



Discourses on Isopublic Podcasts Transcript and End Notes

Series: First Principles

Episode: 1.1 Free Will: Illusion or Reality?

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Transcript

Welcome to *Discourses on Isopublic*.

My name is Dean Adair—creator of isopublic, nation of political equals and the “rule yourself and no else” society.

♪ *Intro music*

This is Episode 1.1 titled, “Free Will: Illusion or Reality?”

This podcast is the first of my First Principles series in which I cover my ideas and beliefs contributing to isopublic. I believe it’s as or more important to understand the whys of something as it is the whats and hows. The First Principles series is concerned with the whys of isopublic.

If you find my opinion persuasive, that’s great, but my primary purpose is disclosure. I don’t expect anyone to accept isopublic on face value. It’s important to have a grasp of the premises upon which an ideology, i.e. a belief system, rests before committing oneself. This series is meant to accomplish that objective.

In this first episode of the series, I’m going to start with the two rudimentary questions of, “Is nature determinate?” and “Do we have free will?” Frankly, it seems strange to me to start off with these concerns because I consider the answers to be self-evident, and yet there’s been an ongoing debate involving intelligent, publicly noteworthy people, so I want to check-off these boxes.

To cut-to-the-chase, my opinion is that nature is indeterminate and we do have free will. The reason I know this is because I *don’t* know the winning numbers of the next Powerball drawing. Do you? Does anyone? I imagine not. I think that observation should make my point, but let’s keep going.

You might understandably wonder how free will and isopublic relate. To question free will relates to everything. To deny we have free will means whatever we do we *must* do. That there’s no right or wrong way to do anything, no right or wrong answer to a question, no right or wrong way to act. That whatever we do is necessary to do because we had no choice in the matter. Why have a criminal justice system? To deny free will means no one is to blame for the harm they do, no one can be responsible.

The online Encyclopaedia Britannica defines determinism as, “in philosophy, [a] theory that all events, including moral choices, are completely determined by previously existing causes. Determinism is usually understood to preclude free will because it entails that humans cannot act otherwise than they



do."¹ In other words, the laws of nature are fixed and all that has happened or ever will is fixed too, including what we do. Thus, if determinists are correct, we're little more than deluded automatons.

Getting back to the Powerball lottery and having no chance of winning it, no one can know the next winning numbers, at least if the drawing is fair and not fixed as it were. Yet if nature is determinate to us, everyone would know the winning numbers and, because everyone would win, everyone would stop playing the game. And stop playing the game of life for that matter, because... why bother. But if no one can predict fully the winning numbers of the next Powerball, nature must be indeterminate. And if nature is indeterminate, we must have free will, i.e. somehow, you'll have to *choose* those winning numbers you think'll make you deliriously rich.

So, if as the determinist claims, everything is fixed and free will just an illusion, that we have no choice but to do as we do—why then should a murderer be punished for a murder he had no choice but to commit? By denying free will, we deny moral agency and, in essence, invalidate justice. But as astronomer Carl Sagan said, "An extraordinary claim requires extraordinary evidence."² What claim could be more extraordinary than that nature is determinate? Until there's irrefutable evidence nature is truly determinate, we have no choice but to believe we do have choice and free will, and thus, to accept humans as moral agents and justice as a moral imperative.

And what evidence do we need to prove nature is determinate? To accurately predict the future. If nature is determinate, there must be a determiner. By definition, a determiner of nature knows the future because, since according to determinism, nature is fixed—everything that has or will happen must happen. What point is there to claim nature is determinate if no one can act as a determiner and precisely know the future? And not just predict the winning numbers of the next Powerball, but know accurately and precisely, the future of all things in nature—the fate of the Earth, the Moon, the Sun, the Milky Way, the whole Universe. This, because all things in nature are interconnected. If we can't predict with precision the next solar flare of the Sun, we can't account for the effect it'll have on Earth's atmosphere when it happens; and if we can't predict the atmosphere, we can't predict what effect it has on the climate; and if we can't predict the climate, we can't predict when it's going to rain next, and when I get soaked and catch cold. And not just the future, but the past too. Thus, the determiner of a determinate nature would be omniscient.

And if nature is indeterminate, by definition, we possess free will. We have free will because we must act in nature but nature is infinitely complex, meaning we generally have multiple possible courses of action available at any given time—but we can only take one, so we have to choose.

Sam Harris is a well-known determinist with a large following. In his book, *Free Will*, Harris asks, "What does it mean to say that rapists and murderers commit their crimes of their own free will? ... To say that they were free *not* to rape and murder is to say that they could have resisted the impulse to do so (or could have avoided feeling such an impulse altogether)—with the universe, including their brains, in precisely the same state it was in at the moment they committed their crimes."³ So Harris seems to ask, why should we hold anyone responsible for a heinous act they had no choice but to commit? For me the irony is that to hold the murderer responsible or not is itself a choice. Even writing a book to convince



people they have no free will was itself a choice. If we have no free will, why bother trying to convince people they have no free will when they have no choice but to believe that they do have free will? That the very act of believing you have free will is itself predetermined and unavoidable? Ultimately for the determinist, it shouldn't matter whether we believe in free will or not since we have no choice but to do what we do whether we believe in free will or not. Ultimately it seems to me, denial of free will is to *choose* nihilism.

Part of Harris' argument against free will is that since what we call consciousness is just the product of neurons firing in the brain, we can't really claim that we're consciously in control of our actions. That since our neurons are just products of physics that we have no control over, our consciousness is just cause and effect. As he wrote, "One fact now seems indisputable: Some moments before you are aware of what you will do next—a time in which you subjectively appear to have complete freedom to behave however you please—your brain has already determined what you will do. You then become conscious of this 'decision' and believe that you are in the process of making it."⁴ In other words, since your subconsciousness decides before you do, you mustn't have free will. But is this necessarily true? Maybe we don't understand the natures of conscious and subconscious thought as well as Harris seems to think we do.

The brain is still very much a mystery to us. Why should we conclude, given what little we know about the brain or consciousness, that a subconscious thought isn't itself a product of free will? We should first understand the subconscious mind before concluding anything about it. What if our subconscious mind is a collection of cognitive faculties as capable of reasoning as our conscious mind? And that we're only capable of being consciously aware of one consciousness at any given time? What if the human brain has multiple equivalents of consciousness operating subconsciously in parallel? Just because a thought wasn't in the forefront of your mind doesn't mean you weren't thinking it.

But even if I concede that my thoughts originate in my subconscious mind, at some point, to perform a voluntary action requires me to decide to act even if I didn't subject myself to the Socratic Method before I did. I generally don't just act on impulse or feelings, or at least I try not to. I don't become aware that I'm eating lunch without any idea why.

If an enraged person commits murder upon seeing their spouse in bed with someone, we call it a crime of passion. But a crime of passion is spontaneous. That there wasn't enough time between the impulse to kill and the killing to reflect on whether it was a good and lawful thing to do. But when there is time to consider the nature of an act before acting, I'm not willing to accept the person is incapable of comprehension or reflection followed by the choice, then the act. I'm not willing to write-off a wrongful act as merely robotic and reflexive. But it *is* necessary for people to comprehend what actions are wrongful in the first place. That murder, stealing, rape, assault, fraud etc., are wrongful and, hopefully, illegal acts such that when people do have time to consider their course of action, they can be confident of not choosing to act wrongfully—the reason why children aren't held responsible.

It seems to me there's a general conflation between free will and what I call *constrained will*. Free will is ideal and constrained will is the will we can actually exercise at any given time. Free will suggests acting



without limit which we can't do. Even if we consider only imagined actions, we're still constrained by our imagination. I can will myself to walk on the Moon wearing only a Hawaiian shirt, shorts and sunglasses, but I can't actually do that. My will is constrained by what I can physically do in the real world. Does that mean I don't have free will though? Maybe in the absolute sense, but no matter how constraining my circumstances, it's a rare situation that I have no choice and only one action available. Do my genetics, the era in which I live, my parents, my financial situation, my career, etc. constrain my ability to do just whatever I please? Of, course. But I still have a will and choice within the framework of my circumstances. No matter how constrained my existence, as long as I'm alive, conscious, and not greatly impaired, I possess choice no matter how limited. The exceptions being in a situation where I can't act or my action will have no effect. If I choose to go bungee jumping, I have the choice not to jump right up until I'm in the air falling. Once I am, I can will myself to be sitting at home on the couch all I want (as I'm sure I would), but gravity has taken that choice away from me.

Suppose you're a contestant on a game show. The host announces that behind one of five doors is a new car and if you pick the right door, the car's yours. But then adds, you aren't allowed to pick doors four or five. Do you still have choices? Yes, you do. Your options have been reduced, but you still have three doors to choose from. What if he adds instead, you're only allowed to choose door number one? And then adds, if that door doesn't have the car, you have to pay him \$100... Do you still have a choice? Even though all but one door has been eliminated, and the one left might cause you more pain than pleasure, you still have a choice whether to play the game. Free will tends to be characterized as, you either have it or you don't. All or nothing. But even if all choice has been removed, you still have free will but then it doesn't matter because you can't exercise it except in your mind.

How much influence do our intuitions, feelings and emotions have on our free will to act? Greatly for sure. But even if entirely, does that mean we'd have no free will? I don't think so. I'm not going to claim to know how my subconsciousness works, but I believe it's integral to my consciousness and shouldn't be treated as something alien to and separate from my conscious mind. Though I perceive my consciousness as a unitary thing, it clearly isn't. My intuitions, feelings and emotions are cognitive processes that inform my conscious mind. The conscious mind seemingly acts like the captain of the ship-of-self while the subconscious mind as the crew. And setting aside involuntary or reflexive actions, or impaired judgment, our consciousness is in charge of us.

Again, for nature to be determinate there must be a determiner. And who is a determiner of nature? God? Me? You? Sam Harris? An extremely powerful AI perhaps? To be a determiner of nature, one must be able to predict nature, i.e. to accurately forecast the future. But who can? My contention is that no one can and no one ever will.

The claim that nature is determinate is a scientific claim. As such, it must be provable applying the scientific method. And if falsified, should be rejected. Here's a thought-experiment to test the claim that nature is determinate. Suppose we take two individuals—a chooser randomly selected and a determinist, say Sam Harris. Unknown to Harris, the chooser randomly selects three weather stations from the thousands located in the United States. The stations must reliably report temperature to a



tenth of a degree, humidity to a percent, and barometric pressure to one hundredth of an inch at frequent intervals 24/7. The chooser writes down their name, their selected station ids, and a random day in the following month and time to the minute for each. The paper is then sealed in an envelope not to be opened until after the next month has passed. At that time, the paper is given to Harris to read.

To prove the determinist claim, Harris must know everything, the chooser's name, what stations were chosen, and each station's respective future readings, because Harris'll read the paper in the future when it's given to him to read along with the station readings. Do you think Harris could succeed in this challenge? Could anyone? Will anyone or anything ever? I don't think so. Claiming nature is determinate is like claiming God exists. It doesn't mean determinism is necessarily false, but there's no way to prove it's true. And it's pretty easy to prove that no human is a determiner of nature.

Here are several reasons why I believe determinism is wrong or irrelevant, and why we should believe we do indeed possess free will and choice—

First, as I note, the claim that nature is determinate is a scientific claim that my weather station thought-experiment falsifies. Just the fact any experiment on determinism must be performed in nature precludes drawing any conclusion from it about nature, i.e. any experiment to prove the determinism claim is subject to the "observer effect," i.e. the act of observation affects what is being observed.

Second, why should we presume nature operates in clockwork fashion, i.e. mechanistically, i.e. that the laws of nature are fixed or that God doesn't play dice with the universe? Quantum physics suggests to us that uncertainty might be fundamental to nature (though quantum physics itself might be victim of the observer effect). Quantum physics suggests to us there's randomness at the bottom of spacetime via the Heisenberg uncertainty principle. If so, then nature is objectively indeterminate.

In 1932, the physicist Arthur Eddington wrote of free will and the theory of quantum physics, "Although we may be uncertain as to the intermediate steps, we can scarcely doubt what is the final answer. If the atom has indeterminacy, surely the human mind will have an equal indeterminacy; for we can scarcely accept a theory which makes out the mind to be more mechanistic than the atom."⁵

Third, nature is infinitely complex thus precluding us from ever objectively knowing nature. Again, we can't claim nature is determinate if we can't predict it. And we can't predict nature because predicting a thing requires knowing the thing absolutely. To absolutely know nature means not only accounting for all governing laws of nature but, at the time of observation, the instantaneous initial states of all affecting things in nature (matter and energy)—an infinite impossibility.

And last, even if we could devise the most powerful supercomputer imaginable to simulate the entire universe with every law of nature and every single particle in nature accurately accounted for including their initial states simultaneously, the simulation itself would be part of the simulation, i.e. the simulation simulating itself would be an infinite regression.

However, though I strongly believe in free will and moral agency, I also acknowledge that choice is constrained by circumstances, i.e. free will is really constrained will. How much do our genes, our



childhood, our economic status, etc. limit our choices? And as a consequence, reduce culpability? I imagine greatly, but circumstances also differ greatly from person to person and, thus, themselves are far too complex for courts consisting of imperfect human beings with incomplete information to properly sort out.

But regardless of whether a harm-doer had little or much freedom to choose not to do harm, harm was still done which requires remedy just the same. Courts must strive, to the best of their ability, to judge only on the facts at hand that bear directly on the case given a presumption of innocence and individual moral agency regardless of unspecified complicating circumstances. The exceptions being someone demonstrated to be at the time mentally incompetent or acting under clear and present threat of life and limb.

Whether one has free will or not, one still acts. And if the act causes harm to another, the doer is responsible whether we want to believe in free will or not. Harm was done and someone was responsible whether they had a choice or not. And if convicted by finding the harm-doer responsible, the courts must decide dutifully and justly how much of a sentence should be served taking into consideration identifiable constraining circumstances so long as the People deem justice has been served.

In summary, I contend that we do possess free will until we don't, meaning we'll cease to have free will once we can accurately predict the future. But given the infinite complexity of nature and the infinite regression that occurs in predicting one's own future, it would seem there's almost zero chance that nature will ever be truly determinate to anyone regardless of how technologically advanced. That until one can accurately predict nature, i.e. act as a determiner of nature, nature is by definition indeterminate. Thus, even if free will might be illusory in the abstract, it's our undeniable reality and very likely always will be. And on the basis that we do possess free will and choice, reason compels us to concern ourselves with the quality of the choices we make. That we must be concerned with good and bad choices, meaning that morality and justice absolutely matter.

Here ends this episode of *Discourses on Isopublic*.

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This is Dean Adair signing off until next time.

♪ *Outro music*



End Notes

¹ Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopædia. "Determinism." Encyclopædia Britannica, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 8 June 2016, www.britannica.com/topic/determinism.

² Sagan, Carl (December 14, 1980). "Encyclopaedia Galactica." Cosmos. Episode 12. 01:24 minutes. PBS.

³ Harris, Sam. *Free Will*. Free Press. Kindle Edition, 2012. Pg. 17.

⁴ Ibid. Pg. 9.

⁵ "The Decline of Determinism." Presidential Address to the Mathematical Association, 1932 *The Mathematical Gazette*, Vol. 16, No. 218 (May, 1932), pp. 66-80.