Free Will

For this paper, I chose *Free Will* by Derek Pereboom. In this essay, Pereboom argues against the idea that moral responsibility for one’s actions can only occur if one has direct causal agency in the decision that is made. He takes this position based off of the case of a mind-controlling neurosurgeon named Mr. Black. In the example, Black inserts a mind control device into a man named Jones which allows him to both monitor and control Jones’ brain. Jones then goes to vote in an election where the candidates are Reagan or Carter. If Jones chooses Carter, the device will change his mind and instead cause him to vote for Reagan. If Jones instead votes for Reagan, the device will do nothing and continue to monitor his brain. Pereboom takes the position that because the machine only takes effect if Jones chooses to vote for Carter, then Jones is not morally responsible for his actions if he in fact chose to vote for Carter but instead voted for Reagan due to the device. Jones is, however, responsible for his choice if he originally chose to vote for Reagan and the machine does nothing to effect the final outcome. Therefore, an action that someone takes of their own volition is an effect of free will and they are morally responsible for it. A person who takes that same action whose decision is altered by an outside force is not morally responsible for the same choice. Therefore, it is not necessarily the outside force that determines whether or not a choice was made freely, but whether or not the choice a person would make of their own free will is the same choice pressed upon them by the outside force.

I do not agree with Pereboom’s conclusion. It is true that in the example of Mr. Black and Jones there was an illusion of free will, and therefore moral responsibility. However, the idea of free will itself shows that an illusion of free will is not free will at all. The very concept of free will requires that there is more than one choice or path for any decision, because if there is no choice in one’s actions than there can be no free will. In the example given, there was only one actual outcome, despite the appearance of there being two. The two outcomes were Jones voting for Reagan on his own, or Jones voting for Reagan because of the mind control device. In reality, there was only one outcome from the beginning. It doesn’t matter who Jones wanted to vote for, he ends up voting for Reagan in either scenario. In this way, he has no control over his actions, and therefore he cannot have moral responsibility for them. Even if he would have chosen to vote for Reagan if given the option, he was never given a choice. The only possibility presented to Jones was to vote for Reagan, and since he had no choice, he has no free will. Pereboom admitted in his essay that it is necessary for the idea of free will that a choice be presented to the person. In the case of Mr. Black and Jones, no real choice was presented, even though there appeared to be one. Therefore in this case, even though Jones appeared to make a choice, he did not actually have direct causal agency over the outcome, and therefore he had no free will.

Pereboom, Derek. *Free Will*. Print.