

The Desirability of Free Will: The Value of the Concept Regardless of Its Existence

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ABSTRACT

Free will is often regarded as being desirable by laypersons, especially when considering determinism as an alternative. However, this dichotomous thinking excludes a number of compatibilist alternatives, which may feature types of free will that could still be regarded as being desirable. Compatibilism, the co-existence of free will and determinism, includes the thoughts of David Hume. Hume defines free will as being an impression of having free will in a causally determined world. This paper investigates the reasons both laypeople and free will theorists have for desiring free will. This paper also develops a case for why David Hume's compatibilist type of free will, which is defined as the impression of free will, and how it can accommodate those reasons more effectively than can libertarian free will. The paper concludes that Humean free will is truly superior in this regard because the existence of an impression of free will can be easily determined to be true while the existence of libertarian free will remains uncertain.

Keywords: Arpaly, Compatibilism, Conscious Will, Determinism, Free Will, Hume, Kane, Significance of Free Will

INTRODUCTION

While free will theorists attribute the value and the resulting desirability of free will to a number of reasons, laypersons may value and desire free will for a variety of other reasons. Free will theorists may provide reasons that follow a technical, interdisciplinary form of thought, but laypersons probably rely on their intuitions to explain the value of the concept. Intuitions such as the desire to have control over one's life, the desire to have dignity or self-worth, and the wish for a comfortable, natural state of being rather than one that is a hindrance, are all potential responses to the question "Why is free will desirable?" Regardless of the specific reasons people value free will, it seems as though many are attracted to the idea. Some,

like philosopher David Hume, even seek to maintain the concept of free will, after claiming libertarian free will to be illusory by changing the definition of it. In order to be as critical and accurate as possible, I plan to focus on free will of the Humean type rather than of a libertarian type because the argument of the concept's actual existence is potentially irrelevant to the question being considered. In this paper I will discuss the results of investigating both philosophical and pedestrian perspectives on the desirability of Humean free will and argue that Humean free will can more effectively accommodate the reasons people desire the concept than can libertarian free will.

HUMEAN FREE WILL

In his essay *Of liberty and necessity*, David Hume develops a compatibilist account of free will. He begins by defining free will as being "the internal impression we feel and are conscious of, when we knowingly give rise to any new motion of our body, or new perception of our mind" (Hume 1739, 76). Essentially, this Humean interpretation considers free will to be a mere conscious feeling or impression of making free choices that are either physically or mentally actualized in the form of actions or thoughts. Since Hume regards free will to be an illusory concept in this manner, he is retroactively categorized as a compatibilist.

The illusory Humean free will is compatible with the kind of causal determinism Hume describes in his essay. According to Hume, the "constant union," or the predictable, regular connection, between objects is promising evidence for objects to operate in a necessary way. If we can empirically witness this predictable connection of an inferred cause and effect, then we should be comfortable with considering objects as being causally determined (Hume 1739, 77). Hume extends this idea of necessary causality to the actions and thoughts of human beings.

While it may not always be apparent, the actions and even thoughts of human beings are subject to causal necessity, much like objects we observe. We may admit with ease that laws of nature produce necessary effects from particular causes, but we have difficulty believing that the contents of our minds and emotions operate similarly. Hume argues that the connections between products of the mind, as well as emotion, and physical causes and effects are closer than we might believe. We understand that infants eventually become adults, as they are casually connected in a physical manner from being one continuous body. It would be absurd to expect an infant to raise three hundred pounds of weight, just as it would be absurd to

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expect an infant to partake in a form of philosophical reasoning as I am currently (Hume 1739, 78). With this example, Hume shows that as the infant necessarily grows physically, as an effect, the infant acquires advanced cognitive abilities, thus connecting the physical cause to an effect on the mind. If "like causes... produce like effects," then physical causes of many kinds can influence our minds and emotions, which in turn can influence effects of either kind (Hume 1739, 78). In a manner of speaking, both kinds of causes and effects operate similarly in the same system of causal necessity, making human actions and thoughts subject to determinism.

Once Hume establishes the causal necessity of human actions and thoughts, he makes a case for necessity itself being the source for moral responsibility based on its causal quality. Hume, as a result, challenges the libertarian perspective that the concept of free will is the foundation for assessing agents' moral responsibility. Since libertarians are incompatibilists, they are required by definition to reject the causal determinism Hume had constructed. If causal determinism is not true, then there is no connection between actions and their actors. This, for Hume, would render the actor not accountable for any actions (Hume 1739, 85). While the actions themselves may be considered bad or good, no one could be blamed or praised for the actions because they are not causally connected to anyone, assuming that causal determinism is not true. In this way, Hume argues for the compatibility between determinism and moral responsibility.

However, the construction of the compatibility between determinism and moral responsibility does not explain the reason Hume provided an alternative definition of free will. Why would Hume invest in changing the definition of free will to maintain the concept in a world he concluded was determined? I believe that one reason is because Hume, like many others, wanted free will regardless of its potential use to justify moral responsibility.

REASONS FOR DESIRING FREE WILL

It has been made clear by Hume that determinism can be compatible with, or rather necessary for moral responsibility. Therefore, if not to justify moral responsibility, what other reasons would compel people to desire and defend free will, particularly one of the Humean type? Robert Kane, Nomy Arpaly, and Daniel Wegner are a few thinkers who mention details relevant to the kinds of reasons people desire free will of both the libertarian and Humean type. Among their reasons are desires for ideal agency, individuality, dignity, autonomy, creativity, desert, and the specific

libertarian desire for real control and choice. However, these reasons, with the exception of the desire for genuine control, can exist apart from the libertarian concept of free will being true. I aim to show, with the help from the work of modern thinkers, how the reasons for desiring free will, upon examination, are actually more meaningful and attainable when considered from a Humean perspective on the concept.

As a libertarian, Robert Kane faces a similar difficulty of not being able to separate a particular reason for desiring free will from the notion of "real" or "genuine" free will being intrinsically desirable. Kane provides numerous amounts of reasons for why people, both common and philosophically trained, would desire free will (Kane 1996, 79–80). However, in the hope of convincing his audience to accept his libertarian perspective of ultimate responsibility, he outlines at the start what ultimate responsibility entails and asks the question of desirability of free will based on ultimate responsibility.

Kane's ultimate responsibility describes the type of free will that allows an agent to have sole "sole authorship" or "underived origination" for their actions (Kane 1996, 79). This means that actions are traceable to and only up to the agents who willingly performed those actions and that those actions could not have been influenced by part of the agent for which the agent themselves were not responsible. It may be obvious now that this is a form of absolute freedom, which Kane advertises as being desirable for a variety of reasons. Although Kane explains why absolute freedom is worth wanting for specific reasons, he acknowledges the compatibilist argument for why ultimate responsibility is not necessary for people to desire free will (Kane 1996, 89–90).

Both incompatibilists and compatibilists will agree that the following are very likely reasons to desire free will: creativity, individuality, desert, autonomy, dignity, love, friendship, etc. (Kane 1996, 80). However, incompatibilists would argue simultaneously for the existence of free will and how the existence is significant to each reason having the quality of being desirable. Without the notion of the concept's existence, the feature in question fails to be a reason for the desirability of free will. For example, creativity is only desirable to an incompatibilist like Kane if the creativity is "genuine" (Kane 1996, 81). If it is not genuine, then it hardly counts as being "real" creativity. Nevertheless, Kane admits that a compatibilist could easily challenge terms such as "genuine" and "real" as being tools to force a requirement of incompatibilist free will into the argument (Kane 1996, 89). It is almost as if Kane is treating each of the desires as instrumental goods to bring

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about what he considers to be the ultimate intrinsic good, absolute and real free will. If this is the case, ultimately all of the desires for free will could be reduced to only one true desire, which is the desire for free will for its own sake.

The compatibilist perspective on the desirability of free will prevents such a reduction or hierarchy of desires. Since none of the reasons for desiring the concept rely on the status of its existence beyond being a real impression of free will, each reason can be considered in full as if those reasons were intrinsically valuable and the concept was instrumental for their achievement. The displacement of the reasons generate more meaning in the specific qualities being valued and cast less doubt on the reasons since they are not based on the uncertain existence of a metaphysical principle. Rather, the values reflect our wishes, which have truth-values that are actually accessible and still provide us with conditions we desire. In an example of a compatibilist consideration of creativity, Kane summarizes the perspective that "real" free will is unnecessary for holding such reasons to desire the concept:

By virtue of denying underived origination, we do not have to deny the existence of novelty and creativity... Even if determinism were true... Beethoven would be artistically creative in the obvious sense that he had produced something novel and magnificent. (Kane 1996, 89)

Nonetheless, a perspective such as this may still lend to questions of the intrinsic importance of free will as a real concept.

Nomy Arpaly, a modern philosopher, however, provides an argument that suggests that the desire for free will for its own sake is incoherent and most likely impossible, which as a result releases the other reasons from being suppressed by terms such as "genuine" or "real." According to Arpaly, some people want something beyond the desires such as the ones provided by Kane. Specifically, they want control over their own mental states. However, in order to have this sort of control one must need to be "a self apart from our mental states that can choose them at will" (Arpaly 2006, 126). Already this desire seems a strange one to possess once it is reflected upon as Arpaly has done. Furthermore, if one were to choose to become a new person with new and different beliefs, desires, and preferences, then the choices would be based on their current or pre-existing beliefs, desires, and preferences (Arpaly 2006, 127). If hypothetically one were absent of any particular

beliefs, desires, and preferences, then they would probably not have the ability to choose or at least choose reasonably. The individual would be as neutral or random as Buridan's ass.

If it is indeed the case that it would be incoherent to desire an impossible, libertarian type of free will, would it still be worth wanting? Arpaly says that it would be worth wanting and it would not be absurd to want it either since we wish for impossible things frequently (Arpaly 2006, 127–128). However, I suggest Humean free will as an alternative, because it is neither impossible, nor absurd to desire.

Social Psychologist and author of *The Illusion of Conscious Will*, Daniel Wegner assumes a Humean type of free will, which is apparent from the title of his work. In his chapter titled, "Protecting the Illusion," Wegner discusses the tendency for people to retroactively claim intentionality for actions that seem obviously unintended (Wegner 2002, 146). These unintentional actions vary in terms of absurdity from actions that were normal but unintended to ones that are difficult to explain due to their incoherence. This is important to Wegner because people, more likely than not, will assume intentionality for unconscious actions regardless of the action's absurdity. Wegner proposes that this tendency is a result of peoples' desire to be an ideal agent, or an agent who exhibits a teleological type of intention and conscious will (Wegner 2002, 146–149). Having conscious intentionality preserves meaning and gives us direction, otherwise we would have to admit to acting meaninglessly, at least as far we know, and acting without any known goal. Wegner's work can help us see that free will is desirable for people who exhibit a tendency to retroactively apply intention to unconscious actions because of the attractiveness of meaning and goal orientation of our actions. While libertarian free will theorists would have a difficult time explaining this desire being separate from the existence of free will for its own sake, Humean free will theorists would find that their claims accommodate this perspective neatly. More specifically, the difficulty for libertarians would arise from their binary mode of thinking (either free will exists or it does not) which assumes that the reasons for desiring ideal agency, via generous interpretations of unintended actions, are directly associated with the hope that free will exists rather than determinism. This type of association is not necessarily obvious for compatibilists such as Hume because their alternative definition of free will does not conflict with ideal agency as well as causally determined unintentional actions. Additionally, it is not unusual for people to place value in determined events, or events perceived as such. Nomy Arpaly's concept of

"romantic necessity" accurately demonstrates the pedestrian value of determinism in terms of colloquial expressions surrounding the idea of "destiny" (Arpaly 2006, 7). Expressions such as, "I *can't help* falling in love with you," "It was meant to be," and, "This book *had* to be written" are all examples of value being placed on some sense of determinism (Arpaly 2006, 4). If people appreciate having this "romantic necessity" as well as ideal agency, depending on the context of events, it may be unwise for them to label themselves as libertarians since their expressions would contradict their beliefs; it would be more appropriate for them to adopt the concept of Humean free will since it allows for expressions of desiring both "romantic necessity" and ideal agency.

Although Humean free will is by definition the impression of having free will, it may be a much more pragmatic and authentic kind of free will to desire. It is authentic in the sense that we can attest to the existence of such an impression as well as moments when we felt we lacked such an impression. People, even determinists, probably spend their daily lives or at least most of their time alive under such an impression. We perform the act of choice making and deliberation as if it were normal and meaningful. Any who deny this, I imagine, live difficult lives in continuous reminder of the determined nature of the world and themselves. Their minds would be clouded by determinist reminders for each and every step, breath, word, and thought, probably making them miserable as a result. Of course I do not believe this to be the nature of any real person's life. It would not be practical to live in such a state.

Contrary to the circumstance described above, a perspective of free will of the Humean type may provide more practical applications to one's life. The pragmatism would be a result of how natural it is to have an impression of free will. As I said, it seems normal and meaningful to deliberate and make choices on a daily basis. It would also provide a feeling of control, which could help us maintain a motivated and positive perspective as well as our sanity. An article was published in the *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* concerning the very issue of maintaining a positive perspective especially in social situations. The studies featured in the article were conducted in order to investigate if an induced or dispositional belief in free will or determinism would result in any significant effects in a social setting, namely aggression and helpfulness (Baumeister et al. 2009, 260–261). The results of the first experiment, which was designed to induce either a belief or disbelief in free will, revealed that participants induced with disbelief were less willing to help than those that were induced with a belief in free will (Baumeister et al. 2009,

263–264). The second experiment concerned not just the willingness but also the commitment to actually help based on dispositional beliefs (Baumeister et al. 2009, 264). The experimenters found that participants who claimed to believe in free will were more likely to volunteer than those who claimed to believe in determinism (Baumeister et al. 2009, 265). The third and last experiment in the article was, like the first experiment, designed to induce either a belief or disbelief in free will and study the relationship of both induced conditions to acts of aggression (Baumeister et al. 2009, 265). The results showed that those who were induced to disbelieve free will acted more aggressively towards others than those who were induced to believe free will (Baumeister et al. 2009, 266–267). While it may be true that due to the experiments' complexity and the uncertain nature of the human mind there may be flaws with the study, but overall the study is rather insightful about how the belief in free will may have a positive role in society.¹ For reasons such as these, free will of the Humean type is convenient at the very least.

OBJECTIONS

Despite these reasons, I anticipate a few objections to this perspective. One may claim that I am advocating a freedom of will that allows for randomness or spontaneity, which would in turn make it a useless form of free will. Considering the fact that Humean free will by definition is a conscious impression, it could not generate any randomness since it relies on the agents being aware of their own deliberation. Another objection I anticipate is one regarding truth and the immoral act of believing falsities. I am inclined to defend Humean free will, although regarded as being an illusory form of libertarian free will, by mentioning the fact that in no way is Humean free will false. Imagine the difference between the existence of a "belief in God" and "God." The existence of the faith someone has in God can be easily determined; if a person is not lying and they claim to believe in God, then the faith they possess certainly exists. However, the same cannot be said for the

1. The experiments varied in complexity in terms of the number of the variables involved and one may object that an inverse relationship may exist between the complexity and the reliability of the experimental results. For example, the third experiment of the study involved many steps, which inadvertently introduced variables that could have had significant effects on the participants making the results questionable. On the other hand, the first experiment was done in a short amount of time with very few opportunities for significant influence from outside variables, making the experiment more reliable. However, the results of all experiments were consistently positive in identifying the relationship in question regardless of the complexity of the experiments.

existence of God because the nature the existence of God is uncertain. Similarly, the impression of freedom we experience frequently is quite real and while the content of the impression may conflict with causal determinism, it doesn't make the impression any less real. Since we act on our impressions as if the content of them were real, there must be some merit in desiring such an impression.

I also anticipate a challenge concerning how necessary Humean free will is in a pragmatic sense. However, as I have said, having an impression of free will is natural, comfortable, and therefore convenient. If we did not believe we had free will of the Humean kind, we would either believe in an impossible, absolute freedom or we would have to actively remind ourselves of how constrained we are by deterministic causes, which would be a great waste of time. Finally, I anticipate an objection from a hard incompatibilist of the determinist kind, much like the view held by Derk Pereboom. One with this type of view may claim that free will of any kind, including Humean free will, is not required to fulfill any of the reasons to desire free will such as self-worth, creativity, love, and individuality. They would probably state that almost all of the reasons to want free will could be maintained in a deterministic world without free will. Take for example self-worth as a reason to desire free will. Derk Pereboom states in *Four Views on Free Will*, that people frequently place value on things such as intelligence, athletic ability, and natural beauty, which are all out of our control (Fischer 2007, 118). With this perspective, it may be true that there could be self-worth without free will of any kind. However, this view doesn't allow for moral responsibility as we practice it regularly. In a determined world, we do not possess control over anything, therefore we cannot be held morally responsible for any of our actions. While the hard incompatibilist perspective can make sense of desirable concepts such as self-worth, it neglects the significant desire for moral responsibility.

Pereboom's alternative to moral responsibility is the "quarantine view," a system founded on practicality and causal responsibility. This view allows for society to essentially restrict and monitor the activities of those who may cause harm to others instead of reacting with the sentiment of punishment, hence it is called quarantining rather than detainment (Pereboom 2001, 174–176). Although this system generates consequences similar to that of a system founded on moral responsibility, such as our current justice system, with the exception of lacking blame, it doesn't allow for people to be praised due to the determined nature of their behaviors and it would also make daily moral judgments more complicated or even impossible to evaluate as we would normally. While quarantining may work well for

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those with a disposition to murder or steal, it makes less sense to quarantine people for things like occasional rude gestures or comments. However, we may still want the option to blame them if we so choose, which is not possible for Pereboom's view. Moral responsibility, in this way, can allow us to operate on multiple levels of moral evaluation unlike the "quarantine view," which can only account for pragmatic evaluations of extreme cases. This major difference in dealing with responsibility highlights the advantages to a Humean perspective of free will relative to the views of a hard incompatibilist.

Judging from existing literature and reasoning, it seems as though there are many reasons for people to desire free will regardless of the status of its existence. The desire for individuality, creativity, autonomy, desert, dignity, love, ideal agency, and other such qualities are all potential reasons for desiring the concept of free will. However, libertarian perspectives, such as Kane's, sometimes require the existence of free will for the desires to be considerable. This seems backwards, so I suggest an alternative, reverse perspective of Humean free will, which can account for such desires regardless of whether or not free will exists. Arpaly's argument of the impossibility of free will significantly limits the types of free will worth wanting, making Humean free will an option worth investigating. Despite the fact that Humean free will may be viewed as being illusory, it is difficult to deny the sort of "common feeling" we can observe in the world when people feel as if they are deliberating or making a choice.

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