

# Free Will

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## Introduction

You likely think that you have control of your own destiny, that you have power over your future. You are free, you might think, to choose what to eat, who to date, and what career to pursue. It certainly does appear that way. When trying to decide between chocolate cake and a salad, it seems that I really do have it in my power to eat either of those things. If I eat the cake, I still could have eaten the salad and *vice versa*.

The appearance of free-will might, though, just be an illusion. It might not really have been in my power to eat the salad even though I thought that it was. Many have thought that free-will is illusory because it jars with our understanding of the physical universe. Our actions are just part of a long chain of causes and effects. And it seems that the facts about the earliest parts of the chain in conjunction with the laws of nature determine exactly how the rest of the chain must go; I can't choose my future because the past has already set it in stone.

## Causal Determinism

Our argument against free-will relies on two claims, one a general claim that applies to all events in the universe, a second a claim about what free-will would require of us.

**Causal determinism:** Given a specified way things are at a time  $t$ , everything which happens at a time later than  $t$  is fixed as a matter of natural law.

Consider a rock falling down a side of a mountain on Mars this morning. That rock was set in motion by some preceding event, perhaps a rover hit and dislodged it. Causal determinism says that the entire state of the universe this morning, including that rock falling down the mountain, was completely determined by the state at any time before this morning plus the laws governing motion, gravity, etc. This might seem far-fetched. But that's exactly what our scientific laws are;

they determine how things will be in the future given how things are in the past. If, then, there was a God like scientist. By knowing the state of the universe 1000 years ago plus all the rules governing our universe, our God-like scientist would know for certain that the rock was going to fall this morning.

Causal determinism seems to jar with a fairly ordinary sense free-will.

**Free Will:** An agent, S, freely chooses to do F at time  $t1$  if and only if it was S's power at time  $t1$  to bring either F or not F about.

Suppose Mike Tyson force feeds me some cake. No-one would claim that I ate that cake freely. Since it was not in my power to not eat the cake, the eating was not in my power at all. Similarly, if you were forced to take a job, or forced to take a course, and it was not in your power to do otherwise, you would not be taking that job of pursuing that course of your own free-will. If you don't have the power to do otherwise, then it was never in your power in the first place. The problem is that Causal Determinism seems to say that it is never in our power to do otherwise:

*Argument Against Free-Will*

1. If a person acts of her own free will, then she could have done otherwise.
2. If determinism is true, no one can do otherwise than one actually does.
3. Therefore, if determinism is true, no one acts of her own free will.

The key premise is 2. Recall that Causal Determinism says that states of the universe, including what you are doing at any particular time, are completely determined by how the universe was in the past, even the far far past, plus the laws of nature. If that's true, then my eating the cake was causally determined, it is already set in stone. In that case, I had no power to not eat the cake. Causal Determinism constrains my actions as much as Mike Tyson can constrain my actions.

Philosophers have been concerned with determining, first, whether Causal Determinism is really true, and, second, whether free-will can be found compatible with Causal Determinism:

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	Free Will is Not Possible	Free Will is Possible
<b>Causal Determinism is true</b>	Hard Determinism	Compatibilism
<b>Causal Determinism is false</b>	Hard Indeterminism	Libertarianism

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## Libertarianism

Libertarians try rescue free-will by rejecting Causal Determinism. They are committed to the following 4 claims:

1. Free Will & Causal Determinism are incompatible.
2. Free Will requires that we have the power to *choose* between alternative possibilities. . . (emphasis on freedom of will and not merely of action)
3. Causal Determinism is false.
4. We sometimes act freely.

The key claim is, of course, 3. Libertarians have argued for it in two very different ways. The first argues that humans are not purely physical creatures and that Causal Determinism applies to purely physical things. The second argues that proper attention to physics shows that Causal Determinism is false.

### Option 1: Dualism

1. The mind/soul/will is not reducible to anything physical.
2. The mind/soul/will is at least partially the cause of some of our actions.
3. Thus, some of our actions have non-physical causes.
4. Thus, some of our actions are not causally determined.

**Problem with 1:** How could a non-physical being be the cause of something physical?

### Option 2: Physicalism

- Proper attention to physics shows that Causal Determinism is false.

Classical Physics: exact, simultaneous values can be assigned to all physical quantities, e.g., the position and momentum of a particle.

Quantum Physics: no exact, simultaneous values can be assigned to all physical quantities, e.g., no exact value can be assigned to both the position and momentum of each particle: the more precisely the position (momentum) of a particle is given, the less precisely can one say what its momentum (position) is.

Causal Determinism seems to require Classical Physics: the state of the universe is determined by the fixed state of the universe at some previous time plus the law of nature. But Quantum Physics tells us that the state of universe at each time is not totally fixed!!!

**Problem:** We are not sub-atomic particles. How does the failure of Causal Determinism at the microscopic level, show that Causal Determinism is false at the macroscopic level?

## Compatibilism

Compatibilists accept Causal Determinism but they claim that humans are still morally responsible for their behavior and deserving of blame and punishment. If a person is morally responsible for their behavior, then they must have control over their own conduct. Compatibilists offer an alternative account of Free Will that they hope is a) compatible with Causal Determinism, and b) sufficient for moral responsibility.

**Compatibilists** deny claim 1. They offer an alternative account of Free-Will

### Forking Path (rejected by compatibilists)

- An agent has control over her conduct at a moment in time if she has the ability to select among, or choose between, alternative courses of action, i.e., choose between alternative future paths.

Give my car examples.

### Source of Action

- An agent freely does F if 1) F arises from her internal states and character, and 2) are not forced by external conditions or agents.

Give some examples.

## Objections

Note the distinction between freely *acting* a certain way and freely *choosing* to act a certain way. Compatibilists are claiming you act freely when your actions arise from your character. You do not But can your actions be free if they you did not freely choose them?

Since the Compatibilist accepts Causal Determinism, they accept that your character is determined by the past. + If your character is shaped by circumstances outside your control, are the actions that arise from your character free?

## Character

Compatibilists claim that an actions is our own just because it arises from our unique personality; if my character makes me eat the cake, then eating the cake, according to the compatibilist, is free.

Our personality is made up a variety of different traits like honesty, courage, greed, etc. Some people are honest and courageous. Some are honest, but

cowardly. I will first make a few remarks about traits in general. I then discuss some evidence that there are no traits whatsoever.

Traits are complex dispositions to notice, construe, think, desire, and act in characteristic ways. To be generous, for instance, is to be disposed to notice occasions for giving, to construe ambiguous social cues charitably, to desire to give people things they want, need, or would appreciate, to deliberate well about what they want, need, or would appreciate, and to act on the basis of such deliberation.

Character traits are normally characterized by three claims:

1. **Robustness Claim:** an individual with a particular character trait will exhibit trait-relevant behavior across a broad spectrum of trait-relevant situations. Such traits are said to be “robust” traits, e.g., an honest person will tend to tell the truth to friends, family members, co-workers, students, etc.
2. **Stability Claim:** traits are relatively stable over time. A soldier who behaves courageously for a significant period of time is courageous. A soldier who behaves non-courageously for a significant period of time is not courageous. A soldier will not become or cease to be courageous overnight.
3. **Integrity Claim:** there is a correlation between having one trait and having another, e.g., a person who is temperate with regard to the pleasures derived from food is likely to also be temperate with regard to the pleasures derived from sexual intercourse. Likewise, an individual with a particular vice is likely to possess other vices.

### **Situationism**

Many have doubted that our behavior is always caused by internal character traits. Psychologists have been concerned to decide when the features of the situation we are in rather than our character traits cause our behavior. Some have argued that we have no character traits whatsoever and that all our behavior is caused by external factors:

“... modern experimental psychology has discovered that circumstance has surprisingly more to do with how people behave than traditional images of character and virtue allow (John Doris 2002, ix).”

Gilbert Harmon expresses this idea as follows:

In trying to characterize and explain a distinctive action, ordinary thinking tends to hypothesize a corresponding distinctive characteristic of the agent and tends to overlook the relevant details of the

agent's perceived situation. . . . Ordinary attributions of character traits to people are often deeply misguided and it may even be the case that there. . . [are] no ordinary traits of the sort people think there are (Harman 1999, 315f).

Situationism can be understood as comprised of three central claims:

1. Non-robustness Claim: moral character traits are not robust—that is, they are not consistent across a wide spectrum of trait-relevant situations. Whatever moral character traits an individual has are situation-specific.
2. Consistency Claim: while a person's moral character traits are relatively stable over time, this should be understood as consistency of situation specific traits, rather than robust traits.
3. Fragmentation Claim: a person's moral character traits do not have the evaluative integrity suggested by the Integrity Claim. There may be considerable disunity in a person's moral character among her situation-specific character traits.

### **Proof for Situationism**

There is empirical evidence, the situationist claims, for each of them:

- Hugh Hartshorne and M. A. May's study of the trait of honesty among school children found no cross-situational correlation. A child may be consistently honest with his friends, but not with his parents or teachers. From this and other studies, Hartshorne and May concluded that character traits are not robust but rather "specific functions of life situations" (Hartshorne and May 1928, 379f).
- By-stander effect:

Other studies further call into question the Integrity Claim of the Traditional View.

For example, in one experiment persons who found a dime in a phone booth were far more likely to help a confederate who dropped some papers than were those who did not find a dime. Another experiment involved seminary students who agreed to give a talk on the importance of helping those in need. On the way to the building where their talks were to be given, they encountered a confederate slumped over and groaning. Those who were told they were already late were much less likely to help than those who were told they had time to spare. These experiments are taken to show that minor factors without moral significance (finding a dime, being in a hurry) are strongly correlated with people's helping behavior.

Perhaps most damning for the robust view of character are the results of the experiments conducted by Stanley Milgram in the 1960s. In these experiments

the great majority of subjects, when politely though firmly requested by an experimenter, were willing to administer what they thought were increasingly severe electric shocks to a screaming “victim.” These experiments are taken to show that if subjects did have compassionate tendencies, these tendencies cannot have been of the type that robust traits require.

Philosophers influenced by the experimental tradition in social psychology conclude that people do not have the broadly based, stable, consistent traits of character that were of interest to the ancient and modern moralists, or to contemporary philosophers working with some version of those views. Rather, the psychological studies are taken to show that persons generally have only narrow, “local” traits that are not unified with other traits into a wider behavioral pattern. Persons are helpful when in a good mood, say, but not helpful when in a hurry, or they are honest at home but not honest at work.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OSsPfbup0ac&spfreload=1>

## **Yoga: The Freedom of Surrender**

“The Supreme Lord is situated in everyone’s heart, O Arjuna, and is directing the wanderings of all living entities, who are seated as on a machine, made of the material energy.”