

## Block V: Videos 24 through 25 (Free Will and Determinism)

I have noticed that even people who claim everything is predetermined and that we can do nothing to change it, look before they cross the road.  
-Steven Hawking

**Introduction:** This topic is near and dear to me, as the concept of free will was once my favorite piece of evidence supporting the existence of Jehovah. I am not saying that there are not other credible indications for the existence of Jehovah, only that this was the one that once resonated the most with me. Ironically, it was in critiquing this series that my emphasis moved from free will to imagination (which will be covered in the next block). My argument for free will did not change, but I have since come to look at free will as a logical extension of imagination.

If one remembers what I said in **video 22**, one already has an idea of how strongly free will implies Jehovah, while determinism implies naturalism (**Topic IV.D.5.ii**). These concepts will come up again and again, especially in **Block VII (Morality)**. It is very important to remember the concepts presented here, as the series freely alternates between free will and determinism as it suits the needs of the lesson at hand. Depending on what one believes about these two topics, many ideas presented later may be found unbelievable.

**A) Determinism:** Hank does a good job describing hard determinism and its implications at min 7:53 of **video 24**. But while arguing for determinism between min 4:16 and 7:53, he asks the questions he should have been asking when talking about Jehovah in **Block II**. While I think Hank takes a round about way in talking about what determinism really is, I don't disagree with what he eventually arrives at. Free will, however, is another matter. I do want to point out that, in direct opposition to what Hank said in **video 24** at min 8:56, there is something about determinism that invariably contradicts itself. Determinism claims that all choice, hence all belief, is illusory. This would include belief in determinism itself (more in **Topic D.1.ii**). It is generally accepted in philosophy that no theory can contradict itself (such as scientism, **Topic I.C.8.iii**). Perhaps they are limited by available words, and determinists will eventually find the language they need. But until then, I feel their credibility is rather weak, at least when taking an extreme position on the matter. To be clear, I accept that nature will act in a deterministic manner when left alone. Where determinists and I part is that I do not believe nature is always left alone.

**B) Free Will:** To me, the real problem in this block and every other discussion I have seen concerning free will is how to *define* free will. I agree that libertarian free will, as defined by using the Principal of Alternate Possibilities in **video 24**, is an indefensible position. I won't try to save it. Any such effort along this line must either result in chaos or randomness (which may be free, but is not willful) or, as both videos show, ultimately finds a deterministic origin. But while I agree free will is hard to demonstrate, I do believe it is not as hard as suggested. Sometimes, one has to first understand what something is *not* in order to understand what it *is*.

But before I go further, I need to establish the context in which free will happens. We clearly live in a reality that has deterministic features, otherwise science would not work. Any concept of free will must accept this part of reality. This fact is ignored in these videos, yet I think it is absolutely essential to understanding free will in a meaningful way. What always seems to be forgotten about determinism is that whenever two opposing forces act on an object, the stronger force always wins. I do not fly through the air because the force of gravity (which pulls me down) is stronger than the centrifugal force trying to fling me off the spinning Earth. Likewise, I do not sink into the ground

because the matrix of the soil I stand on creates more resistance than gravity can overcome. Keeping this in mind, let us move from physical "force" to mental "impulse."

For determinists, life will always act on the strongest impulse, just like a molecule will be acted upon by the strongest force. I often watch my dog come into the house. Sometimes she chooses to eat, and sometimes she chooses to lie down. The deterministic explanation is that whichever impulse is strongest in her at that time, weariness or hunger, determines what she chooses. By having a will, she can influence the environment around her, but her will is determined by her instinct and experiences. She has a will, but it is not free.

But a human, with free will, may choose to eat before going to bed even if weariness is overwhelming and no real hunger is felt. A determinist will correctly suggest that our past experience lets us know that a temporary delay in sleeping now will prevent a major hunger later. But that is beside my point. Of course there will be a reason for delaying the rest. If there were no reason for the act, then it would not be an act of free will, but an act of randomness or chaos. My point is that humans can choose to act on an impulse that was not necessarily the strongest one. This is my idea of free will, that one has the freedom to act on lesser impulses.

This idea does not suggest that one cannot give into the stronger impulse, only that one could and sometimes does. Addictions, coercion, emotions, mental and physical "energy levels," and many other factors may inhibit or even deny free will, and one may be manipulated or fooled into thinking one did act on free will. In **video 25**, and in several videos elsewhere, we will see these considerations come up.

**C) The Question of Jehovah:** Hank does me a wonderful, albeit unintended, favor for my defense of Jehovah. In min 4:16 of **video 24**, he asks the question of where free will comes from. It clearly cannot come from our materialistic universe. Several times in this series, Hank seems to be on the threshold of becoming a theist, and this is perhaps the closest he actually comes to doing so. If only he would answer his own question. If we indeed have free will, then it must be extra-natural as nature can only support determinism (in his book *On Miracles*, C.S. Lewis defined "natural" as what happens when free will is not imposed on nature). Unfortunately, Hank does not answer this question. But the unspoken point here is that an atheistic outlook must needs be deterministic.

#### **D) Video Block V (Free Will and Determinism):**

**1) Video 24 (Determinism vs Free Will):** If this video causes *deja-vu*, you are not imagining things. This is basically a rehash of the arguments made against Saint Aquinas in **video 10**: the Infinite Regress versus Ultimate Causation problem. In that video, if one remembers, ultimate causation was considered to be what "put the nails in the coffin" for Saint Aquinas. It is therefore with irony that an ultimate causation argument is used here to explain determinism in the form of reductionism (min 5:44), while at the same time still believing in infinite regress because whatever caused this cause was likewise caused by something else.

**i) Opening Shot:** Right from the introduction, we see the story of Oedipus being presented. While I do agree that this epic does a great job explaining how we must respond to fate, the problem is that this video is not about fate, but rather free will. I think it might have been better used as the Thought Bubble for the next video. Regardless of whether it would have helped the next video or not, it only adds confusion here. This is because fate is not about either determinism or free will by themselves, but rather how the two come together. Fate shows how certain things must happen (the

deterministic aspect) that free will cannot overcome. Therefore, fate becomes a redundant term if free will is already removed.

**ii) In Defense of Free Will:** To me, one of the greatest problems in accepting determinism, other than my faith in Jehovah, is how poorly determinists actually present their arguments. Their arguments tend to go around in circles, and invariably use words that seem to contradict each other (like implying reductionism in infinite regress). And remember, to say one believes in determinism actually *is* a contradiction, as one is a determinist by compulsion, not by choice.

We also must remember that while determinism is ultimately an infinite regress argument, determinists oftentimes only go a couple steps back. We are told that the ball flies through the air because the bat hit it. But why did the bat hit it? The answer is because the batter swung at it. But why did the batter swing at it? The determinist can only say at this time that the "mind" is too complicated to understand to give any other answer with certainty. The determinist has to admit he doesn't know why the batter swung, but assures us that, if we continue looking, then we will eventually find out why. This sounds like a "promissory note" to me, and in **video 22** Hank claimed such things were rather weak arguments.

**iii) Scientism:** Take note of Hank's appeal to science for a philosophical theory (min 6:13). Science is not philosophy (as we saw in **video 8**). Science is empirical, and, as I have often mentioned, this entire series has been heavily rationalistic. I have often demonstrated throughout the series that science (especially cosmology) is actually providing more and more evidence that suggests Jehovah is the more credible solution (intelligent design, **Topic II.F.3.i**) than classic materialism. Here we see Hank, at best, failing to be consistent in explaining theories. This is an example of the "math problem" I warned of in **Topic I.A.1**.

**iv) Oxymoron:** The argument that actions can be determined by belief, desire and temperament (min 6:46) is interesting to me. Where does belief come in when taking a deterministic position? A belief can be described as a *choice* on what the truth might be in the absence of *conclusive* evidence. In the deterministic theory, belief is illusionary. Therefore, it is seeking to explain itself using inappropriate terms. This is another example of determinists being unable to explain their position without contradicting their fundamental "belief."

**v) Stronger Faith:** While this is not the place to go into a full explanation, I just want to point out that one should see just how much more faith one needs in order to be an atheist than a theist (a Christian in particular). Cosmologists struggle to find a way around intelligent design (talked about in **Topic II.F.3.i**). Without an ultimate value to compare anything else with, one ultimately embraces the absurd as defined in **video 16** (which was so important for **Block IV (Essence)**). We are not sure if the mind can exist, much less how it interacts with our body (**video 22**). In this video, Hank admits how hard it is to give up the idea of free will, and this struggle continues in the next video. All these problems (and quite a few more that are not discussed in the series at all, such as Planck's Law) stem from assuming an infinite regress of cause and effect.

But if infinite regress is *not* true (and science is coming up with more and more empirical evidence that supports this idea), then we open up Jehovah as the ultimate causation for both the material and for the mind. Cosmologists can now get past intelligent design, absurdity no longer exists, and free will is explained as well as its connection to the material.

And when one considers, in the absence of empirical evidence, that there is no rational argument suggesting infinite regress is superior to ultimate causation, we see that the two are a draw. After all, if every effect has a cause, and if we look at time, space and matter as effects, then something that is not time, space or matter must have caused it. And if we find a place where time and space do not exist, then we must, by definition, have an ultimate causation in the strictest, literal sense.

In the end, while there is no rational reason to suggest infinite regress over ultimate causation, there is plenty of empirical evidence pointing to ultimate causation. This alone does not prove Jehovah exists, but it takes a lot more faith to not believe in Him than to believe when all things are truly considered.

**vi) Parting Shot:** At min 1:58, we are told that libertarian free will is compatible with socialism. In the hundred plus years in which dozens of socialist states have existed, not one is known for allowing its citizens to act as they please. While I appreciate his legitimate need to differentiate the political definition of libertarian from the philosophical, I feel Hank should be more careful in doing so.

**2) Video 25 (Compatibilism):** I already defined my ideas of compatibilism in **Topic B**, so I won't be adding too much here. Instead, I will comment on what is said in the video.

This video really didn't present anything new, but rather kept the free will vs. determinism argument going in a circle. Any attempt to find some sign of free will with an exclusively materialistic view of the universe must always revert to determinism. The so-called "soft determinism" is still determinism; all it really did was move the process from the physical to the mental. When one considers "fate" (the diving board example), there wasn't even an impulse to act by the one who got wet. One was sent into motion by a completely separate entity.

**i) Free Will:** Nothing presented in this video is in conflict with my ideas concerning free will. In the case of the pedophile with a tumor, his internal problems may have created an impulse so strong that it was practically impossible to resist. But this is really a distraction. He was described as being horrified at what he did, yet no testimony is provided that he sought any help before being caught. Hank seems to agree with me on this point, considering a couple of other examples at the end of the video (getting drunk and sneezing on food). Hank's logic points out that one could avoid drinking in the first place or turn away for a sneeze. If we apply this line of reasoning to the pedophile, he might have saved his stepdaughter by seeking help before it was too late.

**ii) Frankfurt Cases:** What disturbs me in this video is the attempt to complicate what should have been a straightforward matter. The so-called Frankfurt Cases only demonstrate situations where free will is denied through manipulation. Just like my pet dog example (**Topic B**), these people still had a will (they manipulated nature), but it was not free. Just because one is satisfied with the result and/or is ignorant of being manipulated does not mean they exercised free will. But also note that this denial of free will is not a natural thing, but the result of someone else imposing their free will on others.

**iii) Culpability:** The video does bring up the concept of culpability (although it never uses that word), but it demonstrates a very poor grasp of this concept. It is true that one normally has a choice to drink, and therefore is still culpable for actions taken while drunk. It is also almost certainly true that the pedophile had a chance to talk to others about his strange new urges before he attacked his stepdaughter. But here is where the lack of "value" once again haunts the teachings of this video.

In most of this video, we find this inability to find value as a stumbling block. We are trying to look at the universe as either true or untrue, therefore it is difficult to assign gradations of truth or importance. Specifically for this video: we have different levels of control over our free will depending on various factors. At the end of the video, Hank finally breaks free of that trap by simply stating that some things we have control over while others we don't.

**iv) Parting Shot:** I do wish we learned more about Patricia Churchland, but I suppose I should be glad she was mentioned at all. Her idea of control is not that much different than what I suggested in **Topic B**. From what I do know of her, she is an atheist, but is questioning the philosophical conclusions of contemporary times. Perhaps her challenging the current philosophical views will lead future generations of philosophers back to Christian teachings, and the argument against Saint Aquinas (**videos 10 and 11**) will come full circle. Time will tell.

Raymond Mulholland

Original Publication Date: 2 September 2022

video 24 link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vCGtkDzELAI>

video 25 link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KETTtiprINU&t=466s>