

Do We Really Have Free Will?

Some people doubt that beings created by an all-knowing, all-powerful God can really have free will. If He knows exactly what we will do and He chooses to create us as we are He is ultimately responsible for our choices. If He really desires us to make a different choice, such as avoiding sin, He will make us such that we would make that different choice. If the Christian God exists, He must be cruel for damning to hell those who make the choices He designed them to make. Pretty simple.

It seems that someone holding such a belief might find it easier to accept that a creature had free will if the creator did not know the choices that the creature would make. That would mean that in order for a creator to make a creature with free will the creator would have to have limited knowledge. Of course, this is nonsense. Being less knowledgeable would not give a creator greater capability. So, ultimately the challenger believes it is impossible to make a creature with free will.

Why? One reason is that the challenger does not know how to create such a being.

Likewise, I do not know how to create a planet that could sustain the abundance of life that exists on our planet. If I could not see our planet and know by experience that it actually does sustain such an abundance of life I could reasonably doubt that such a planet could exist.

I might have no idea how to make an animal that flies. But I know that animals can fly because I have seen the animals and have seen them fly. If I had seen birds, but had never seen them fly I might doubt that they could.

It was impossible for man to fly, until we did. It was impossible to make a vehicle that could carry men to the moon, until we did. It was impossible to transport the heart from one creature to another without both dying, until we did. It was impossible to transport sound across great distances, until we did.

But we see creatures every day that seem to possess free will. The difference is that we have no real way of knowing whether actions taken by these creatures were freely chosen or predestined. It is hard to see whether a decision by a man or animal is freely made or whether it is simply the result of a series of chemical reactions.

Did the bird really fly or was he tossed? How could we tell?

Did the man make a decision freely or was it just a predetermined decision based on his existing makeup and the stimuli he was exposed to? How could we tell?

To begin the discussion we need a definition of free will. We will use free will to mean the ability to make a moral decision within oneself.

This definition excludes animals, which may be able to make free decisions, but cannot consider the moral aspects of a decision.

What does a being need in order to freely make a moral decision?

- He needs to be aware of at least some of the moral implications of the decision. If there are moral implications, but the being is unaware of all of them he is not able to exercise free will in the moral sense.
- He needs to be free to act. A person who is drunk or possessed or emotionally distraught or insane or immature may not have the ability to consider the morality of an action.

So let's look at a healthy, sane, sober, mature person. The concern is that he could appear to be acting in free will while following a script. Those challenging that we have free will do not suggest that we are actors knowingly following a script, but rather that we are scripted within our being and that all of our decisions and all of our pondering and all of our research and seeking counsel are just part of the programmed response. We are designed to think and act as if we are making decisions in order to make the decisions that we were made to make.

So, if there is a God He designed us to think we are making decisions. Our very design is to be misled. The entire universe is a deception. Every little decision we make is a deception to us. In that case, instead of a great creation, a creature that somehow actually has the gift of free will and therefore can have a real relationship with others and with God we are just very advanced chemically controlled robots who are deceived in the very essence of our existences.¹

Instead of being made to know, love, and serve God and be happy with Him we were made as a trick...for no noble purpose.

If we are to believe that man does not have free will we have to believe that either God could not create a being with free will or that He would not. If He could not then He is not all-powerful. If He would not then He thought it would be better to make a being with the appearance of free will than to actually do so. However, it is not better to make a creature with pretend free will when He could make the real thing.

If a creature does have free will, that is, he has the power to act against God's will, then such a creature could merit everlasting punishment in hell...provided his decisions mattered that much.

But why doesn't God just make everyone to have enough information, grace, and perspective to always choose His will? He does give everyone *enough* help to actually make choices that would lead each person to Him, but He actually wants a real "yes" from us. The offer of a lasting relationship with the living God is a great gift and it should not be offered cheaply. If people are not willing to say "no" to themselves for God they are not really willing to say "yes" to Him in totality.

¹ There is a philosophy called "reductionism" or "materialism" that posits we cannot have free will because everything in the material universe that will occur in the next moment is determined by the conditions of this moment. In effect, chemical processes in our minds make all of our decisions since our minds exist only in the material universe. How do we know that everything that affects the material universe exists in the material universe? We don't. Science (really material science) limits itself to the material world. It is not designed to deal in the spiritual realm. It ignores the existence of God and acts under the assumption that there is nothing outside of the material world in which we live. Usually this works fine because God rarely alters the physical laws He has established. However, we can see that there must be something outside of our universe because it came into existence almost 14 billion years ago....and it did not bring itself into existence.

When we agonize over what would be the best course of action or kick ourselves afterwards when we realize we chose poorly we are acting as if we believe we have free will and that we are real persons. We will even advise a less mature friend when we worry he is making a mistake. We need to recognize that we spend our whole lives acting as if we are really making decisions. If we know that it is not true why are we participating in the deception?

What would be true if free will did not exist?

1. Every sinful, evil act would be caused directly by God. God *alone* would be responsible for every abortion, every murder, every rape, every lie, and every blasphemy. God alone would be responsible for every instance of hatred between men.
2. The Crucifixion of Our Lord would cease to be a gift from God the Son to God the Father (and us) in order to atone for our sins. It would instead be an act of malice by the Father against the Son by asking Him in the Garden of Gethsemane to accept the suffering.
3. There would be no point in trying to grow in virtue. Since we would not really be in control of our actions or responsible for them it would be foolish to try to control that which could not be controlled. Instead, we should just do whatever brings about whatever ends we desire.
4. Heroic and sacrificial actions by individuals for others would have no real merit because they would be nothing more than programmed responses.
5. The relationships that we have with other people that we must cherish have no real value.
6. There would be no reason for heaven or hell or eternal life. Not having free will we would not image God in any substantial way and, therefore, there would be no reason to keep us in existence forever. We could not sin (offend God) without free will, so we could not deserve hell. God's love for us and our love for God would not result in a real relationship, so why would God bother? Would any of us, being much less than God, choose to live with another creature (whether human or animal) whose every action was controlled by us and those actions produced a feigned relationship. (OK, the answer to this question might be "yes," as some of us are quite fond of our coffeemakers.)
7. There would be no real value in our life.

We should believe in free will if we believe God is better, because it is better.