

Free Will, Science and Nature

Being in the image of God the human individual possesses the dignity of a person, who is not just something, but someone. He is capable of self-knowledge, of self-possession and of freely giving himself and entering into communion with other persons. And he is called by grace to a covenant with his Creator, to offer him a response of faith and love that no other creature can give in his stead.

-Catechism of the Catholic Church #357

Science tells us that all properties ultimately come from atoms, and that all events arise from how bodies interact with each other based on the laws of physics (which I also call the laws of nature, as for this document they are the same).

We are told that every atom exerts some influence on every other atom (mostly, but not exclusively, from gravity and magnetism) and that the strength of the influence is largely based on proximity. In theory, if 1) the vector, energy level and location of every atom in the universe were perfectly known, 2) all influences on every atom were perfectly understood, and 3) a supercomputer were powerful enough to process all this information, then the exact location, energy level and vector of any given atom at any given time (future or past) could be predicted. To say otherwise would suggest that the laws of nature as we know them are wrong.

So, if we hold that the behaviors of all atoms are predictable within the laws of physics and nature, then we can predict when two or more atoms will combine to form a molecule, and when molecules will combine with other bodies to form even bigger molecules. Since these molecules are comprised of atoms, they also must obey the laws of nature as other bodies influence them. Therefore, their locations, energy levels and vectors must also be predictable.

At some point, a group of very special molecules clump together and form a cell, and life has been created. I'm not interested in the exact process on how this happens, how long this takes to happen or how likely it is to happen, only that it would have been predictable if a perfect understanding of the particles coming out of the Big Bang could be known. Furthermore, whatever complex actions take place within the cell must still conform to the predictable laws of nature because the cell can't have any property that doesn't come from the atoms that compose it. From here, the early cells reproduce, mutate, and combine to form multi-cellular life. Further mutation allows some cells to specialize, forming tissues and organs. Life becomes more and more complex. But, no matter how complex life becomes, it must still obey the laws of nature because it is ultimately a group of atoms. This is basically my version of Laplace's Demon (written in 1814), and is the ultimate explanation for a philosophy known as Determinism: the idea that everything that happens was determined by events that lead up to it. I don't think many people will disagree with this statement, but there is an implication to this that is not so obvious (kudos to those who saw it coming).

If I chance to see a dog walking in my neighbor's yard, then one of two things must be true about the universe. The first possibility is that this observation I see was predestined and predictable the moment the Big Bang happened. I was not in a position to see my neighbor's dog because I willed myself to do it, I was there because the 14 billion year dance of atoms compelled me to be there. The other possibility is that a series of choices I made through Free Will brought me to the vantage point where I saw the dog.

The laws of physics, as we know them, do account for the first possibility, but not the second. If one believes in the second possibility, then Naturalism has a crisis. Either Free Will is outside the laws of physics (which is contrary to the very premise of Naturalism) or the laws of physics as we know them are grossly incomplete. If it is indeed possible for nature to provide Free Will, then some new property of atoms needs to be identified, as well as a theory (or, most likely, a series of theories) explaining why this property only manifests itself in cells and not other collections of molecules. Even more theories must then be made to explain why Free Will is so conspicuously prevalent in humans as opposed to other forms of cellular life.

In contrast, the Jewish/Christian concept of a God is one who is willful, who created a nature capable of adapting to impositions made by Free Will and who gave humans (and, to a lesser extent, possibly to animals) Free Will. This is a core belief that extends at least 3,400 years ago, has remained unchanged and yet is still compatible with the modern concepts of the laws of physics. The Jewish/Christian theory has therefore shown to be both simple and holistic.

Occam's Razor (when two theories are in competition to each other, chose the more simpler one unless compelling reason exists otherwise), therefore, only favors Naturalism if Free Will does not exist. The more effort Naturalists make in trying to explain Free Will without God, the more complex Naturalism becomes, and the more Occam's Razor points to the Supernatural. In all fairness to Naturalists, a growing acceptance of Determinism has taken root. I'll talk about the implications of Determinism as I go along.

There was a scorpion who came to a river he needed to cross. He saw a turtle and asked the turtle to carry him across the river. The turtle said, "No, because you will sting me and I'll die." The scorpion responded, "Why would I do that? If you die, I will drown and die also." Seeing the logic, the turtle agreed and allowed the scorpion on his back. Halfway across, the scorpion stung the turtle. As the turtle was dying, he asked, "Why did you do that? Now we will both die!" "I can't help it," said the scorpion, "It's in my nature."
-author unknown

I often see my dog come in through the doggy-door and either stop at the food bowl to eat, or walk past it to a pillow to lie down. Sometimes, after she rests for a bit, she goes back to eat. Every now and then, she may only lie down for a few seconds before getting right back up and eating! This is because she is acting in response to the signals her body is sending to her brain. If the strongest message is hunger, then her impulse is to eat. If the strongest message is tiredness, then her impulse is to lie down. In the amusing case of her lying down just long enough to get comfortable before she gets back up again, the two signals were nearly the same. The two or three seconds of rest was all it took for the hunger signal to be stronger. Whatever intelligence science eventually assigns to dogs, this is the kind of behavior one would expect a life form to do in the Deterministic (or Natural) sense. The natural impulses necessary for the dog's health are competing with each other and are resolved by whichever signal (hunger or weariness) is stronger at the moment.

A human, on the other hand, may come home both hungry and tired. In many cases, he will realize that it is more economical to eat first and then go lie down, as a temporary delay in rest in order to eat first will soon result in both impulses being satisfied. This may be even if the sleep impulse is much stronger than the hunger. Now, here is where skeptics might say that such a behavior could still

be explained by education. I would agree if that was all there was to it. But the man may decide for various other reasons to either not eat (perhaps he wants to lose weight) and/or not rest (perhaps he needs to study for a test). The point is that, for humans anyway, things can get very complicated very quickly.

When in danger (especially against man-made threats), animals often times make a deadly choice out of impulse because that particular danger is so rare that the proper response has not been imprinted into their DNA. Yet humans (which have had so much less time to evolve) have shown an incredible ability to recognize and avoid traps much more subtle than can ever be found in nature. Considering how little time man has been on this Earth compared to other species, the instinct (i.e.-DNA) argument falls apart at least on this aspect. Education (experience) goes a long way in addressing this issue, but I can't see how it *completely* satisfies this issue either.

There are a great many examples of people succeeding with little or no education. Even among the highly learned, what separates the "intelligent" from the "intellectual giants" is a certain inspiration that was not shared by all. In his book *It Doesn't Take a Hero*, Norman Schwarzkopf repeatedly speaks of his early career in the army, when he was sent to advise a South Vietnamese commander who had never been to a military school. Yet Schwarzkopf, who master minded one of the most brilliant military campaigns in world history and who retired as four star general, claims that this officer was the greatest military strategist he had ever met.

Furthermore, it is difficult to imagine these alternative behaviors must always be instinctual or learned on the observation that different people often act in different ways even if they seem to have similar backgrounds. Children within the same family most often have very different personalities, despite having similar genetics and upbringing. But if education and genetic based instinct are taken to be true, then one would expect similar responses to similar influences as is common with other animals. There is also a bit of a paradox if one takes time to think about it. One could say that Evolution gave a trait to humans that allow us to resist certain impulses for a better future outcome. But this theory would also suggest that this wanting would itself be a pleasant experience instead of the unpleasant one it invariably is. Anyone who has struggled to not act on impulse to buy something seen in a store, the impulse so strong one feels it in his whole body, should be skeptical of not having a Free Will, even if they gave into the urge in the end. The ability to debate the merits of the purchase instead of simply picking it up suggests Free Will.

Finally, Determinism is a paradox all its own. To claim to be a Determinist must mean one has a belief in Determinism. Yet a belief must mean there is the possibility to believe in something else, hence there is a choice to be made. And a choice means there must be Free Will. And I am not just playing word games, I've yet to hear an argument by Determinists that doesn't include the word "should." If one is compelled to do something, then there is no "should." If one does it, then it is because they were compelled to do it, not because they decided they should. Arguments made by Determinists invariably become circular arguments and do more to confuse than to clarify.

When trying to explain Determinism, Naturalism keeps finding paradox after paradox after paradox. Every new "solution" makes Determinism more complex and also opens up another series of questions. Furthermore, the more we focus on explaining human behavior, the further we get from understanding behavior in other animals, making the discussion less holistic. The Jewish/Christian faith remains simple: man is different from other animals simply because God made him to lord over the rest. The difference between man and animals remains part of the same natural order God set up, so it is also holistic with all of creation.

If God annihilates or creates or deflects a unit of matter He has created a new situation at that point. Immediately all Nature domiciles this new situation, makes it at home in her realm, adapts all other events to it. It finds itself conforming to all the laws [of Nature].

-C.S. Lewis *Miracles* Chapter 8 ("Miracles and the Laws of Nature")

Now, we clearly live in the natural universe; I am not attempting to deny that. But the question may come up as to how Free Will and Reason, if not part of nature, can exist in opposition to nature.

Simply put, nature is the perfect hostess. She can accept anyone new to the party seamlessly and instantly. She will not miss a beat, and every other member of the party will be equally and perfectly attended to at every moment. A bowling ball, sitting on the ground, will most likely never make it to the top of a tower by nature. But if man, imposing his Free Will upon nature, takes this same bowling ball to the top of the tower, then nature responds by giving the ball potential energy. Should man, again of his own Free Will, drop the ball so that it lands in its original starting place, the ball will return perfectly to its original state by converting the potential energy into kinetic energy, and then passing the kinetic energy to its landing spot (causing a slight change in the landing spot, but such a detail is not necessary for this demonstration).

Nature cannot be the *cause* of Free Will or Reason, but nature is perfectly capable of accepting the *effects* of Free Will and Reason. The Jewish/Christian explanation for Free Will and Reason is simple because it requires no change in the understanding of nature, and is holistic in the sense that it works perfectly with nature.

Raymond Mulholland
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