

Freedom and Determinism

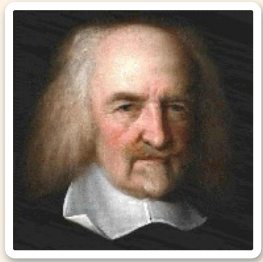
How can we be free in a world of causes?



George Matthews, Pennsylvania College of Technology

2020

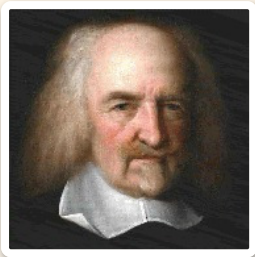
Living in the Material World



Thomas Hobbes
1588-1679

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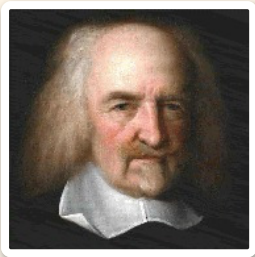
"What is the heart but a spring, and the nerves but so many strings and the joints but so many wheels giving motion to the whole body?"



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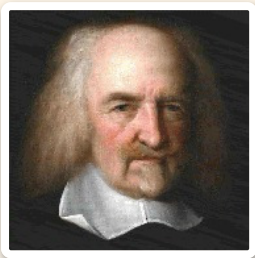


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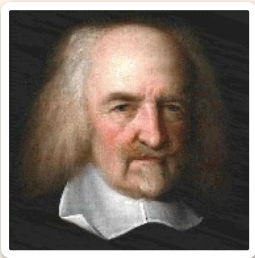


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- Hobbes was an early materialist who sought mechanistic explanations for everything humans did.
- Hobbes' account of the origins of society assumes only that we each seek our own gain and will only cooperate if forced to do so.
- In spite of this he does appeal to our ability to *freely choose* to create a society as the moral foundation of the social order. This raises a difficult question...

The Puzzle of Freedom

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Everything that happens has a cause.

We are often free to choose to do one thing or another.

If I am caused to do something
I am not free to do otherwise.

The Puzzle of Freedom

Everything that happens has a cause.

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*Each of these claims seems to be true on its own, but can they all be true **at the same time**? It is hard to see how.*

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I am not free to do otherwise.

The Puzzle of Freedom

Everything that happens has a cause.

We are often free to choose to do one thing or another.

Either we are caused, but not free; free but not caused; or somehow free and caused at the same time. This gives us three philosophical strategies for discussing freedom.

If I am caused to do something
I am not free to do otherwise.

The Puzzle of Freedom

Everything that happens has a cause.

We are often free to choose to do one thing or another.

False

Determinism accepts that everything has a cause and that causes and freedom are incompatible, and so **denies that we are really free.**

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The Puzzle of Freedom

Everything that happens has a
False
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Libertarianism accepts that we are free and that causes and
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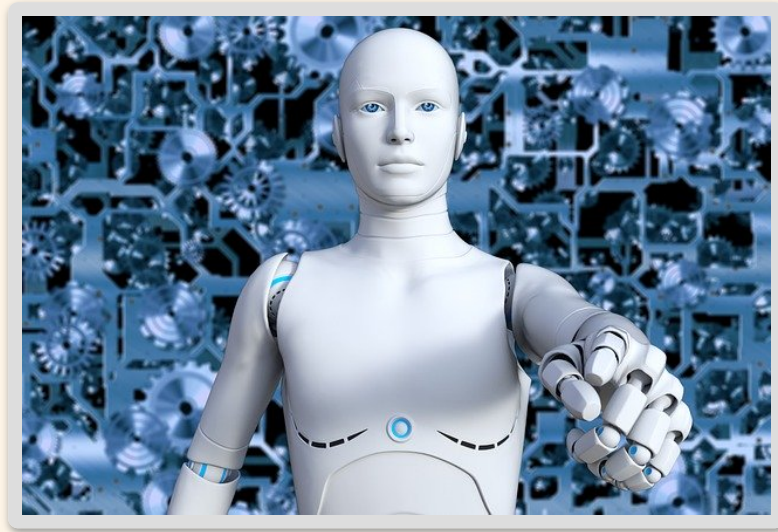
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What's at stake

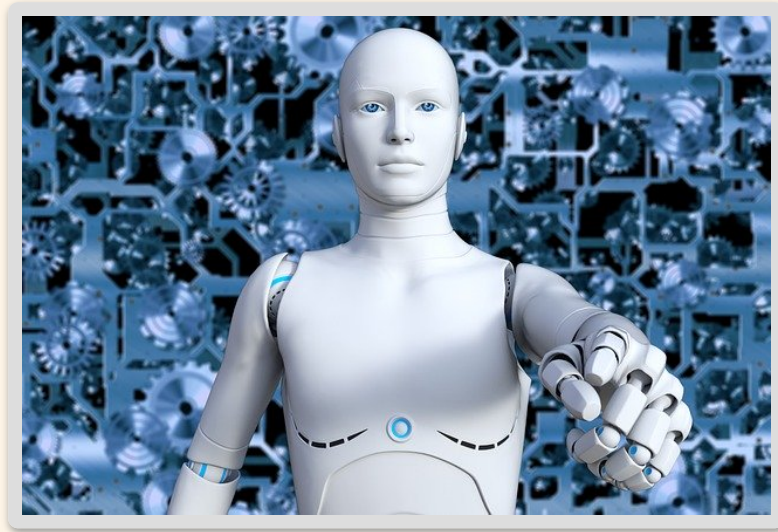
What's at stake

Freedom is important



What's at stake

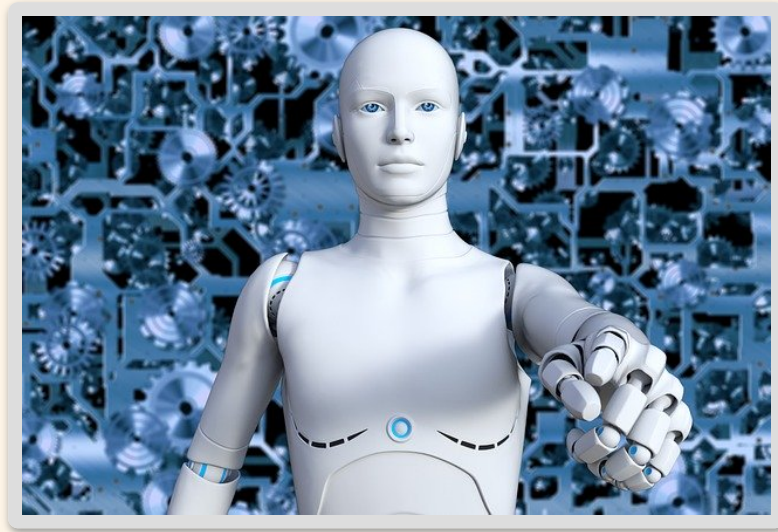
Freedom is important



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What's at stake

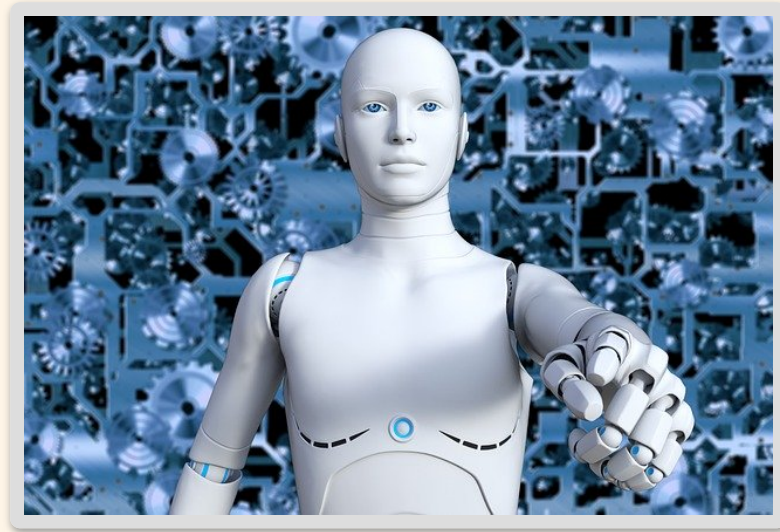
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What's at stake

Freedom is important



- Our lives seem to unfold as a series of real choices.
- We hold people responsible for many of their actions and that assumes that they *have a choice* in each case.
- Life would seem meaningless without the ability to choose.

What's at stake

Freedom is mysterious



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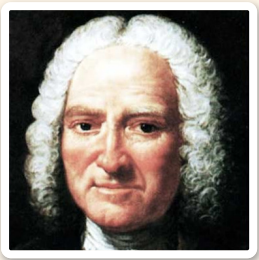
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- Whatever happens seems to have a cause.
- Explaining *anything* seems to involve showing why it had to happen, the mechanisms behind the scenes.
- As scientific understanding progresses we may seem more and more like complex machines.

Determinism

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Baron D'Holbach
1723-1789

Determinism

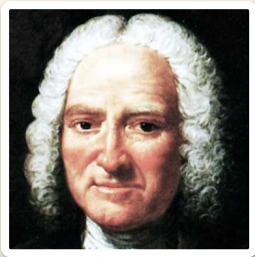
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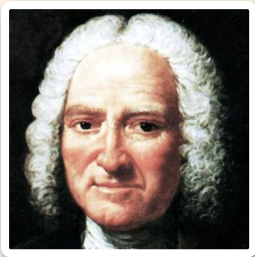


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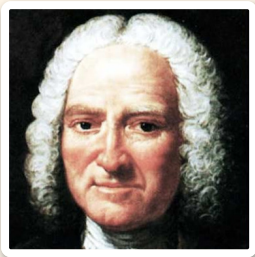


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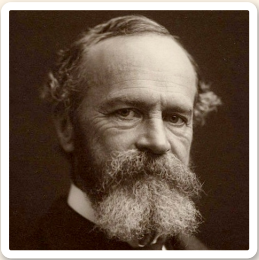


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- For him, our sense of freedom is an illusion, a result of us not knowing what causes us to do what we do.
- Does it even make sense to *argue* about determinism? If the answer we find compelling is pre-determined why bother saying anything at all?

Libertarianism

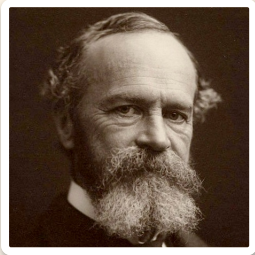
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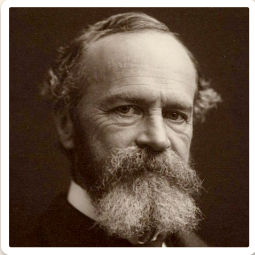
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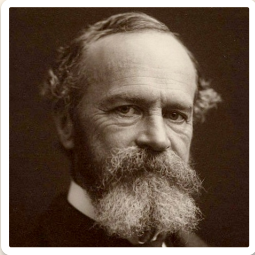


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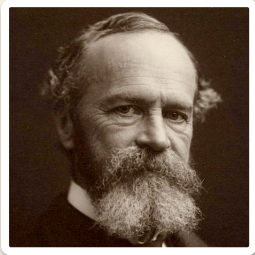


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- Libertarians like James defend our common-sense understanding of ourselves as free agents.
- We experience ourselves as making choices and not as being caused to pick one option over another.
- And yet we may wonder whether we can trust our experiences of ourselves. Doesn't science often show us the previously hidden causes of things in our experience?

Compatibilism

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W.T. Stace
1886-1967

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"Acts freely done are those acts whose immediate causes are the psychological state in the agent. Acts not freely done [have causes] external to the agent."



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- When we are not free we are caused to do things by external forces; when we are free we *cause ourselves* to do certain things.
- Does this account of human freedom simply offer one mystery in place of another? Let's look more closely...

Reasons and causes

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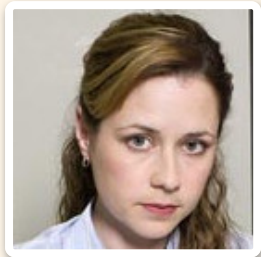
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Consider some examples...

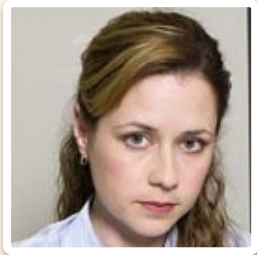
Reasons and causes

I am not going to work today because I quit.



Reasons and causes

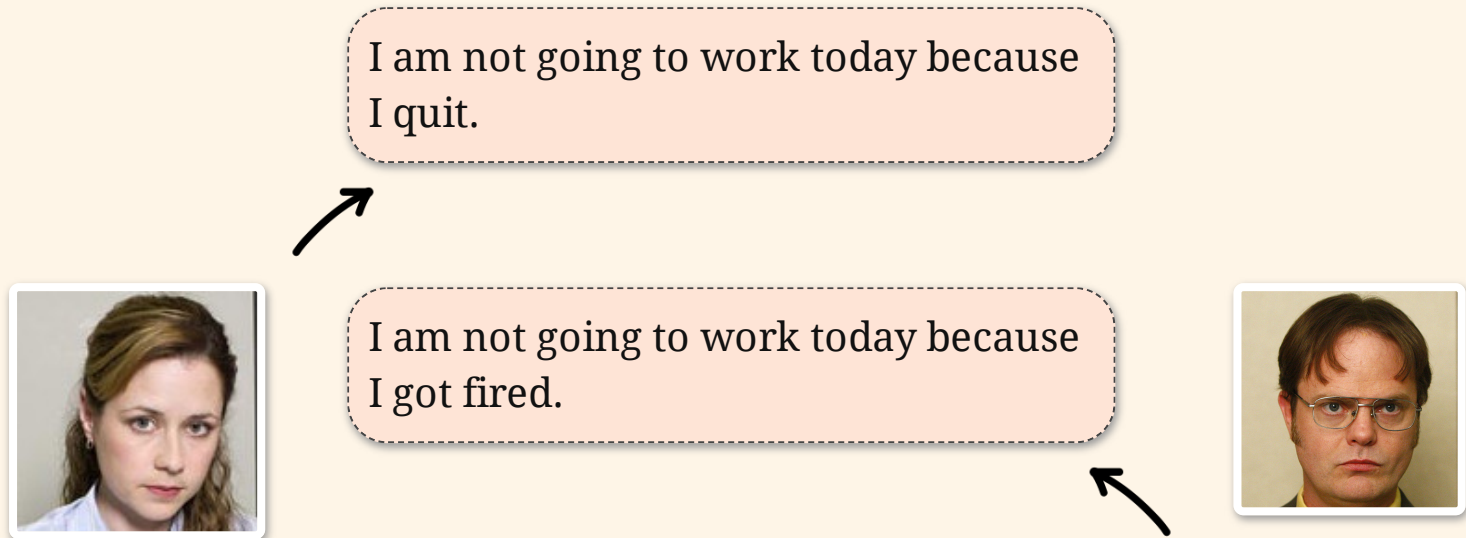
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I am not going to work today because I got fired.



Reasons and causes



We may quit a job because it doesn't fit in with our carefully considered plans, but given the role of bosses in our society getting fired leaves us no choice.

Reasons and causes

I gave money to charity because I wanted to help.



Reasons and causes

I gave money to charity because I wanted to help.



I gave money to the man who pointed a gun at me.



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Threats of force are ways of coercing us to go against our own wishes, acts of charity reflect our own wishes to help others.

Reasons and causes

I take drugs because I want to relax
after a long day at work.



Reasons and causes

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I take drugs because I am hopelessly addicted and can't stop myself.



Reasons and causes



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Addictions can trap us since they can affect brain physiology such that our ability to say "no" to our own impulses is impaired. The line between responsible adult use of potentially addictive substances and behaviors and addiction can be fuzzy.

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But what then about legal and moral concepts of freedom that seem essential to our social lives and understanding of ourselves?

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- Many streams of brain activity, ranging from our instinctual and emotional impulses to our symbolic reasoning, converge here giving us the ability to filter out some impulses and pursue some others based on conscious thought processes.

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- Responsible adults are presumed to be able to make deliberate choices in this way.

Existentialism and freedom

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1905-1980

Existentialism and freedom

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- For Sartre free action is action that we use to make meaning out of the predicaments in which we find ourselves, to take what is *given* to us by circumstances and make it *our own*.

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- For Sartre free action is action that we use to make meaning out of the predicaments in which we find ourselves, to take what is *given* to us by circumstances and make it *our own*.
- Living *autonomously* is a never-ending project of critically reflecting on the causes and conditions which make possible and constrain our lives.

Find out more

Freedom and Determinism: from the Crash Course video series here is a great account of the tricky debate about freedom and determinism.

Compatibilism: also from the Crash Course, the next in the series about the compatibilist attempt to resolve the problem.

Free Will: a comprehensive account of the philosophical question of freedom at the *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.



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