

The Free Will/Determinism Paradox

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Most of us humans, I would guess, prefer to think we have free will. That is, we prefer to think we are able to make choices or decisions based upon our own unique volitions. Such thought appeals to our vanities. If we make “good” choices and decisions, our self-esteem is elevated, and this gives us pleasure.

On the other hand, most of our knowledge leads us in the direction of believing the universe’s functions are deterministic. That is, our knowledge tells us that choice is not necessary to our description of the universe. Events occur as a result of the events which preceded them. For example, if we strike the cue-ball properly, the 8-ball will be knocked into the billiard table pocket which we intended.

We have developed a paradox in our thinking. How can we have free will and the remainder of the universe be deterministic? Our attempts at resolution have been primarily religion oriented. This resolution presumes that we humans are special within the universe. The devine creator gave us free will. Simple as that! The downside of such resolution is that it is not based upon knowledge. It is faith. We might argue that it is an a priori principle. However, this position is tenuous since none of our observation or data support this principle. The logical resolution is to postulate that we do not possess free will. Rather, we have the impression of free will because we do not know all the factors and events which determine our choices or decisions. Therefore, in the presence of inadequate knowledge, we have an illusion of free will, but with more knowledge we would be able to see the determinism in our actions.

Another attempt at resolution of the free will/determinism paradox has evolved from the incorporation of probability theory into modern physics. Probability theory is based upon the concept that outcomes of events can be confined within a set of possible outcomes. Further, knowing the characteristics of the set of possible outcomes allows us to make predictions as to what the most probable outcomes will be. Thus, modern physical theories may be thought of as a blend of free will with determinism. A specific event outcome is not determined, but the outcome of many such events (the set of possible outcomes) is determined. For example, we cannot say when a specific radioactive molecule will decay, but we can say very accurately how many molecules will decay within a specified time period (i.e., we know the half-life decay periods of radioactive substances). Extending this construction of knowledge to humans tempts us to say it is possible for each of us to have the free will to make our individual decisions. As entities we are certainly very complicated and contain within each of us an infinite number of subevents occurring during our exercise of any choice or decision. However, the probabilistic approach to free will does not fulfill our desires. A choice resulting from the outcome of a random event or a million random events is not the exercise of free will based upon unique volition. It is the same as the a flip of a coin!

Even though our knowledge is telling us that we do not possess free will, most of us are loathe to accept this conclusion. We think, if I do not have free will, then it is not

important whatever I do. I might just as well stay in bed all day. Such reaction is emotional, not logical. It is this kind of negative emotional reaction which inhibits us from accepting the logical conclusion of determinism. The following is a simple thought exercise which may help us understand the deception which our emotions are perpetrating upon upon our intellects. Consider the following simulations of an “undetermined universe” and a “determined universe.” Suppose that a new car is to be given away by your local community association on Saturday night. Every adult in the community is eligible. In the undetermined universe, the winner of the car will be drawn at random by computer selection from the list of community adults at 8:00 p.m. on Saturday night and the winner announced over the local FM radio station. In the determined universe, the computer random selection has already been made but the name of the winner is being maintained secret in the vault of the community association until 8:00 p.m. Saturday night when it will be announced over the radio. For the average person in the community the emotional impact of the contest is identical whether an undetermined or determined universe exists. His “odds” of winning are the same and he listens to the radio announcement with the same anticipation. For a person who believes the universe to be undetermined, there is no point to any action relating to his winning. He might just as well stay in bed until 8:00 p.m. Saturday. However, for a person in the determined universe and believing that the universe is actually determined, he might break into the community association safe, see if he is the winner, and if not, substitute his name as the winner.

The moral of this example is two-fold. First, the emotional rejection of a determined universe is false. If a person operates outside of knowledge, that is on faith, he cannot distinguish between an undetermined and determined universe. Secondly, a person acting on knowledge will realize that it is only in a determined universe that his specific actions can be considered important and effective. In an undetermined universe none of his actions can effect the outcome which he desires.

Because the universe is deterministic, free will does not, and cannot, exist. The above example uses the concept of randomness as a substitute for free will. Although true randomness cannot exist in a determined universe, randomness is a theory which we have defined and quantized. Randomness is a valuable mathematical tool, and we do not have any problems accepting that real physical systems only approximate randomness. The concept of free will is not precise. And, because free will is tied into our self concepts, we are very reluctant to accept that we only have approximate free will (i.e., we only have the impression of free will).

Although true free will does not exist, we can rationally discuss the characteristics which free will would have if it did exist. This intellectual activity is analogous to defining the characteristics of randomness even though true randomness does not exist. So what are some of the characteristics of free will? I believe the principal characteristic of free will is that whatever choices or decisions we make, these choices or decisions should be dependent upon the character or state of our individual being. That is, I make choices or decisions based upon who I am. My choices or decisions are not random, nor are they the direct result of someone else’s being. This is achieved in a determined universe, not an undetermined universe. In a determined universe, I am the product of all events which I or my ancestors have experienced. I am

a unique being and my choices or decisions are the result of who I am! Thus, I have the principal characteristic of free will even though the universe is determined.

In conclusion, the real paradox of free will/determinism is that free will can exist only in a determined universe. In order to exercise our free will, our actions must have the potential to effect the outcome of events. Our actions cannot effect an event outcome unless there is a cause-effect relationship. Cause-effect is determinism.

End

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