

## In our stars or in ourselves?

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A long-standing debate among philosophers is whether people have free will in making decisions or are choices determined for us in advance of our decisions. The matter of whether free will or determinism has better supporting arguments has important implications for our moral and ethical decisions.

Briefly, the determinists' position is decisions we make are the result of cultural upbringing, past experiences, inherited intelligence, and a whole chain of past influences that precede the choices we face daily.

Determinists argue that if we knew enough about one's past experiences we could determine in advance how one will "choose" even prior to the decision-makers' own awareness of the choices they are about to make.

Under carefully controlled conditions it's possible for neuro-psychologists to measure brain activity and know in advance that the subject has made a choice a few seconds before the subject will be conscious of his or her own decision.

The free will position argues humans are indeed able to make free choices. Some choices will be better than others, but on the whole, human beings are responsible for choices we make.

Even though it may be true that we are influenced by past experiences, we are not cognitively aware of most of our personal long chain of previous events. We live in the present moment and are forced by daily demands to make the best decisions we can since daily living often requires us to choose in the here and now.

In religious thinking, there is some support for both determinism and free will. In general, most Roman Catholics have a firm belief in free will. They hold the view that in order to be morally accountable, humans have freedom to choose and thus they are responsible for the results of their daily choices.

Free will proponents believe they will occasionally make "bad choices."

Most of the time in legal matters the courts support the free will view — that is, in normal criminal cases the perpetrators of crimes are held accountable for the choices they make.

Many Protestant religious followers also support the view that adherents have free will and are responsible for their ethical choices. However, some but not many, are followers of earlier Calvinist beliefs current during the Protestant Reformation. These adherents lean towards the determinist opinions, believing that their lives are more or less planned out at the time of their birth. This rather extreme view of determinism is known as predestination.

Moral accountability for our choices offers support for the free will position. Even though our decisions will be influenced by the chain of events leading up to the present, we are mostly unaware of this long chain of influences.

We are often required to choose in the immediacy of present day events.

If we did not have at least some free will, we would nonetheless be required to act on the choices with which we are presented unless we simply respond to life's events as pre-programmed automatons.

Even if we were totally convinced by the determinist arguments, we would still have to act in everyday choices as a free will believer would act — that is, we must use our free will even though we may also be partially determined by past experiences.

Free will and determinism are not mutually exclusive. Past experiences can and should lead us to make better free will decisions. The two views, determinism and free will, are not entirely separate, nor antithetical, nor incompatible, since we will continue to make decisions regardless of our awareness of the reasons behind our decisions.