An Attack on Free Will
By Hyrum Hendrickson

The existence of free will has been taken almost axiomatically for most of human history. It's easy to see why; everyone feels as if they are in control of their actions. Everyone feels free. The existence of free will feels so intuitive and obvious that it is rarely questioned. Throughout history, such thoughtless intuition has led many to stumble into false beliefs. When an honest unbiased seeker begins a rigorous study of free will, they will find that it may be yet another example of a dogmatic belief that will soon be superseded by reason.

We will begin with a few definitions. Free will has classically been defined as the ability of a rational agent to select specific actions from among genuine alternative actions. A determined event is an event that is wholly determined by prior conditions. A random event is an event that has no cause. These terms each assign a different causation to events, and thus are mutually exclusive. An action must be either random, determined, or free.

Since the renaissance, western culture has obsessively searched to understand the principle of causation. Scientists have developed complex theories capable of predicting events such as earthquakes, storms, disease spread, and lightning strikes. Nearly all phenomena that were once considered either random or the will of God, have been found to follow simple laws. Given enough data about the initial condition, the exact outcome can be known. Uncertainty has been crowded out by precise mathematical models. The modern culture built upon successful scientific predictions has become used to expecting a predictable mathematical pattern. This change in

mindset has opened the door for people to question that which was once seen as obviously true. One such idea is free will. Let us examine this idea.

A simple logical argument can be made to show that 'free will' cannot exist. We will imagine a situation with Alexander the Great. He is given a choice, he may choose to invade Egypt, or to refrain from invading Egypt. This choice may appear to be free, however, let's examine it more carefully. Imagine that Alexander chooses to invade Egypt, is this choice determined? Imagine that we rewind time and give him the same choice again, are we certain that he will choose again to invade Egypt? If we say that he will always choose to invade Egypt, each time we rewind the clock, then he clearly isn't free. Given the initial conditions of his choice, we can always be certain that he will invade.

If he will always make the same choice when the exact same situation is presented, his actions are determined, and therefore cannot be free. However, consider the case where we cannot be certain that he will make the same choice if we rewind the clock. On some occasions, he will choose to invade. But other times, with the exact situation and information, he will refrain from invading. Clearly, there is no differentiation because to separate the situations, we have defined them as being the same. If there is no differentiating cause, then his choice is an event without a cause, a random event. It seems, therefore, that all events must either be random or determined, there is no room for free will in any situation.

Free will is among the most convincing illusions that conscious beings experience. While they certainly feel that they have the ability to select between genuine alternatives, they are mistaken. It is a logical impossibility for a free choice to exist. As

humanity continues to progress towards a more precise understanding of reality, we necessarily must leave behind those beliefs and dogmas that are incompatible with reason. While we may rightly worry about the consequences of a world in which free will is not recognized, it is foolhardy to cling to a false belief solely because of its familiarity.