

Free Will and the Future of Humanity

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This article presents the author's attempt to analyze the argument "manipulation" versus "free will" by the philosopher Derk Pereboom. To demonstrate his position, Pereboom uses the "thought experiment" method, popular in analytical philosophy, and cites four similar cases. For the analysis and criticism of argumentation, developments from logic, a theory of argumentation, and science philosophy are used. An excursion into the history of "free will" was carried out, and the main directions in it were shown: compatibilism and incompatibilism, their differences, and strategies for arguing these positions. The article also examines the importance of free will in the context of the latest modern trends: globalization, COVID-19, civil society, foundations of democracy, a theory of law.

Keywords: free will, determinism, compatibilism, incompatibilism, hard incompatibilism, skepticism, manipulation argument, responsibility

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Introduction

The problem of globalization, the maximum penetration of social networks, and Internet giants into our private life calls into question many civil rights. The presence of our digital copies in search engines allows us to form our virtual image with such an accuracy that could not be achieved by polling even our relatives and friends. Such accurate information will enable us to manipulate our decisions, and outpace our desires, intercepting them at the moment of transition from subconsciousness to consciousness. The situation has become even more difficult due to COVID-19. We are forced to sit in isolation and consume more digital content, leaving our virtual footprint to simulate our images accurately. Hence, we can conclude the importance of the presence or absence of free will in a person because an affirmative or negative answer to the question of whether we have free will or not can lead in the future to a social model in the spirit of totalitarian or authoritarian regimes, in which there will be no place for creativity and human personality. Indeed, creativity is the maximum manifestation of a person's free will as a person in action.

The importance of free will

The importance of free will is difficult to overestimate: almost all the civilization's achievements and humanity's value in the form of laws based on the simple fact that humans have free will. In modern philosophical discussions, the existence of free will is not taken for granted; numerous debates on this issue make one think about two things: is there free will at all, and what to do if there is none? Based on the premise of the absence of free will, some authors nevertheless conclude that it is necessary to preserve existing social and moral norms, allowing for maintaining the political and social balance. In my opinion, this approach is quite dangerous. If we continue to build a civilization on the same foundation as before but admit that this foundation is wrong, this can lead to the collapse of the system as a whole and local crises.

In this article, the author proposes to consider one of the arguments against the existence of free will and to identify some manipulation techniques used in this argument to substantiate this point of view. A popular way to demonstrate your position in the analytic philosophy of mind is through a thought experiment. The whole essence of the method consists of creating a mental model of an alternative world, where one of the keys at the choice of the philosopher — the author of the model) events/properties of our world would be changed. In the course of such a thought experiment, one can trace the changes to which the substitution of a specific event or property would lead. One of the first to formalize this is as a method (method of possible worlds) Saul Aaron Kripke.

In modern analytical philosophy, the most popular direction in studying the theory of consciousness (the mind-body problem), which has some internal directions: personality identity, the hard mind-body problem, the question of free will, etc. This article will discuss the last-mentioned direction — about the study of free will. Such a great interest in consciousness is associated with the rapid development of brain science and parallel analyses of artificial intelligence (self-learning systems/algorithms).

The following can be considered a neutral definition of free will: “the unique ability of persons to exercise control over their conduct in the fullest manner necessary for moral responsibility.” In connection with the formulation of free will through control, it is possible to develop this definition in two directions. First, the concept of the future's unboundedness by one scenario can result in a study of the possibility of alternative ways of making decisions. Secondly, it is necessary to consider the influence of the current events on the act of deciding by the agent of free will, which may call into question his ability to control this activity. Below we will try to outline the main aspects of the attack on compatibilism in the context of the second path.

In modern analytical philosophy, there are several main directions associated with free will: compatibilism and incompatibilism. Representatives of the first direction talk about the possibility of combining determinism with free will and moral responsibility.

Incompatibilism is a community with several main views on this issue: libertarians (who recognize the only free will and does not acknowledge determinism) and philosophers who do not recognize free will and say that causal causality rules everywhere. At this time, most philosophers take a compatibilist position.

Compatibility is one of the reasonably old positions regarding free will, the basic principles formulated by David Hume and John Locke. The possibility of an agent having different decision-making options makes this system as attractive as possible to develop an ontological foundation for most countries' existing democratic structures in Europe and the United States.

When we say free will, we mean some concepts that often contradict each other. The following points can be considered the classical formulation of the problem of free will (McKenna & Coates, 2015):

1. Some agents, at some time, could have acted otherwise than she did.
2. Actions are events.
3. Every event has a cause.
4. If an event is caused, then it is causally determined.
5. If an event is an act that is causally determined, then the agent of the act could not have acted otherwise than in the way that she did.

Looking at these points, you can understand how this or that point of view is formed. Compatibilists cannot accept point No. 5, but incompatibilists have much more opportunity to formulate their positions. A philosopher who is skeptical about free will, on the contrary, will support point No. 5. A hard-core determinist will deny point No. 1. The libertarian will deny points No. 3 and No. 5, as he tends to understand our universe as causally indefinite. These five points can be considered fundamental, but often in modern works, one can find their modifications depending on the author's goals or only partially reproduce them by the author's position.

In the light of research in the neurophysiology of the brain and recent advances in this field, philosophers such as Derk Pereboom — a representative of the skeptic camp of free will — are gaining popularity. One of the most popular arguments in the free will debate in recent years has been the “manipulation argument.” As mentioned above, Pereboom's position is precisely in problematizing the grounds for making decisions.

Skepticism about free will

The manipulation argument is put forward against compatibilism in various modifications. Suppose you trace the history of the idea. In that case, it appears in the middle of the 20th century, according to many researchers' opinions, precisely in the works of Richard Taylor (Taylor, 1963: 46-47) and John Wisdom (Wisdom, 1934: 116). Most of the books related to this topic indicate that they were among the first to introduce this argument into philosophical problems (Locke & Frankfurt, 1975). In our time, Derk Pereboom took him into service against compatibilism.

When constructing his argumentation, Derk Pereboom describes four thought experiments, gradually lowering the plot's fantasy to the world that most closely matches ours. The main idea of this thought experiment is to show the agent's inability to control the consequences of events that occurred in the past, which implies the lack of control of the agent in making its decisions. Professor Plum, Miss White are the common names for characters in Cluedo's detective board game, a murder investigation.

Case 1. A team of neurophysiologists can manipulate the mental state of Professor Plum at any given time using technology like radio control. In this case, they do this by pressing a button just before he begins to reflect on his position. This leads Plum to reason selfishly, which neuroscientists know will deterministically end with the decision to kill Miss White. (Pereboom, 2013: 424)

Case 2. Plum is a perfectly ordinary person, except that at the beginning of his life, neuroscientists programmed him in such a way that he often, though not always, thinks selfishly (as in case 1). As a consequence, in the particular circumstances in which he now finds himself,

Plum is causally determined to initiate a selfish but reasonably responsive decision-making process while having a set of first and second-order desires that result in the decision to kill Miss White (Pereboom, 2013: 425)

Case 3: Plum is an ordinary human being, except that he was causally determined by the rigorous training practices of his household and community in such a way that his reasoning processes are often but not exclusively rationally egoistic (as in Cases 1 and 2). This training took place when he was too young to have the ability to prevent or alter the practices that determined this aspect of his character. This training, together with his particular current circumstances, causally determines him to engage in the egoistic reasons-responsive process of deliberation and to have the first and second-order desires that result in his decision to kill White. Plum has the general ability to regulate his behavior by moral reasons, but in his circumstances, due to the egoistic nature of his reasoning processing, he is causally determined to make his decision. The neural realization of his reasoning process and of his decision is the same as it is in Cases 1 and 2. Here again, his action is not due to an irresistible desire. (Pereboom, 2013: 426)

Case 4: Physicalist determinism is true — everything in the universe is physical, and everything that happens is causally determined by virtue of the past states of the universe in conjunction with the laws of nature. Plum is an ordinary human being, raised in normal circumstances, and again his reasoning processes are frequently but not exclusively egoistic (as in Cases 1-3). His decision to kill White results from his reasons-responsive deliberation process and he has the specified first and second-order desires. The neural realization of his reasoning process and decision is just as it is in Cases 1-3. Again, he has the general ability to grasp, apply, and regulate his behavior by moral reasons, and it is not due to an irresistible desire that he kills White (Pereboom, 2013: 426-427)

If we represent this as an argument, then we get the following:

1. Any agent who acts A due to manipulation is not free and does not bear moral responsibility for action A, although all the conditions of moral responsibility put forward by compatibilists can be met.

2. Any agent determined to commit A does not differ from the agent achieving A due to manipulation in any important aspect.

Consequently:

3. Any agent determined to commit A is not free and is not morally responsible for A.

As we can see, this is modified classical reasoning with a bias towards the skeptical position of incompatibilists.

The neutral definition of determinism reads: “the facts of the past, in conjunction with the laws of nature, entail every truth about the future.” (McKenna & Coates, 2015) Let us try to figure out what is the connection between determinism and manipulation. Manipulation occurs under two conditions: the will of the manipulator and the means of manipulation. When we draw an analogy with determinism, it turns out that in terms of its functions, determinism is intuitively more like a means of manipulation than manipulation in general. There is no need to talk about the relevance of replacing concepts: the concepts do not entirely coincide in content and volume, which makes such a replacement not identical. These two words from different linguistic practices: “manipulation” is more suitable for agents who take part in psychological and social events, and “determinism” is associated with areas of knowledge where accurate calculation is necessary, and we can talk about some predictability (Barnhill, 2014; Hoefer, 2015; Woodward, 2016).

Pereboom knows about two components of manipulation and the importance of the

manipulator's will in this act. Therefore, he proposes replacing the agent with a random/spontaneous machine that does not have a thinking creator. In the first two cases, in place of neuroscientists with a beacon and scientists who change DNA in the distant past, there must be an automatic machine that will perform the same role but which has no will. In my opinion, this is a complex and opaque move that only complicates the thought experiment. After all, with the introduction of such a machine, it is not clear why Plum should kill Miss White. The presence of a device in place of the subject does not level the target but only automates it and makes the manipulation more powerful. If scientists can fall asleep, forget, spill coffee on themselves while Plum and White communicate, then the machine will not miss this moment.

Even if we emphasize the "suddenness" or random generation of this machine, its emergence from nowhere, then this very possibility casts doubt on the concepts of "determinism," "law of nature," and causality in general, at least within the world in which we discuss this.

It is typical for thought experiments (for most of them) to change someone of the world's parameters so that it is easier to track the changes made by it. The substitution of a random machine for neuroscientists introduces another additional parameter that complicates the ability to conclude from the existing premises and leads to the loss of an intuitive sense of clarity and plausibility of the situation in cases 1-2.

Derk Pereboom pursued the goal of proving that an agent cannot make decisions because the forces of nature and the consequences of decisions in adopting which he did not participate are acting on him. Free will, in this case, should be an open concept that does not indicate anything. In my opinion, this criticism can be rephrased as follows: "You cannot control the universe, so you have no free will." Suppose this argument is interpreted in this way. In that case, only the god who created this world can have free will or at least the god who creates random machines that can implant a radio-controlled chip into the human brain and force them to kill other people while disrupting the causal connection (Pereboom, 2014).

Because the agent in these cases was an ordinary person who does not have omnipotence, then the criteria for the boundaries within which a person can act is infinitely less than that of a god with omnipotence. There is an apparent discrepancy between the capabilities of these two agents. Also, the agent "god" and the agent "man" to the world is different: the first is its creator, which speaks of his external relationship to the world; the second is a participant in this world who cannot go beyond its borders. For an agent like a human, criteria should be adopted that are consistent with real possibilities, preventing going to extremes when developing such thought experiments.

Another argument in favor of skepticism with free will is, "The decisions made cause physical events in the brain and the rest of the body, and such events, according to these theories, are governed by the laws of physics." Pereboom points out the impossibility of substantiating the thesis of free will because physics laws are deterministic, and no chance or different scenarios are derived from them. He appeals to the reductionism of all processes to the physical law and the possibility of deriving all high-level states from them.

In connection with the above, I would like to refer to the article by Eric Scerri and Lee McIntyre (Scerri & McIntyre, 1997), which I will briefly retell below. The scientific picture of the world implies the reducibility of all processes to physical ones. In other words, any high-level state can be described through the laws of physics. It may well take many hundreds of pages, but theoretically, it is possible. This article provides examples of the impossibility of constructing such formulations for the closest science to physics, namely chemistry. Descriptions through physical laws are likely only for the first chemical elements. There is

also the problem of “three bodies,” which makes it impossible to describe more complex relationships in chemical reactions. The conclusions drawn from this article are as follows: while reductionism can only be spoken of as a scientific attitude, but not as a fact. Therefore, an appeal to physics laws can be considered only as a strong intuition, but not as a fact that does not require proof.

Conclusions

This thought experiment enables us to outline the range of problems discussed in the concept of free will. Each example gives us more opportunities to clarify this concept and define its content and scope more precisely. Often, the most unrealistic standards are used to show how this concept can work for such ideas. The skepticism of such a complex concept as free will is understandable. However, to say that it is empty is also wrong. After all, if we question this concept, then next to it, the responsibility for making decisions will be in question. This is already pulling the destruction of the foundations of law that have been going on from the Roman Republic's times to the present day. As I wrote in the introduction, the issue of free will is pressing. The main thing is to understand, in connection with the acceleration of life and the automation of many processes, where exactly are the boundaries of our life. We can feel responsible for our decisions and exercise our free will to the fullest.

In this article, the author analyzed the argumentation and gave its main flaws. To use such a method as “analogy,” it is necessary to understand what the comparison is based on and what criteria will pass. Analysis of the concepts of “manipulation” and “determinism” showed no coincidence in content and meaning, which are included in the standard definitions of these terms. For better argumentation, it is necessary to give them a different explanation. Another question will arise: to whom is this argumentation directed if the new definition radically differs from the original one?

The next point in criticism is the relevance of concepts. Pereboom proceeds from a complaint of compatibilism through the “source of decision-making” and speaks of the impossibility of controlling events that were even before the agent's appearance — citing examples 1-3, which show the impossibility of establishing full control over the reasons that act on the agent. “You cannot control the Universe, so you have no free will,” — this is the conclusion I made while analyzing the argumentation. This implies the position of “God,” who has all the completeness of knowledge and the ability to calculate all possible options. Modern science declares only the desire to accumulate knowledge but does not speak of the end of this process. After all, the question was about free will and not about omniscience and omnipotence, which is possible only in a possible world where gods live. The position of “God” implies a different attitude to the world: often, he takes an external place and the agent in experiments — an internal one (Kan, 1996; Mele, 2006).

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