

# Princeton Philosophical Society: Free Will and Its Critics

Free will: there are many definitions, but all tend to concern themselves with what aspect of agency is required for moral responsibility

- ▶ Regulative control: in acting, a person could have acted otherwise
- ▶ Guidance control: a person guides his actions through intent even if he couldn't have acted otherwise

Two central epistemological theories:

- ▶ Determinism: "given a specified way things are at a time  $t$ , the way things go thereafter is fixed as a matter of natural law"
- ▶ Indeterminism: some events are randomly (or probabilistically) generated, ungoverned by any set of causes

A simple argument for the strict unprovability of either:

1. In order to establish that either determinism or indeterminism is true, we must have proven knowledge of reality
2. We cannot have proven knowledge of reality
3. Therefore we cannot ever prove determinism or indeterminism

Evidence of a sort in favor of each:

1. Determinism: at the macroscopic level of thought and action, we have experimental evidence that shows reproducibility of results given the same starting conditions
2. Indeterminism: nearly every current theory of physics (including simple Newtonian physics) admits conditions where indeterminism is true

If you accept regulative control as a necessary part of free will, it seems impossible either way:

1. Free will requires that given an act  $A$ , the agent could have acted otherwise
2. Indeterminate actions happen randomly and without intent or control
3. Therefore indeterminism and free will are incompatible
4. Determinate actions are fixed and unchangeable
5. Therefore determinism is incompatible with free will

Compatibilism: the doctrine that free will is fully reconcilable with a deterministic world; compatibilists argue that regulative control is unnecessary and moral responsibility should only require guidance control

The tool argument: suppose a biologist (the 'designer') takes a normal person (the 'tool') into his lab and puts neural implants into his brain. These implants give an electrochemical stimulus to the tool such that the designer can control exactly what the tool wants and feels. If the designer presses button  $A$ , the tool will have a strong desire to throw himself off a bridge. When the tool thinks and acts as the designer triggers, can he be held morally responsible for what he does? What does this imply about 'guidance control'? How is his situation different from any of ours, with the agent of programming for us simply being evolution or a deity or any other such source?

A version of Kant's phenomenal defense of free will: the notion that we have free will is part of the basic cognitive lens with which we view the world; arguments over the metaphysical existence of free will are irrelevant, because we have no real choice but to act and believe as if free will does exist