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Is Free Will an Illusion? Scientists, Philosophers Forced to Differ

By Natalie Wolchover | LiveScience.com – Wed, Mar 21, 2012

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Are you really in control, or is your every decision predetermined? Who's at the steering wheel: you, your genes, your upbringing, fate, karma, God?

A hot topic for several thousand years, the question of whether free will exists may never be settled to everyone's satisfaction. But in a series of new articles for the [Chronicles of Higher Education](#), six academics from diverse fields offer fresh perspectives from the standpoints of modern neuroscience and philosophy. Ultimately, they voted 4-2 in favor of the position that free will is merely an illusion.

The four scientists on the panel denied the existence of free will, arguing that human behavior is governed by the brain, which is itself controlled by each person's genetic blueprint built upon by his or her life experiences. Meanwhile, the two philosophers cast the dissenting votes, arguing that free will is perfectly compatible with the discoveries of neuroscience.

[Jerry Coyne](#), an evolutionary biologist at the University of Chicago, defined free will as the possibility that, after making a decision, you could have chosen otherwise. But a "decision," Coyne argues, is merely a series of electrical and chemical impulses between [molecules in the brain](#) — molecules whose configuration is predetermined by genes and environment. Though each decision is the outcome of an immensely complicated series of chemical reactions, those reactions are governed by the laws of physics and could not possibly turn out differently. "Like the output of a programmed computer, only one choice is ever physically possible: the one you made," Coyne wrote.

The three other scientists concurred with Coyne's viewpoint. As Owen Jones, a professor of law and biological sciences at Vanderbilt University, put it in his essay: "Will is as free as lunch. (If you doubt, just try willing yourself out of love, lust, anger, or jealousy)."

Though everyone must be held accountable for his or her actions, neuroscience and the nonexistence of free will should be factored into some criminal cases, the scholars argued. [\[Math Formula May Explain Why Serial Killers Kill\]](#)

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A counterargument came from Hilary Bok, a philosopher at the Johns Hopkins University, who said scientists misunderstand the question of free will when they argue that decisions are governed by the activity of brain cells. Free will, in her opinion, is being capable of stepping back from one's existing motivations and habits and making a reasoned decision among various alternatives. "The claim that a person chose her action does not conflict with the claim that some neural processes or states caused it; it simply re-describes it," she wrote.

Alfred Mele, another philosopher at Florida State University, also believes the concept of free will is compatible with the findings of neuroscience. He cited a 2008 study in which volunteers were asked to push either of two buttons. According to the study, brain activity up to 10 seconds before the decision was consciously reached revealed which button the volunteer was more likely to press.

Though the study is widely viewed as evidence against free will, Mele pointed out that the study participants' brain activity accurately predicted their eventual decision only 60 percent of the time. In his view, this suggests people can consciously choose to override their brains' predispositions.

Therefore, he wrote, "I do not recommend betting the farm on the nonexistence of free will."

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53 • 16 hrs ago

I don't agree with their findings, but it sounds like a fascinating conversation to have at the bar sometime.

MT Adam • 1 hr 38 mins ago

God has given us the power of choice; it is ours to exercise. We cannot change our hearts, we cannot control our thoughts, our impulses, our affections. We cannot make ourselves pure, fit for God's service. But we can choose to serve God, we can give Him our will; then He will work in us to will and to do according to His good pleasure. Thus our whole nature will be brought under the control of Christ.

Trace • [Elizabethtown, Pennsylvania](#) • 1 day 12 hrs ago

I used to be indecisive, but now I just don't know.

Wolf Banderson • 13 hrs ago

while the reactionary position of free will is nice, i have devoted my entire valid existence upon the foundations of free will.

i know no whether or not it is an illusion, the concept of free will being a falsehood makes us seem mechanical and is all but a prelude to accepting that we are naught but machines designed to devour, and that this is all that our society has left to model itself after.

i like to believe that free will is something more, that there is more within guiding those complex electrical currents.

i want to believe free will is truly real and that we control our bodies, not the other way around.

or, to put it more appropriately, we control our bodies, we are not our bodies.

thinking of it that way may seem somewhat unrealistic to an extent, but i believe there is more to this body than meat and water, that what commits the electrical current, what forges it, is actually within and that the current is not made by the body.

but this is all just a supposition.

when the truth finally and ultimately dawns, whatever it may be, i shall accept it for what it is, and live with the illusion or the reality.

but i hope that free will is more than an illusion forged by self sustaining electricity made from the energy of cellular kinesis.

if this is the case, that we are really here and not mere sacks of complex flesh, i shall be happy knowing that we live as we should.

i will keep an open mind, but there is yet true proof, merely opinion, as a philosopher myself i have to believe in free will, but i am also obligated as a man to keep a very open mind and accept all things and judge them in accordance to my own understanding of the world.

in this way i ensure that i can be considered close enough to "right" to be able to pass such knowledge on to the next generation.

but being a wiseass is also quite nice.

Count De Monet • 40 mins ago

Four scientists plus two philosophers equals one stacked deck.

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JM • Cicero, Illinois • 10 hrs ago

You can "will" yourself out of love, lust, jealousy, etc... I know because I've done it. If no one could "will" themselves out of those emotions, there would be a way higher divorce rate, that's for sure. You can chose to not lust after someone or even love someone. You don't have to cheat on your spouse. You don't have to cheat on your taxes. I think some people feel more guilty about certain things, but just knowing something is wrong or something won't make your spouse happy should be enough for you to say you won't do said thing. At least that is how I've always been.

Ron's Kool-Ade Stand • Dallas, Texas • 1 day 4 hrs ago

Ever try to quit smoking (drinking, doing drugs, etc)? All of the neurological imperatives are telling you to light up. It's free will that you don't and I don't see where this study addresses that.

Red • 1 day 10 hrs ago

Uh-oh, should the truth land squarely on determinism, to say that there are weighty and far reaching implications is an understatement...a game changer in spades doubled and redoubled...rubber, set and match. But, it sure as he# would answer some questions that have been plaguing me since I was a teen.

FI1014 • Chattanooga, Tennessee • 1 day 17 hrs ago

'there is nothing new under the sun ' read the philosophers of old and the same things were debated thousands of years ago while we may have machines measuring the electrical activity of the brain, we still can not define or locate the spirit / soul of humanity

Michael • Las Vegas, Nevada • 22 hrs ago

We all have impulsive behavior. But ultimately we are rational beings and capable of over-riding our instinctive or impulsive behavior. It's the only reason why we managed to rise above the animals that surround us. If you feel that you have no control over your own will, then you need to be chained to a post in your own yard.

Robin M • Norfolk, Virginia • 2 days 14 hrs ago

We are all conditioned by many things.

Abe Lincoln • Tulsa, Oklahoma • 1 hr 49 mins ago

I am "forced" to disagree with their opinions.

Ben • Dallas, Texas • 1 day 13 hrs ago

Karma means action. That is all; it is not a cause and effect sequence. If someone says you have bad karma, it means that your action is your own doing.

Alex • Clanton, Alabama • 43 mins ago

When you stop striving to understand the Universe, then you will know the Universe, without understanding. Free will and fate do co-exist. It is the limits of perception in a linear based time existence, that prevent us from seeing the truth. From Gods point of view (existing eternally as beginning and end of all things), you have free will, but your fate and outcome is (was) fixed at the moment of creation. The nature of multi-dimensional existence will prove this out as science catches up with philosophy. OM :)

Entropy • 1 day 8 hrs ago

I choose to believe free will is an illusion. What a strange thing to say.

Silverback • 21 hrs ago

I'll go with the opinions of the observation people over the opinions of the intuition people.

Tommy P • Atlanta, Georgia • 22 hrs ago

Read about solipsism. Check out Mark Passio's work. This is all a lead up to a Minority Report type governing society. Precrime. Just like the "justified sinners" in Calvin's version of Christianity. We need to fight this type of thinking with all our might.

Bradley • Champaign, Illinois • 1 day 0 hrs ago

Honestly? I think the problem is that people assume it's a dilemma--that freedom of will either has to exist or it doesn't. And that's a problem because "free will" as such is so abstract that it really can only be defined subjectively on a person-to-person basis. Sure, we can talk about "self-agency" and "decision-making" all day...

And courts of law MUST have a "reasonable person" standard in order to function. They have to ask "what would a generic reasonable person do in this circumstance"? Hey, it beats doing what the internet does--which is asking "what would Chuck Norris do?" and then half=ssing it all the way to the bank.

But the truth is there is no generic person. Our brains are at least as non-identical as snowflakes--sure, certain patterns repeat, but when you combine that with lifestyle, the combinations escape human prediction utterly.

So what am I saying? I'm saying free will has to exist in the moment for a specific person in a circumstance--or it doesn't. Either one can happen depending on the person and circumstance. But what you can say about any ONE person or any ONE circumstance is NOT going to generalize to ALL people across all circumstances.

Because if willpower wasn't abstract and subjective, addiction wouldn't exist--it couldn't if ALL people had full access to reason and decision-making faculties at all times. If it were a FACT, addiction couldn't exist. If it didn't exist at all, addiction would render it a reduction to absurdity because NOBODY would ever overcome an addiction ever. That isn't reality either.

The reality is that some people overcome that--have free will in that situation--while others don't.

John • Waco, Texas • 1 day 1 hr ago

To someone else free will may be an illusion but to you ... it's whatever you choose to believe.

Notaslave • Orlando, Florida • 1 day 12 hrs ago

Only when your belief space is taking the bait will the memeoid accept the download.

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