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**MALAYSIA CLUB**  
EST. 1991



# Perspectives - Summer School 2014

## Philosophy

*The Free Will Problem*

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# The Free Will Problem

## Tutorial Pack

*Taught by: Abhishek Kamat and Li Li Tan*

How do you know if your actions are free? (General Philosophy)

What implications does this bear, on our understanding of morality? (Ethics)

### Tutorial objective

*To gain a deeper understanding of:*

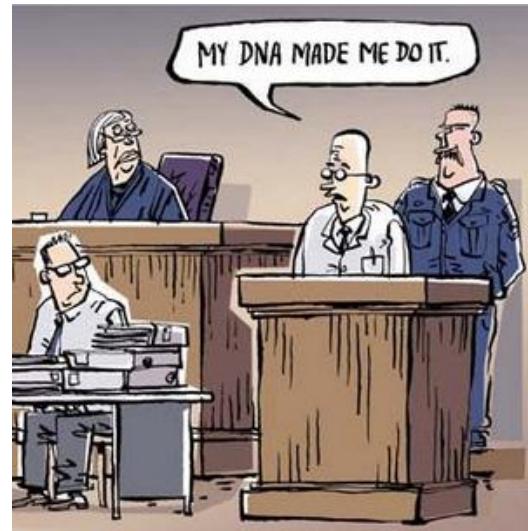
- The free will debate – the problem of free will and determinism (Traditional Problem)
- The compatibility of free will and determinism (Compatibility Problem)
- Free choice and Morality

### Pack Contents

- Free Will and Determinism – Theodore Sider
- Do you really have Free Will? - Roy F. Baumeister
- Life without Free Will – Sam Harris
- Extension – Read this if you get the time (we may not be able to cover this in the session)
  - Ofra Magidor's Slide
  - Peter Van Inwagen's objections

### Instructions

1. Read all the content provided thoroughly
2. As you read the content note down any ideas, thoughts and any questions that arise
3. Summarise each article into a few short paragraphs
4. Don't worry you will not be tested or examined on this content so make sure you enjoy the reading and ask loads of questions!



## CHAPTER 6

# Free Will and Determinism

Theodore Sider

### The Problem

Suppose you are kidnaped and forced to commit a series of terrible murders. The kidnaper makes you shoot a first victim by forcing your finger to squeeze the trigger of a gun, hypnotizes you into poisoning a second, and then throws you from an airplane, causing you to squash a third. Miraculously, you survive the fall from the airplane. You stagger from the scene, relieved that the ordeal is over. But then, to your amazement, you are apprehended by the police, who handcuff you and charge you with murder. The parents of the victims scream obscenities at you as you are led away in disgrace.

Are the police and parents fair to blame you for the killings? Obviously not, for you have an unassailable excuse: you did not act of your own free will. You couldn't help what you did; you could not have done otherwise. And only those who act freely are morally responsible.

We all believe that we have free will. How could we not? Renouncing freedom would mean no longer planning for the

future, for why make plans if you are not free to change what will happen? It would mean renouncing morality, for only those who act freely deserve blame or punishment. Without freedom, we march along pre-determined paths, unable to control our destinies. Such a life is not worth living.

Yet freedom seems to conflict with a certain apparent fact. Incredibly, this fact is no secret; most people are fully aware of it. We uncritically accept free will only because we fail to put two and two together. The problem of free will is a time bomb hidden within our most deeply held beliefs.

Here is the fact: *every event has a cause*. This fact is known as determinism.

We all believe in causes. If scientists discovered debris in the upper stratosphere spelling out 'Ozzy Osbourne!', they would immediately go to work to discover the cause. Was the debris put there by a renegade division of NASA comprised of heavy-metal fans? Was it a science project from a school for adolescent geniuses? If these things were ruled out as causes, the scientists would start to consider stranger hypotheses. Perhaps aliens from another planet are playing a joke on us. Perhaps the debris is left over from a collision between comets, and the resemblance to the name of the heavy-metal singer is purely coincidental. Perhaps different bits of the debris each have different kinds of causes. Any of these hypotheses might be entertained. But the one thing the scientists would *not* contemplate is that there simply is no cause whatsoever. Causes can be hard to discover, or coincidental, or have many different parts, but they are always there.

It's not that uncaused events are utterly inconceivable. We can imagine what it would be like for an uncaused event to occur. For that matter, we can imagine what it would be like for all sorts of strange things to occur: pigs flying, monkeys making 10,000 feet tall statues from jello, and so on. But it is reasonable to believe that no such things *in fact* occur. Likewise, it is reasonable

to believe that there are in fact no uncaused events—that is, it is reasonable to believe in determinism.

Our belief in determinism is reasonable because we have all seen science succeed, again and again, in its search for the underlying causes of things. Technological innovations owe their existence to science: skyscrapers, vaccination, rocket ships, the internet. Science seems to explain everything we observe: the changing of the seasons, the movement of the planets, the inner workings of plants and animals. Given this track record, we reasonably expect the march of scientific progress to continue; we expect that science will eventually discover the causes of everything.

The threat to freedom comes when we realize that this march will eventually overtake us. From the scientific point of view, human choices and behavior are just another part of the natural world. Like the seasons, planets, plants, and animals, our actions are studyable, predictable, explainable, controllable. It is hard to say when, if ever, scientists will learn enough about what makes humans tick in order to predict everything we do. But regardless of when the causes of human behavior are *discovered*, determinism assures us that these causes *exist*.

It is hard to accept that one's own choices are subject to causes. Suppose you become sleepy and are tempted to put down this book. The causes are trying to put you to sleep. But you resist them! You are strong and continue reading anyway. Have you thwarted the causes and refuted determinism? Of course not. Continuing to read has its own cause. Perhaps your love of metaphysics overcomes your drowsiness. Perhaps your parents taught you to be disciplined. Or perhaps you are just stubborn. No matter what the reason, there was some cause.

You may reply: 'But I felt no compulsion to read or not to read; I simply decided to do one or the other. I sensed no cause'. It is true that many thoughts, feelings, and decisions do not *feel* caused. But this does not really threaten determinism.

Sometimes the causes of our decisions aren't consciously detectable, but those causes still exist. Some causes of behavior are pre-conscious functions of the brain, as contemporary psychology teaches, or perhaps even subconscious desires, as Freud thought. Other causes of decisions may not even be mental. The brain is an incredibly complicated physical object, and might 'swerve' this way or that as a result of certain motions of its tiniest parts. Such purely physical causes cannot be detected merely by directing one's attention inward, no matter how long and hard and calmly one meditates. We can't expect to be able to detect all the causes of our decisions just by introspection.

So: determinism is true, even for human actions. But now, consider any allegedly free action. To illustrate how much is at stake here, let's consider an action that is horribly morally reprehensible: Hitler's invasion of Poland in 1939. We most certainly blame Hitler for this action. We thus consider him to have acted freely. But determinism seems to imply that Hitler was not free at all.

To see why, we must first investigate the concepts of cause and effect. A cause is an earlier event that *makes* a later effect happen. Given the laws of nature,<sup>1</sup> once the cause has occurred, the effect *must* occur. Lightning causes thunder: the laws of nature governing electricity and sound guarantee that, when lightning strikes, thunder will follow.

Determinism says that Hitler's invasion of Poland was caused by some earlier event. So far, there is little to threaten Hitler's freedom. The cause of the invasion might be something under Hitler's control, in which case the invasion would also be under his control. For instance, the cause might be a decision that Hitler made just before the invasion. If so, then it seems we can still blame Hitler for ordering the invasion.

<sup>1</sup> Chapter 9 discusses laws of nature.

But now consider this decision itself. It is just another event. So determinism implies that it too must have a cause. This new cause might be an even earlier decision Hitler made, or something his advisers told him, or something he ate, or, more likely, a combination of many factors. Whatever it is, call this cause of Hitler's decision to invade Poland ' $c$ '. Notice that  $c$  also caused the invasion of Poland. For as we saw above, a cause is an earlier event that makes a later event happen. Once  $c$  occurred, Hitler's decision had to occur; and once that decision occurred, the invasion had to occur.

We can repeat this reasoning indefinitely. Determinism implies that  $c$  must have an earlier cause  $c_1$ , which in turn must have an earlier cause  $c_2$ , and so on. The resulting sequence of events stretches back in time:

$$\dots c_2 \rightarrow c_1 \rightarrow c \rightarrow \text{the decision} \rightarrow \text{the invasion}$$

Each event in the sequence causes the invasion, since each event causes the event that occurs immediately after it, which then causes the next event occurring immediately after that one, and so on. The final few events in this sequence look like ones under Hitler's control. But the earlier ones do not, for as we move back in time, we eventually reach events before Hitler's birth.

This argument can be repeated for any human action, however momentous or trivial. Suppose an old man slips while crossing the street, and I laugh at him instead of helping him up. Using the above chain of reasoning, we can show that my laughter was caused by events before my birth.

Things now look very bad for freedom. Hitler no longer seems to have had a free choice about whether to invade Poland. I seem to have had no choice but to laugh at the old man. For these actions were all caused by things outside our control. But then what was morally wrong about what Hitler or I did? How can we blame Hitler for invading Poland if it was settled before

his birth that he would do it? How can we blame me for laughing? How can we blame anyone for anything?

We can restate the challenge to freedom in terms of physics. Any action or decision involves the motion of sub-atomic particles in one's body and brain. These sub-atomic particles move according to the laws of physics. Physics lets us calculate the future positions of particles from information about (i) the previous states of the particles, and (ii) the forces acting on the particles. So, in principle, one could have examined the sub-atomic particles one hundred years before the invasion of Poland, calculated exactly how those particles would be moving one hundred years later, and thereby calculated that Hitler would invade Poland. Such calculations are far too difficult to ever complete in practice, but that doesn't matter. Whether or not anyone could have completed the calculations, *the particles were there*, before Hitler's birth, and the fact that they were there, and arranged in the way that they were, made it *inevitable* that Hitler would invade Poland. Once again, we have found a cause for Hitler's invasion that already existed before Hitler was born. And the existence of such a cause seems to imply that Hitler's invasion of Poland was not a free action.

And yet, it *must* have been free, for how else can we *blame* him for this despicable act? The time bomb has exploded. Two of our most deeply held beliefs, our belief in science and our belief in freedom and morality, seem to contradict each other. We must resolve this conflict.

# Do You Really Have Free Will? *Of course. Here's how it evolved.*

By Roy F. Baumeister

It has become **fashionable** to say that people **have no free will**. Many scientists cannot imagine how the idea of free will could be reconciled with the laws of **physics and chemistry**. Brain researchers say that the brain is just a bunch of nerve cells that fire as a **direct result** of chemical and electrical events, with no room for free will. Others note that people are **unaware of some causes of their behavior**, such as unconscious cues or genetic predispositions, and extrapolate to suggest that all behavior may be caused that way, so that conscious choosing is an illusion.

Scientists take delight in (and advance their careers by) claiming to have disproved conventional wisdom, and so bashing free will is appealing. But their statements against free will **can be misleading** and are sometimes downright mistaken, as several **thoughtful critics have pointed out**.

Arguments about free will are mostly semantic arguments about definitions. Most experts who deny free will are arguing against peculiar, unscientific versions of the idea, such as that “free will” means that causality is not involved. As my longtime friend and colleague John Bargh put it once in a debate, “Free will means **freedom from causation**.” Other scientists who argue against free will say that it means that a soul or other supernatural entity causes behavior, and not surprisingly they consider such explanations unscientific.

These arguments leave untouched the meaning of free will that most people understand, which is consciously making choices about what to do in the absence of external coercion, and accepting responsibility for one’s actions. Hardly anyone denies that people engage in logical reasoning and self-control to make choices. There is a *genuine psychological reality* behind the idea of free will. The debate is merely about whether this reality deserves to be called free will. Setting aside the semantic debate, let’s try to understand what that underlying reality is.

There is no need to insist that free will is some kind of magical violation of causality. Free will is just another kind of cause. The causal process by which a person decides whether to marry is simply different from the processes that cause balls to roll downhill, ice to melt in the hot sun, a magnet to attract nails, or a stock price to rise and fall.

Different sciences discover different kinds of causes. Phillip Anderson, who won the Nobel Prize in physics, **explained this beautifully** several decades ago in a brief article titled “More is different.” Physics may be the most fundamental of the sciences, but as one moves up the ladder to chemistry, then biology, then physiology, then psychology, and on to economics and sociology—at each level, new kinds of causes enter the picture.

As Anderson explained, the things each science studies cannot be fully reduced to the lower levels, but they also cannot *violate* the lower levels. Our actions cannot break the laws of physics, but they can be influenced by things beyond gravity, friction, and electromagnetic charges. No number of facts about a carbon atom can explain life, let alone the meaning of your life. These causes operate at different levels of organization. Even if you could write a history of the Civil War purely in terms of muscle movements or nerve cell firings, that (very long and dull) book would completely miss the point of the war. Free will cannot violate the laws of physics or even neuroscience, but it invokes causes that go beyond them.

The evolution of free will began when living things began to make choices. The difference between plants and animals illustrates an important early step. Plants don't change their location and don't need brains to help them decide where to go. Animals do. Free will is an advanced form of the simple process of controlling oneself, called agency.

The squirrel is more complex than the tree, and it does plenty of things the tree can't. When chased by a dog, the squirrel needs to choose which direction to run. Its decision processes may be simple, but it does choose, nonetheless. Thousands of lab studies have shown how rats learn to make choices that bring them rewards. How did this simple agency evolve into the more complex style of choosing that people call free will?

Living things everywhere face two problems: survival and reproduction. All species have to solve those basic problems or else go extinct. Humankind has an unusual strategy for solving them: culture. We communicate, develop complex social systems, engage in trade, accumulate knowledge collectively, create giant social institutions (governments, hospitals, universities, corporations). These help us survive and reproduce, increasingly in comfortable and safe ways. These large systems have worked very well for us, if you measure success in the biological terms of survival and reproduction.

If culture is so successful, why don't other species use it? They can't—because they lack the psychological innate capabilities it requires. Our ancestors evolved the ability to act in the ways necessary for culture to succeed. Free will likely will be found right there—it's what enables humans to control their actions in precisely the ways required to build and operate complex social systems.

What psychological capabilities are needed to make cultural systems work? To be a member of a group with culture, people must be able to understand the culture's rules for actions, including moral principles and formal laws. They need to be able to talk about their choices with others, participate in group decisions, and carry out their assigned role. Culture can bring immense benefits, from cooked rice to the iPhone, but it only works if people cooperate and obey the rules.

If you think of freedom as being able to do whatever you want, with no rules, you might be surprised to hear that *free will is for following rules*. Doing whatever you want is fully within the capability of any animal in the forest. Free will is for a far more advanced

way of acting. It's what a creature might need in order to adjust its behavior to novel situations, to get what it wants while still following the complicated rules of the society.

People must inhibit impulses and desires and find ways of satisfying them within the rules. People also consciously imagine various future scenarios ("If I do this, then that will happen, whereupon I would do something else, leading to another result ...") and guide their present actions based on disciplined imagination.

That, in a nutshell, is the inner deciding process that humans have evolved. That is the reality behind the idea of free will: these processes of rational choice and self-control. It's this or nothing. If you accept free will, this is what it is. If you insist on disbelieving in free will, these are the processes that are commonly taken for it. But either way, there is a real phenomenon here. And to understand human life, it is vital to understand how this phenomenon works.

Does it deserve to be called free? I do think so. Philosophers debate whether people have free will as if the answer will be a simple yes or no. But very few psychological phenomena are absolute dichotomies. Instead, most psychological phenomena are on a continuum. Some acts are clearly freer than others. The freer actions would include conscious thought and deciding, self-control, logical reasoning, and the pursuit of enlightened self-interest.

Self-control counts as a kind of freedom because it begins with not acting on every impulse. The simple brain acts whenever something triggers a response: A hungry creature sees food and eats it. The most recently evolved parts of the human brain have an extensive mechanism for overriding those impulses, which enables us to reject food when we're hungry, whether it's because we're dieting, vegetarian, keeping kosher, or mistrustful of the food. Self-control furnishes the possibility of acting from rational principles rather than acting on impulse.

The use of abstract ideas such as moral principles to guide action takes us far beyond anything that you will find in a physics or chemistry textbook, and so we are free in the sense of emergence, of going beyond simpler forms of causality. Again, we cannot break the laws of physics, but we can act in ways that add new causes that go far beyond physical causation. No electron understands the Golden Rule, and indeed an exhaustive study of any given atom will furnish no clue as to whether it is part of a person who is obeying or disobeying that rule. The economic laws of supply and demand are genuine causes, but they cannot be reduced to or fully explained by chemical reactions. Understanding free will in this way allows us to reconcile the popular understanding of free will as making choices with our scientific understanding of the world.

# Life Without Free Will

Sam Harris

One of the most common objections to my position on free will is that accepting it could have terrible consequences, psychologically or socially. This is a strange rejoinder, analogous to what many religious people allege against atheism: Without a belief in God, human beings will cease to be good to one another. Both responses abandon any pretense of caring about what is true and merely change the subject. But that does not mean we should never worry about the practical effects of holding specific beliefs.

I can well imagine that some people might use the nonexistence of free will as a pretext for doing whatever they want, assuming that it's pointless to resist temptation or that there's no difference between good and evil. This is a misunderstanding of the situation, but, I admit, a possible one. There is also the question of how we should raise children in light of what science tells us about the nature of the human mind. It seems doubtful that a lecture on the illusoriness of free will should be part of an elementary school curriculum.

In my view, the reality of good and evil does not depend upon the existence of free will, because with or without free will, we can distinguish between suffering and happiness. With or without free will, a psychopath who enjoys killing children is different from a pediatric surgeon who enjoys saving them. Whatever the truth about free will, these distinctions are unmistakable and well worth caring about.

Might free will somehow be required for goodness to be manifest? How, for instance, does one become a pediatric surgeon? Well, you must first be born, with an intact nervous system, and then provided with a proper education. No freedom there, I'm afraid. You must also have the physical talent for the job and avoid smashing your hands at rugby. Needless to say, it won't do to be someone who faints at the sight of blood. Chalk these achievements up to good luck as well. At some point you must decide to become a surgeon—a result, presumably, of first wanting to become one. Will you be the conscious source of this wanting? Will you be responsible for its prevailing over all the other things you want but that are incompatible with a career in medicine? No. If you succeed at becoming a surgeon, you will simply find yourself

standing one day, scalpel in hand, at the confluence of all the genetic and environmental causes that led you to develop along this line. None of these events requires that you, the conscious subject, be the ultimate cause of your aspirations, abilities, and resulting behavior. And, needless to say, you can take no credit for the fact that you weren't born a psychopath.

Of course, I'm not saying that you can become a surgeon *by accident*—you must do many things, deliberately and well, and in the appropriate sequence, year after year. Becoming a surgeon requires effort. But can you take credit for your disposition to make that effort? To turn the matter around, am I *responsible* for the fact that it has never once occurred to me that I might like to be a surgeon? Who gets the blame for my lack of inspiration? And what if the desire to become a surgeon suddenly arises tomorrow and becomes so intense that I jettison my other professional goals and enroll in medical school? Would I—that is, the part of me that is actually *experiencing* my life—be the true cause of these developments? Every moment of conscious effort—every thought, intention, and decision—will have been caused by events of which I am not conscious. Where is the freedom in this?

If we cannot assign blame to the workings of the universe, how can evil people be held responsible for their actions? In the deepest sense, it seems, they can't be. But in a practical sense, they must be. I see no contradiction in this. In fact, I think that keeping the deep causes of human behavior in view would only improve our practical response to evil. The feeling that people are deeply responsible for who they are does nothing but produce moral illusions and psychological suffering. Imagine that you are enjoying your last nap of the summer, perhaps outside in a hammock somewhere, and are awakened by an unfamiliar sound. You open your eyes to the sight of a large bear charging at you across the lawn. It should be easy enough to understand that you have a problem. If we swap this bear for a large man holding a butcher knife, the problem changes in a few interesting ways, but the sudden appearance of free will in the brain of your attacker is not among them. Should you survive this ordeal, your subsequent experience is liable to depend—far too much, in my view—on the species of your attacker. Imagine the difference between seeing the man who almost killed you on the witness stand and seeing the bear romping at the zoo. If you are like many victims, you might be overcome in the first instance by feelings of rage and hatred so intense as to constitute a further trauma. You might spend years fantasizing about the man's death. But it seems

certain that your experience at the zoo would be altogether different. You might even bring friends and family just for the fun of it: “That’s the beast that almost killed me!” Which state of mind would you prefer—seething hatred or triumphant feelings of good luck and amazement? The conviction that a human assailant could have done otherwise, while a bear could not, would seem to account for much of the difference.

A person’s conscious thoughts, intentions, and efforts at every moment are preceded by causes of which he is unaware. What is more, they are preceded by deep causes—genes, childhood experience, etc.—for which no one, however evil, can be held responsible. Our ignorance of both sets of facts gives rise to moral illusions. And yet many people worry that it is necessary to believe in free will, especially in the process of raising children.

This strikes me as a legitimate concern, though I would point out that the question of which truths to tell children (or childlike adults) haunts every room in the mansion of our understanding. For instance, my wife and I recently took our three-year-old daughter on an airplane for the first time. She loves to fly! As it happens, her joy was made possible in part because we neglected to tell her that airplanes occasionally malfunction and fall out of the sky, killing everyone on board. I don’t believe I’m the first person to observe that certain truths are best left unspoken, especially in the presence of young children. And I would no more think of telling my daughter at this age that free will is an illusion than I would teach her to drive a car or load a pistol.

Which is to say that there is a time and a place for everything—unless, of course, there isn’t. We all find ourselves in the position of a child from time to time, when specific information, however valid or necessary it may be in other contexts, will only produce confusion, despondency, or terror in the context of our life. It can be perfectly rational to avoid certain facts. For instance, if you must undergo a medical procedure for which there is no reasonable alternative, I recommend that you not conduct an Internet search designed to uncover all its possible complications. Similarly, if you are prone to nightmares or otherwise destabilized by contemplating human evil, I recommend that you not read *Machete Season*.

Some forms of knowledge are not for everyone.

Generally speaking, however, I don’t think that the illusoriness of free will is an ugly truth. Nor is it one that must remain a philosophical abstraction. In fact, as I write this, it is absolutely clear to me that I do not have free will. This knowledge

doesn't seem to prevent me from getting things done. Recognizing that my conscious mind is always downstream from the underlying causes of my thoughts, intentions, and actions does not change the fact that thoughts, intentions, and actions of all kinds are necessary for living a happy life—or an unhappy one, for that matter.

I haven't been noticeably harmed, and I believe I have benefited, from knowing that the next thought that unfurls in my mind will arise and become effective (or not) due to conditions that I cannot know and did not bring into being. The negative effects that people worry about—a lack of motivation, a plunge into nihilism—are simply not evident in my life. And the positive effects have been obvious. Seeing through the illusion of free will has lessened my feelings of hatred for bad people. I'm still capable of feeling hatred, of course, but when I think about the actual causes of a person's behavior, the feeling falls away. It is a relief to put down this burden, and I think nothing would be lost if we all put it down together. On the contrary, much would be gained. We could forget about retribution and concentrate entirely on mitigating harm. (And if punishing people proved important for either deterrence or rehabilitation, we could make prison as unpleasant as required.)

Understanding the true causes of human behavior does not leave any room for the traditional notion of free will. But this shouldn't depress us, or tempt us to go off our diets. Diligence and wisdom still yield better results than sloth and stupidity. And, in psychologically healthy adults, understanding the illusoriness of free will should make divisive feelings such as pride and hatred a little less compelling. While it's conceivable that someone, somewhere, might be made worse off by dispensing with the illusion of free will, I think that on balance, it could only produce a more compassionate, equitable, and sane society.

# the free-will problem

Is it possible for free will and determinism to co-exist?

yes

COMPATABLISM

no

INCOMPATABLISM

Is determinism true?

no

LIBERTERIANISM

yes

HARD DETERMINISM

# Two arguments for Incompatibilism

Peter Van Inwagen

## Consequence Argument

"If determinism is true, then our acts are the consequences of the laws of nature and events in the remote past. But it is not up to us what went on before we were born, and neither is it up to us what the laws of nature are. Therefore, the consequences of these things (including our present acts) are not up to us."

- Let L be the laws of nature.
- Let S<sub>0</sub> be a description of the complete state of the world at a time t<sub>0</sub>.
- Let S<sub>1</sub> be a description of the complete state of the world at some later time t<sub>1</sub>.
- **Determinism: Necessarily, if L and S<sub>0</sub>, then S<sub>1</sub>.**

*The consequence argument (van Inwagen):*

- (1) If I could have done not-Q instead of Q, then I could have rendered S<sub>1</sub> false.
- (2) If I could have rendered S<sub>1</sub> false, then I could have rendered either L or S<sub>0</sub> false.
- (3) But I can do neither of these!
- (4) So, I could not have done not-Q.
- (5) If I could not have acted otherwise, I did not act freely.**



*"Free will is overrated."*

**CN**  
COLLECTION

## Randomness Objection

If indeterminism is true, then all events are cause-less. Therefore all events including human action are down to indeterminate chance. If all our actions are down to chance and are thus random- this kind of human agency cannot be called free will.

**Therefore regardless of whether or not determinism is true, free will cannot be true.**