos, noumenal selves outside of space and time, unmoved movers, uncaused causes, and other unusual forms of agency or causation” (p. 13)<sup>2</sup> However, Kane is merely setting the stage: it *seems* that nondeterminism might preclude free will, but not so fast. Not only is free will compatible with free will, Kane believes it is

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<sup>2</sup> We will have a chance to delve into these deliciously bizarre ideas later.

wholly dependent on it.

First, Kane lays out his operational definitions of free will. He considers two throughout his essay, eventually discarding the first—the existence of *alternative possibilities*—upon the conclusion that the mere existence of multiple possible future paths does not secure freedom of will in the face of indeterminism. A good example is a quantum process: it is true that the spin of an electron is fundamentally undetermined until it is observed. Prior to measurement, it can be said that there are two possible outcomes—spin up and spin down—each to be expected with equal probability. Of course, the mere existence of these alternative possibilities does not ensure that our electron has any sort of free will regarding what its spin will become; in actuality, the outcome is truly random—the electron’s future is governed solely by chance. Evidently, as Kane rightfully observes, the alternative pathways argument lacks a key ingredient—that the agent has the ability to do otherwise—not simply that alternative possibilities exist. The argument presupposes the existence of free will and so is circular.

Kane augments this definition to arrive at a second criterion of free will, that of *ultimate responsibility*: “to be ultimately responsible for an action, an agent must be responsible for anything that is a sufficient cause or motive for the action’s occurring.” (p. 18) Freedom of will is taken to be synonymous with having ultimate responsibility for our choices and actions. Kane’s goal is to demonstrate how this kind of free will works despite the existence of indeterminate forces in the universe. His proposal goes as follows: even if we find ourselves in a position in which we are pre-determined to act in a certain way—we could not have done other than we did—this circumstance is the causal outcome of previous life experiences and decisions which, importantly, *could have been made differently*. In other words, we still have ultimate responsibility “for our present motives and character by virtue of some earlier struggles and self-forming actions, [for which we could have done otherwise], that brought us to this point in our life where we could do no other.” (p. 19) So while many of our actions are indeed determined and we do not will them, Kane suggests that there is a very special subset—so-called *self-forming actions*—that are a different breed altogether. These somehow evade the clutches of determinism and represent true instances of willed outcomes, on which can be built any number of subsequent determined actions

But what are these self-forming actions? Since they are not forced on us by determinism, they must be undetermined in a fundamental sense. While Kane accepts that determinism is fatal to free will of the kind he espouses, nondeterminism is not only compatible with it, but as we shall see, *necessary for it*. Kane argues that “undetermined self-forming actions...occur at those difficult times of life when we are torn between competing visions of what we should do or become.” During these moments, Kane suggests that those regions of our brain involved in the decision process are in some sense “out of equilibrium” and that our neurons experience unspecified “micro-indeterminacies”, perhaps of a quantum-chaotic nature. But here’s where it gets a little wacky: Kane argues, “When we do decide under such conditions of uncertainty, the outcome would not be determined because of the preceding indeterminacy—and yet the outcome can be willed (and hence rational and voluntary) either way owing to the fact that in such self-formation, the agents’ prior wills are divided by conflicting motives.” (p. 36) This is a confusing statement, but Kane provides an example:

Consider a businesswoman who faces such a conflict. She is on her way to an important meeting when she observes an assault taking place in an alley. An inner struggle ensues between her conscience, to stop and call for help, and her career ambitions, which tell her she cannot miss this meeting. She has to make an effort of will to overcome the temptation to go on. If she overcomes this temptation, it will be the result of her effort, but if she fails, it will be because she did not allow her effort to succeed. (p. 36)

Kane seems to suggest that the struggle amounts to an indeterminism of action, an action that becomes certain only after a decision is made. Kane has in mind “competing neural networks”, each associated with an

alternative action (think angel and devil sitting on one's shoulder): when faced with a dilemma, there is a sort of indeterminism going on in the brain as these two networks clash for control of the body. After agonizing over what to do, we make a choice. After the decision is made, it can be said that the agent is responsible for it in that it followed from well-reasoned deliberation, *regardless of which choice was made*: "the choice will be willed by the woman either way when it is made, and it will be done for *reasons* either way—reasons that she then and there *endorses*" (p. 40). Kane argues that these kinds of dilemmas represent true voluntary control and hence agents are responsible for the choices they make: no matter which way it turns out, the agent can rationalize the decision and can be said to have willed it. The rationalized justification charts a logical thought process that culminates in action consistent with the agent's intentions. The problem that I see with this is the *post hoc* nature of the assessment of free will. I chose the word "rationalized" to help illustrate this: Kane has in mind agents who, in hindsight, can make good justified sense of their actions—they feel totally and freely responsible for them: "We set our wills one way or the other in the *act* of deciding itself, and not before." (p. 40) But in what sense do they have ultimate responsibility? Kane seems to have successfully described a process by which all actions are willed *a posteriori* ("oh yeah, I meant to do that") but *a priori*, the resolution of a dilemma is either causally determined or fundamentally uncertain; he seems to be saying that our wills are set by our actions, not the other way around. But our actions are governed by physical law, and so too then must Kane's free will.

This brand of libertarianism is baffling, to say the least. It is a carefully laid out argument that still somehow fails to address the one issue that it sets out to resolve: the origin of free will in a nondeterministic world. Specifically, it doesn't convincingly eliminate chance as a driver of our will. Unless, of course, Kane does not assume that consciousness is all just physics under the hood. Divorcing the mental from the material has traditionally been the libertarian meal ticket out of physicalist hell; however, Kane doesn't give voice to this assumption, and in fact prides himself in not relying on such heady metaphysical mumbo jumbo. But, seeing as Kane has led us right up to and left us at the brim of this misty cauldron, we should at least peer inside. Before leaving libertarianism, we lift the ropes and duck out of the physicalist ring to take a quick tour of some of these more colorful gems of the human creative apparatus.

The question of the compatibility of free will with the causal physical world is at least as old as Descartes. Cartesian dualism asserts the existence of two primary essences: the mind and the body. One physical and extended in space (the body), one immaterial and indivisible (the mind). Cartesian dualism is a prime example of a world that is not causally closed, a world in which a certain essence—the conscious mind—operates at a level beyond the affairs and influence of physical causality. It might be argued that the conscious mind exercises free will, and it might be also at the same time be accepted that the physical world is causally closed. So different are these conceptions that one is struck with an immediate problem: how do these two essences interact? We know they must, as the conscious willing to lift one's leg will quickly attest. Though the mind might be free, it must exert its will through a physical medium—our bodies—which, ticking along in a mechanical prison, cannot execute this freedom. This is the *mind-body problem*, and it's a real bitch if you're a dualist.

While Descartes' ideas no longer hold much sway in the halls of the world's philosophy departments, if incompatibilist free will is going to have any chance, it is going to have to take a cue from the superphysical essence of Cartesian philosophy. The bugbear is the physical causality that strings together all events in the universe, founding the future securely on the past. So, what to do? We could ditch causality: either argue that instances of free will have *no* cause, or that their cause is not also an effect of some prior event. These are called *noncausal* and *agent-causal* theories, respectively. Indeed, all such theories must posit a superphysical entity or process within us that empowers our freedoms. These have gone by many different names: Kant argued for the *noumenal self*—a thing existing beyond the senses—from which free will might spring. Alternatively, the brain might possess "transempirical power centers" that seek to hijack neural indeterminacy within the decision process to slip a genuine piece of free will through the causal ties

of physics. Perhaps my favorite incarnation of a noncausal source of free will is the immaterial and deeply mysterious homunculus (Latin for “little man”) within each of us that aspires acts of volition not determined by any known cause [4]. Importantly, these might be true. But, they each involve inherently undetectable elements in a crucial way, and so we cannot test them scientifically. For this reason we also cannot rule them out, but they are not consistent with the world as we observe it and so are, to me, much less satisfying proposals than a non-libertarian answer to the question of free will.

## Compatibilism: having one's cake and eating it too

Compatibilism—the position that some kind of free will is possible even in a causally determined world—is either deeply mysterious or easily misunderstood. Free will and moral responsibility based on something like Kane's ultimate responsibility is clearly, simply impossible in a deterministic, causally closed universe. This observation has led many critics to glibly dismiss compatibilism as a trivially erroneous stance; Sam Harris has said of the position that it is “deliberately obtuse” and that it “resembled theology” [5]. In his review of Sam Harris' *Free Will*, philosopher Dan Dennett bristles at this jab, barely tempered by his characteristic decorum: “I would hope that Harris would pause at this point to wonder—just wonder—whether *maybe* his philosophical colleagues had seen some points that had somehow escaped him in his canvassing of compatibilism.” [6]

Dennett's review is bizarre: he contends from the beginning that Harris is not thinking correctly about compatibilism—that it is not about having the kind of ultimate responsibility necessary to ground moral liability. The Dennett-Harris exchange is interesting and entertaining (if not a little frustrating); I mention it to emphasize that even smart guys can overlook the importance of defining their terms, and this is surprisingly common in the compatibilist debate on free will. No doubt it's possible to conceive of other notions of free will that can happily coexist with physicalism, but we're not talking about them here: we want free will based on Kane's requirement of ultimate responsibility.

John Martin Fischer, a philosopher at UC Riverside, argues the compatibilist viewpoint in *Four Views*. The core of his position is based strongly on the fact that we *thoroughly feel* that we have free will and moral responsibility, that though causal determinism may be true, it does not manifest itself phenomenologically: “A compatibilist need not deny what seems so obvious...” (p. 65). This is an indisputable and noncontroversial point—hard incompatibilists and compatibilists can toast to this one. Fisher is not considering whether we have genuine free will, but whether we can act more or less free from external constraints. We cannot always: sometimes we are jailed, or hypnotised, or suffering from dementia. Compatibilists wish to apply the question of moral responsibility at this level of material constraint—it's not that the actions for which we are morally accountable are *uncaused*, but that they are *unforced*.

This distinction is of course irrelevant to hard incompatibilists: both forced and unforced agents are equally “controlled” by external circumstances, both are subject to the same physical causality. But this bothers Fischer, who introduces us to Sam,

a “normal” adult human being, who grew up in favorable circumstances. He has no unusual neurophysiological or psychological anomalies or disorders, and he is not in a context in which he is manipulated, brainwashed, coerced, or otherwise “compelled” to do what he does. More specifically, no factors that uncontroversially function to undermine, distort, or thwart the normal human faculty of practical reasoning or execution of the outputs of such reasoning are present. He deliberates in the “normal way” about whether to deliberately withhold pertinent information on his income tax forms, and, although he knows it is morally wrong, he decides to withhold the information and cheat on his taxes anyway. (p. 64)

Fischer reflects that “[i]ncompatibilism would seem to lead to a collapse of the important distinction between

agents such as Sam and thoroughly manipulated or brainwashed or coerced agents.” (p. 65) Yes, it most certainly would. How inconvenient of physical causality to muddy these waters! Fischer and compatibilists like him must therefore cleave the basis of moral responsibility from determinism: “A compatibilist’s view of human beings as (sometimes) both free and morally responsible agents is *resilient* to the particular empirical discovery that causal determinism is true.” (p. 66) Put another way, “One of the main virtues of compatibilism is that our deepest and most basic views about our agency—our freedom and moral responsibility—are not held hostage to views in physics” (p. 111). This is a peculiar viewpoint, that something definitively and wholly within the physical world need not operate in a manner consistent with the laws that govern it. Echoing Harris, this sounds *exactly* like your garden-variety religious apology. Fischer is doubling-down on morality as a conscious experience, as all would agree it is, while hoping to carve out some essential aspect of it that is disconnected to the causal events and actions over which it is supposed to preside. Not content with only the conscious shell—the feeling—of morality, Fischer seeks to find some semblance of true free will that is compatible with determinism. How much can he hope to salvage with determinism crowding out the stage?

Earlier it was proposed that genuine free will and moral responsibility necessitate alternative paths—that agents *could have done otherwise*. If our actions are forced or coerced such that we have no alternatives, then compatibilists and incompatibilists agree that we cannot be held morally accountable. But compatibilists go further: suppose I “willingly” select the path that I would otherwise have been forced to select...then am I morally accountable? If so, in neither case are there ever honest alternatives. Fischer’s brand of compatibilism therefore argues that moral responsibility does not require the existence of alternate choices<sup>3</sup>. Fischer illustrates this proposal using a modernized version of a series of such cases originally proposed by Harry Frankfurt in the 1960’s [7]:

Because he dares to hope that the Democrats finally have a good chance of winning the White House, the benevolent but elderly neurosurgeon, Black, has come out of retirement to participate in yet another philosophical example. He has secretly inserted a chip in Jones’s brain that enables Black to monitor and control Jones’s activities. Black can exercise this control through a sophisticated computer that he has programmed so that, among other things, it monitors Jones’s voting behavior. If Jones were to show any inclination to vote for McCain (or, let us say, anyone other than Obama), then the computer, through the chip in Jones’s brain, would intervene to assure that he actually decides to vote for Obama and does so vote. But if Jones decides on his own to vote for Obama (as Black, the old progressive would prefer), the computer does nothing but continue to monitor without affecting the goings-on in Jones’s head.

Now suppose that Jones decides to vote for Obama on his own, just as he would have if Black had not inserted the chip in his head. It seems, upon first thinking about this case, that Jones can be held morally responsible for his choice and act of voting for Obama, although he could not have chosen otherwise and he could not have done otherwise.

Does this work? Does just “willingly” staying on the path secure you with a sense of moral liability? In this example, who Black votes for is determined (enforced by the chip in his brain); on the other hand, his will is not determined (by assumption) and so we are dangerously close to begging the question<sup>4</sup>. Fischer

<sup>3</sup> There are compatibilists who do not surrender the possibility that alternate paths are consistent with determinism. Multiple-past compatibilists argue that the past can change to accommodate a true freedom of will; others, so-called local-miracle compatibilists accept the unique past preceding any given action and the validity of physical law, but they allow for the existence of miracles that momentarily suspend physical law, giving some elbow room for free will to exert itself. These people should be tagged so that we know who they are.

<sup>4</sup> ...in the logical, not rhetorical sense. That is, assuming the conclusion of the argument.

finally comes around to nicely summarizing the difficulty of this position (one that we've known all along), "If we are just complexes of events related deterministically to our surroundings, there might not seem to be space for "selves" or "persons" ...the self is crowded out." (p. 85) Indeed, he is looking for the same gap—the same suspension of determinism—that Kane surmises as a place where free will can thrive (for Kane, this niche is ruled by indeterminism; for Fisher, presumably causal determinism.) Sadly, he basically dismisses the difficulty, claiming to be "not at all convinced" that determinism precludes "activity" of the type necessary to support moral responsibility (p. 87). But exactly what is this special "type" of "activity"? It must be more than the "ordinary interpersonal sense" of conscious experience, since we all concede that such a type is imminently compatible with determinism; but more importantly, the compatibilist has yet to show why this type of activity is the one that matters to the question of free will. Ultimately, though, Fischer admits to not having an answer. Absent a solution, Fischer attacks the aesthetics of a determined universe, taking the tack: though I don't have a better answer, yours is still dumb. "When I deliberate, I assume that I have access to various possibilities that are connected to a single past; I do not assume that each possibility comes with its own past(s)! Intuitively, the future is a garden of forking paths; but each path branches off a single past. To suppose that each future branch has its own past or set of pasts is to imagine a field overrun by weeds, and not an orderly garden. *This picture is as unintuitive and unattractive as it is complex and inelegant.* It seems to me that the idea that our freedom is the power to add to the given past, holding fixed the laws of nature, corresponds to important elements of our intuitive picture of agency or conceptual scheme, broadly construed." (p. 104, italics mine)

To conclude and summarize, Fischer is compelled by the fact that we definitively *feel* free and morally accountable for our actions, and indeed we feel this irrespective of any physical theories espousing the truth of causal determinism. That we feel "active" in everyday experience despite the fact that we are actually fully passive organisms if causal determinism obtains is of course of deep interest, but it's not relevant to the question of whether free will truly exists (in the sense of having ultimate responsibility), or that moral rule is imperative. Fischer goes so far as to suppose that this "commonsense" notion of "being active" is the one that matters, that our perception of reality essentially trumps its actual, physical basis. Regarding ultimate responsibility, he poses, "Why, one might ask, demand this rather rarefied sort of "activity" or moral responsibility?" (p. 89) (If we accept the Consequence Argument (as we all do, including Fischer), there is nothing *rarefied* about the idea that our actions are solely the effects of external causes: it's a founding assumption.) The incompatibilist does not deny that these perceptions of control and initiative exist, just that they are not relevant to the ultimate control and responsibility necessary to establish free will and moral accountability.

Ultimately, Fischer wants to argue that there is still a sense in which we are free and moral even without the existence of alternate paths: "whatever it is that precludes access to alternative paths may not operate in such a way as to crowd out the features in virtue of which we are robustly morally responsible." (p. 113) But he doesn't say how this works. His solution will need to demonstrate how the physical law that constrains the possibility of alternate paths does not also constrain the goings within a given path. In particular, he will need to find a way of operationally distinguishing between alternate paths and meanderings within a given path. I think such distinctions are impossible if we accept the Consequence Argument, and I think that's why smart people like Fischer have not advanced a compelling solution.

## So, what now?

After the dust settles, we seem to be left with a brand of free will and moral responsibility that cannot be liberated from the constraints of causal determinism. Yet, we are still left with the uneasy feeling that we *are* in control of our future despite apparent facts to the contrary. John Searle, in his excellent book *Mind*:

*a brief introduction* [8], observes “There is an oddity about the experience of free will in that we cannot get rid of the conviction that we are free even if we become philosophically convinced that the conviction is wrong.” (p. 219) Why is this? Why is our subjective conscious experience one of freedom and volition? Searle doesn’t offer an explanation, but exposes a hurdle that any explanation will have to clear,

Across time we spend an enormous amount of time, effort, money, etc., in preparing ourselves and in training our young so that they can make better decisions rather than worse decisions. But if every detail of our supposedly free decisions and actions was already written in the book of history at the time of the Big Bang, if everything we do is entirely determined by causal forces operating on us, if the whole experience of free rational decision making is an illusion, then why is it such a pervasive part of our biological life history? (p. 233)

In short: why prepare for something you are already slated to win or lose? If the universe operates deterministically, why do we observe the apparent fact that good preparation and efforts to improve ourselves often culminate in better jobs, better health, and greater happiness? If these end states are pre-written, why do they also seem to depend on us working to ensure we obtain them?

I think the answer is simply that Darwinian evolution is a consequence of and constrained by physical law. Consider the first replicating molecules, the forebears of modern DNA. It is expected that those molecules that replicated the fastest and with the highest fidelity would inevitably crowd out those inferior in these respects. There is no conscious ambition on the part of the successful molecules—through the dice roll of molecular mutation, they have hit upon the ability to carry out the physical processes that ensure their dominance. This same model translates to more complex organisms: genes that enforce a solid work ethic and good planning, executive function, and physical constitution are necessary for survival, *given the physical laws by which natural selection operates*. So hard work *does* matter to success—physics won’t have it any other way! But causal determinism says that it ultimately is not up to us whether we work hard—we either will or we will not. The hope then is that the initial conditions of the universe and all the quantum jitters of electrons from here to the Big Bang aligned to put us through college and grant us success in our lives.

This doesn’t answer that nagging question of why we still feel like free will and moral accountability are real things, even though we might come to realize intellectually that they are illusory. Feeling like we are in control is an essential part of being a conscious animal—after all, the brain *is* in supervisory control of our thoughts and actions. There might be a Darwinian explanation—it is perhaps possible that some series of mutations resulted in hyper-aware individuals, ones that came to realize the futility of their actions and were led to a brand of fatalism that secured their fate as lazy, unambitious automatons, easy pickings for those other animals happy in their delusions. But again, though it would feel to these hyper-aware individuals that they were voluntarily abdicating ambition, it would be nothing more than a guaranteed consequence of the physical gene expression. But I doubt any mutation could furnish an organism with the real, concrete notion that that it is merely a mechanized object. It seems plausible that our feeling of control and volition is a consequence of the fact that we hold incomplete information regarding the dynamics of the universe. A pendulum is clearly deterministic: by observing the system from an external vantage point we have sufficient information to discern the regularity of its motion. But as individuals with extremely limited epistemic claims on the universe, we have a vanishingly small amount of information regarding the mind-numbingly complex physical, biological, and sociological workings of our existence. We have no choice but to be ignorant of the fact that we are but actors on a stage, playing tiny parts in a vast play that only the audience sees for what it is.

The illusion of freedom and control has given life to the philosophy of ethics and moral inquiry, which seeks to identify the standards and values according to which we should conduct our lives. But, if the presupposition that we have the power to act as we wish is invalid, what of ethics? What of moral responsibility?

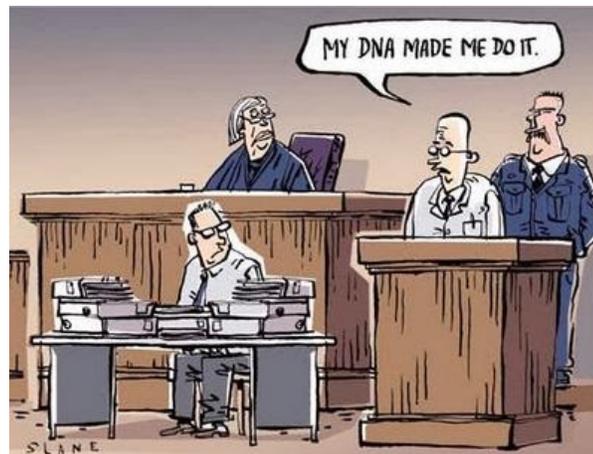


FIG. 1: Our views on punishment and moral culpability should consider the environmental constraints on free will, regardless of whether causal determinism is true.

Many incompatibilists feel inclined to revise our notions of ethics and morality in the face of determinism, seeking alternative ways of treating criminals and the unscrupulous; however, revelations of the truth of determinism should not cause any paroxysms of conscience about how to handle criminals. Even in a world in which free will reigns supreme, our personalities are to a large extent shaped by society, by family life, by upbringing. Our freedom of will is already constrained and our moral sense potentially impaired by any number of past experiences that genuinely lay outside our control. Shouldn't these realizations, which transcend notions of determinism, already compel us to take pause and reconsider whether and to what extent we attribute moral responsibility?

I cannot help but be a fatalist about these kinds of questions: it does not matter whether we *decide* to think differently about morality or free will if we fundamentally lack the ability to do so. Sam Harris in his book *Free Will* mounts a decisive attack against the existence of free will on the basis of neuropsychology, arguing that even without granting determinism the brain works in such a way that our impulses and desires are shaped at the neurophysiological level *before* we become consciously aware of them. But then he waffles on the question of moral responsibility, reprising the compatibilist viewpoint: "Judgements of [moral] responsibility depend upon the overall complexion of one's mind, not on the metaphysics of cause and effect." (p. 49) Well, I won't waffle. It is evident from the foregoing discussion that causal determinism precludes free will, and with it any vestige of morality. Of course, we will still go on worrying about what we should and should not do, and philosophers will still debate about virtues and trolleys and fat men. This is not hypocritical because *we have no choice but to be deceived*. A tough pill, but one we have no choice but to swallow.

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- [1] *Four Views On Free Will*, John Martin Fischer, Robert Kane, Derk Pereboom, Manuel Vargas, Wiley-Blackwell (2007).  
 [2] *An Essay on Free Will*, van Inwagen (1983).  
 [3] Fatalism, Richard Taylor, *The Philosophical Review* (1962).  
 [4] *The Significance of Free Will*, Robert Kane, Oxford University Press (1998).  
 [5] *Free Will*, Sam Harris, Free Press (2012).  
 [6] <http://www.samharris.org/blog/item/reflections-on-free-will>  
 [7] Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility, Harry G. Frankfurt, *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 66, No. 4 (1969).

[8] *Mind: a brief introduction*, John R. Searle, Oxford University Press (2004).