## INTRODUCTION

*Here's a brief introduction to the philosophical puzzle of free will.*

The Ancient Greeks worried a lot about fate. The Fates, they thought, were three goddesses who wove the tapestry of our lives on their loom. Whatever you do, and whatever befalls you, from birth to death, is predestined by how the thread of your life has already been woven into history. Try as you might to avoid your fate, you cannot. There is nothing you can do that will alter how the future has been predestined to unfold. Indeed, your attempts to thwart fate may actually bring about what has been predestined.

A nice illustration of fate in action is provided by an Ancient Mesopotamian tale retold by Somerset Maugham in his short story *An Appointment in Samarra*. A merchant sends his servant to the marketplace for provisions. The terrified servant returns saying that he saw death in the marketplace and that she had made a threatening gesture towards him. The servant borrows the merchant's horse and gallops off to Samarra, 75 miles away, to try to avoid his fate. When the merchant goes to the marketplace he also sees death, and he asks her why she threatened his servant. Death replies: 'That was not a threatening gesture, it was only a start of surprise. I was astonished to see him in Baghdad, for I have an appointment with him tonight in Samarra.'

The poor servant is fated to die that evening, and there's nothing he can do about it. But is fatalism – the view that, no matter what we do, our futures are predestined and unavoidable – true? Obviously not. The ludicrousness of fatalism is demonstrated by the person who, when told that they should wear a safety belt as it may well save their life in an accident, refuses, saying 'Que será, será. What will

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be, will be – there is nothing we can do to change the future.' Clearly, what we do can change the future. Installing seatbelts has saved thousands from serious injury or death. Putting on a parachute before jumping out of a plane will probably save your life!

However, even if Fatalism is false, perhaps there remains another, rather more serious, threat to your freedom to determine how your life goes?

Science reveals that the universe is governed by natural laws. These laws determine how everything unfolds. Given sufficient knowledge of the laws of nature and how things are physically right now, it's possible in principle to predict what will happen in an hour, a day or a year's time.

But we human beings are parts of this physical universe. Our bodies are physical objects, and so subject to those same natural laws. But then everything we do can *also* be predicted long before we actually do it. Presented with a fork in the road, you might think you are free to choose the left fork or the right. But it turns out that whichever choice you will make was determined long ago by the laws of nature and the prior physical state of the universe. You can't do other than what those laws dictate.

Of course, we *think* we are free. It *seems* to us that we're able to make free choices. But perhaps the truth is we are nature's puppets and free will is an illusion.

Of course, science has established that many things that seem 'just obvious' are not in fact true. It really *seems* like the Earth doesn't move – but science has established that it does. So has science revealed that free will, like a stationary Earth, is also an illusion?

While fatalism is easily dispensed with, this science-based threat to free will looks much more serious. We now face a famous, and thorny, philosophical dilemma. On the one hand it *seems* to us that we're free – indeed, it really matters to us that we are free. On the other hand, we appear to have been presented with an argument that establishes we're not. Something has to give – but what?

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There is no philosophical or scientific consensus about that. Some philosophers and scientists believe free will is an illusion. Others believe we have free will.

One way of defending the claim that we have free will that *won't* work is to insist you are free because sometimes you choose tea for breakfast, but other times coffee. There's no 'law of nature' that determines that you will choose tea rather than coffee tomorrow morning. This defence involves a misunderstanding. Obviously there's no law of nature that says you will choose tea rather than coffee. However, the fact that you choose tea some days and coffee others is explained by the fact that there are physical differences between you on the days you choose tea and you on the days you choose coffee – differences you aren't aware of. Whichever choice you make will still be determined by the laws of nature.

But must we accept that every physical event has a physical cause? Some defend free will by insisting their mind is *not part of the physical universe*. When they decide to reach for the tea rather than the coffee they make a free, undetermined choice. Then, somehow, their non-physical mind causes a physical chain of events that results in their arm reaching for the tea.

This theory that the mind is something that is non-physical – thus escaping physical determinism – but that can nevertheless cause physical things to happen is the view of French philosopher René Descartes. Descartes thought your immaterial mind affects what's going on in your body via a gland in the brain called the pineal gland. Descartes supposed the gland functions, in effect, as an aerial: receiving input from the mind and turning it into physical activity. So, on Descartes's view, *some* physical events have no physical cause – namely, the mind-caused events that take place in our pineal glands.

Unfortunately, there's growing scientific evidence that our bodies are not under the control of some sort of immaterial mind. For example, it turns out that the brain activity of a person about to make a conscious decision to press a



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button with either their right or left hand reveals physical changes that can allow an observer to predict which hand the subject will use a full seven to ten seconds before the subject makes that conscious decision. If a subject's conscious choice to use their left rather than right hand is made freely by an immaterial mind, it wouldn't be possible to make that prediction based solely on what is happening in their brain seven to ten seconds earlier.

Another way in which we might try to salvage free will is to appeal to quantum indeterminacy. A majority of physicists now lean towards the view that what happens at the quantum level – at the level of the very, very, small, is not in fact entirely physically determined. It appears the laws of nature don't determine *exactly* where a subatomic particle will land in certain experiments, but only roughly where it will land. But if there is some indeterminacy at the quantum level, might this not allow for free will? However, it's unclear why mere indeterminacy would bring about free will. Random events are no more events over which we have control than are physically determined events: if some random event in my brain causes my arm to shoot out and punch you on the nose, that's not an example of my freely choosing to punch you.

Currently, it appears that if we want to defend free will against the threat posed by physical determinism, our best bet is to try to show that free will and determinism are *compatible*. Perhaps, when we unpack what the phrase 'free action' really means, it will turn out that we can still perform a free action even if everything we do is also physically determined. Is this strategy for reconciling the findings of science with free will going to work? The jury is out.

*This piece is an adapted excerpt from a forthcoming book:* What Am I Doing with My Life?

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