# Free Will – What is it? Do you have it?

The belief that you are free to do anything from which you are not prevented by physical constraints is called Metaphysical libertarianism (so named to distinguish it from political libertarianism).

But libertarianism seems to fly in the face of determinism: if the natural world consists of the interactions of several physical systems that are governed by laws – many of which we think we know – then future states of a system are determined and in principle predictable from present states.

Compatibilism states that free will can still exist in a deterministic system. The future states of some deterministic systems cannot be predicted (as in the Game of Life).

Our predictions about natural systems that we think of as deterministic (the solar system, e.g.) are subject to the accuracy of our measurement of the initial conditions, which can render unreliable a long-range prediction based on those initial measurements. But this kind of fuzziness cannot rescue free will from determinism.

Nor can quantum mechanics, which, some people have suggested, creates novelty by introducing randomness into an otherwise deterministic system. But this doesn't grant us free will – it grants us random will.

Our belief in our own free will seems to be confirmed every time we make a conscious decision. But there are several reasons to doubt that our feeling of control is an accurate representation of what actually happens when we appear to make a free choice.

1. Many of our physical actions are willed at a much higher level than the level of the control of individual muscles. Merely walking involves a complicated coordination of muscular control, which we seem able to delegate to a neural subroutine. Are each of those individual instances of control under our conscious will? Our digestive system – thank goodness – functions without our having to decide, e.g., when to initiate peristalsis.

2. Our brains fool us on a regular basis for reasons that might have had survival value in the ancestral environment. It takes us a concerted effort to see our blind spot. Our brains "back-time" stimuli from our extremities to take into account he length of time it took for the signal to travel to the brain. Our brains "fill in the blanks," as in the phenomenon of the Cutaneous Rabbit.

3. Experiments conducted by Benjamin Libet suggested that neural activity preceded his subjects' conscious awareness that they had made a decision. Other have performed similar experiments and apparently there is disagreement about whether his conclusion is warranted. But can it be that my conscious decision to push a button was *not* preceded by any neural activity? Assuming that my ideas are instantiated somewhere in my brain, can the neural function from which my ideas arise really be simultaneous with my awareness of those ideas? Was there no preliminary "set up" required?

For some people the solution is to deny the brain's role in free will. Some people – dualists – believe that mind is entirely distinct from brain, and some of them see the brain as a transceiver (I kid you not) that receives and sends information from your body to your disembodied mind. This move seems to be an *ad hoc* hypothesis, posited merely to save free will. Could there be evidence for this claim?