

What philosophical question could be more relevant to me (someone who is being punished for crimes) or you (people who, in one way or another, are condoning this punishment)?

True, there are other philosophical &/or ethical questions that should also be relevant to us — for example, What is real? When is forgiveness appropriate & how should it be implemented? Why is "getting tough" on crime not reducing crime? Why is it acceptable for agents of governments to kill for their governments' interests, but unacceptable for an individual to kill for their personal interests; why are governments immune from murder prosecutions? — but the question of whether or not & to what extent an individual is responsible for the decisions/actions they effectuate cuts right to the heart of whether or not it's fair to punish them for breaking laws. Most people would agree that it would be unjustifiably cruel to punish a fish for swimming or a person for breathing, given that a fish must swim & a person must breathe.¹

Some people believe that all animals, including humans, only act in ways determined by forces beyond their control. This belief is known as determinism. Determinism is an attractive philosophy to someone who finds their life in ruins: such a person can thereby evade responsibility for their plight. Fate, the system, or God is to blame, not the person's own incompetency.

Believing in determinism allows an individual to relax, be lazy. Why worry or struggle when your fate is sealed?

"Mad" Max, my fellow stupor-max captive, is a loud, proud determinist. He justifies his fatalism in part by claiming that Einstein & Schopenhauer were determinists. After much wrangling, I was able to extract this summary of Max's "groundbreaking theory":

"Every action we take is the inevitable result of the domino

f.n. 1 As the U.S. Supreme Court explained in Morissette v. United States, 342 U.S. 246, 250, 72 S.Ct. 240, 243, 96 L.Ed. 2d 288 (1952):

The contention that an injury can amount to a crime only when inflicted by intention is as universal and persistent in mature systems of law as belief in freedom of the human will and a consequent ability and duty of the normal [emphasis mine] individual to choose between good and evil.

This is why when someone commits a crime due to insanity they are supposed to be criminally acquitted & civilly committed. Suppose to be.

effect of all the events that occur in the Universe. Everything is a reaction, coming from a reaction, coming from a reaction....

"To believe in free will, you must believe in dualism, that there's a spirit separate from your body that can control your body independently of your body's influences. Physics control you; you don't control physics."

Before you go out & do something crazy, thinking you can't stop yourself, keep reading & you'll find out why Max's theory is all wrong.

Yes, Max, Einstein, & Schopenhauer — if Max's claim that they were determinists is accurate² — are all wrong, or can be wrong. In Max's case & in many other people's cases, Max & Einstein are correct.

Go ahead, hold onto something until the vertigo subsides.

This issue is complex & Max's fluent sophistry makes it more so. It took me a couple o' days o' brain-chewin' to figure out both the flaws in Max's reasoning & the truth of the matter.

Buckle yourselves in, get comfy, & let Prometheus take y'all on an intellectual ride. And sip on some sweet tea, because I can't & would!

Varieties of Decisions/Actions

In order to determine whether or not we can freely decide/act as we do, we need to understand what decisions/actions we engage in.

The following is my categorization of the kinds I observe people making:

- 1) Reflexive,
- 2) Present,
- 3) Near-Future Planned,
- 4) Distant-Future Planned,
- 5) Beliefs,
- 6) Approach to Life/Personality
- 7) Whether or Not to Focus Our Attention,
- 8) What to Focus Our Attention On.

This categorization is merely a means of facilitating our analysis.

As we proceed, please keep in mind/consider that:

- The many billions of neurons that compose a healthy human brain create exponentially greater qualities than one neuron plus many billions;
- The characteristics of the neurons composing our brains have far different qualities than the compounds those neurons are made of;
- The human mind is more than a mere brain — it is all of its components (i.e. a brain, it's attached nervous system, & the body it's part of) and the ideas & programming it has incorporated into itself.

f.n. 2 I can't confirm or deny Max's claim about Einstein. According to The New American Desk Encyclopedia, it appears that Schopenhauer believed in free will, although he also believed that trying to exercise it brings misery. See The World as Will and Idea, 1819, by Arthur Schopenhauer for more.

1. Reflexive Decisions/Actions

Max + Einstein seem right when it comes to reflexive thought + action — by reflexive thought I mean the transmission through a human's nervous system of a response to a stimuli, not contemplation of the stimuli. Certain responses to stimuli are wired into our nervous system, e.g.: we feel a doctor thump our knee + we kick; we see a bright light shining in our eyes + our pupil contracts;

Max + Einstein seem right, but they are not. The reasons why they are wrong undermines any possibility of determinism being correct, at least for those who are aware that determinism does not have to be correct.

Some people control + overcome their reflexes, apparently by semi-hypnotizing themselves into not recognizing a stimulus or the full intensity of the stimulus, thereby preventing the reflexive thought that would trigger a reflexive action. Such people — for example, maybe members of polar-bear clubs, who cut holes in ice-covered bodies of water + swim in them; definitely Buddhist monks who've calmly set themselves ablaze³ in public to protest Chinese persecution; definitely samurai who committed seppuku³; and anyone who doesn't blink while putting in eye drops.

Max would say, "Those people mastered their reflexes in response to a prior event [or events] or a belief formed in response to a prior event [or events]. Every action is the inevitable result of a prior action!"

To disprove Max's thesis, I must stop his infinitely regressing explanation for our current decisions/actions. De rien! Consider these holes.

- Due^{to} a brain's imperfections +/or the fact that it's a living + constantly changing (due to both environmental forces + innate drives) organ, not every prior event/stimuli impacts a person or remains as an influence. We ignore + forget.

- Apparently, unlike animals with simpler central nervous systems

f.n.3 Max has said that suicide is an extreme form of self-preservation. He did not explain, yet I agree + will explain: someone who feels their identity, their essence is being destroyed or perverted by overwhelming forces may conclude that their death is the only way to preserve what's left of themselves.

Some people, such as Tibetan Buddhist monks + samurai warriors, identify themselves so strongly with their culture/society that they interpret an attack on their culture/society as an attack on themselves. For samurai, the attacker is themselves, their own shameful actions or inactions, making their suicides twice as rational as that of the monks. In both cases, they kill their lesser individual selves in a last-ditch effort to preserve their greater selves.

(C.N.S.), humans are capable of objectively considering their motivations, including past influences, then reacting to a present situation in a wiser way than they did in the past.

- A mature, healthy human mind is capable of what psychologists call inhibition, restraining present desires in order to pursue longer-term goals.
- Psychotherapy such as Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (R.E.B.T.) can help someone master their emotional urges, if someone lets it.
- Just as we can manipulate others, so we can manipulate ourselves.
- The very fact that Max realizes that our past experiences influence (he'd say control) our present decisions/actions reveals that he is capable of rejecting that influence.

Max would say, "The decision to reject or accept a past influence is determined by a past event," if he didn't instead sidestep the holes I point out by insulting me. Most likely he'd insult me, because he's wrong!

Once a person achieves self-awareness, the ability to objectively consider what's influencing them, such a person can consider and then accept or reject any past influence. At such a point, a person who lets past influences continue to influence them has chosen for that to be.

Once a person is capable of objectively analyzing their motives, how they do so will be determined by the beliefs they've adopted (see p.10 below for how we form our beliefs), their recollection of past experiences, any pressing present stimuli, & the person's goals. Such decisions/actions can be the product of a person's objective or free will, albeit shaped more or less by their reactions to past experiences & their innate drives — all possessed by the person, not uncontrollable external forces.

Believing that free will is possible does not require one to believe that humans are controlled by a spirit that's independent from their flesh.⁴ This ability can be achieved with the pseudo-spirit known as consciousness. There's nothing magical or mystical about the ability to focus our mind

f.n. 4 There are holes in this dualist belief, such as: 1) why would our spirit need a body if it can exist independently of a body? 2) How's a spirit attached to its body? 3) How could an immaterial spirit control a material body? 4) Why must we satisfy our body's physical needs if a spirit controls it? 5) Why can't a spirit manipulate its dead body? 6) How does one spirit prevent another from taking over its body?

These holes can not be filled in empirically, because the belief in spirits is a matter of faith, not science. Even some religious faiths reject such beliefs, for example, Jehovah's Witnesses.

on its motives, although this does require a person to incorporate some programming into their brain in order to turn it into a mind, a process which Daniel C. Dennett discusses in pp. 253-280, inter alia, of his Consciousness Explained.

In the unlikely event that Max would not already be focussed on ad hominem attacks on me, he'd argue, "We only program our brains that way in response to an outside stimuli," misapplying Newton's laws of motion — a healthy human brain possesses the genetically programmed drive to become a mind capable of objective self-analysis. Humans' ability to objectively analyze themselves & their environment, along with our opposable thumbs & social nature, is our greatest survival tool.

Even if Max would be right, so what? Regardless of how we become capable of objective self-awareness, once we are we are. Then, even when it comes to our reflexes (or at least some), we can have free will.

2. Present Decisions/Actions

We decide what to do right now based on our near-future plans, distant-future plans, our beliefs, our approach to life/personality, whether or not we've decided to focus our attention, what are attention might be focussed on, as well as what reflexes become aroused. All of these mental factors are being processed simultaneously & lead to our physical actions. Verify this for yourself by objectively considering your own thoughts for a few moments, as much of your thoughts as you're capable of considering.⁵ In p. 217 of Consciousness Explained, Dennett describes a normal human brain, correctly I think, as "a massive parallel processing machine," "a many-things-all-at-once machine."

So, how do we choose from all the thoughts and impulses incited within our mind what we do NOW?

Let me demonstrate this with an imaginary person⁶ with these qualities:

1. His first name is Jason;
2. He loves a girl named Tammy, his girlfriend;
3. His age is 17;
4. He's at home, on a Friday night, at 7 P.M.;
5. He grew up in a stable, healthy family;
6. He's healthy;

f.n. 5 Some of our thoughts are so disturbing — because, for example, they conflict with our need to respect ourselves or the values we affect to be social — that we deceive ourselves into believing they don't exist. This brings us towards the murky realm of the subconscious mind, a subject deserving its own essay, at least.

f.n. 6 Each of us makes ourselves up, so this creation is as real as anyone.

7. He's decent looking; 8. He has a modest disposable income. There's much more to Jason & his situation than stated above, but these details are enough for me to demonstrate how we decide what to do NOW.

Jason decides what to do NOW based on a mixture of his: reflexive responses (e.g. slapping at a mosquito that bites him), near-future plans (e.g. as he's going on a date with Tammy later, he's considering what he'll do, dressing up for it, & ignoring what's playing on a nearby T.V.), distant-future plans (e.g. as he wants to spend his life with Tammy, he intends to marry her, so is going on the date with her & continually tries to impress her that he's a good choice for a husband; he also wants to go to college, so, despite his sexual attraction for her, he avoids activity that might impregnate Tammy & force them to work to support a child), beliefs (e.g. he doesn't want a bug stealing his blood, so he kills it; being a sincere Christian, he believes abortions & pre-marital sex are wrong, so avoids both; he loves Tammy & believes that a man should provide for his family, which he believes necessitates a college education, thus his forenoted actions & plans), personality (e.g. he's very confident, optimistic, thoughtful, & a slow talker, so he's calm & looking forward to the date), whether or not his attention is focussed (e.g. given his good self-esteem, his confidence in Tammy's commitment to him, his mind operates more subconsciously/subjectively than consciously/objectively, which is less stressful than carefully considering the implications of his actions before taking them), what his attention is focussed on (e.g. contemplating the pleasure of Tammy's company & their possible future together, but is temporarily distracted by the mosquito bite).

There's a lot going on all at once in Jason's head. So much is going on, far more than I noted, that Jason can't consciously consider all or even many of these mental processes without disrupting his reception of additional incoming stimuli & reacting as needed thereto.⁷

How does Jason choose what to focus his attention on, let alone what actions to take?

I believe that Jason chooses what to focus on & what actions to take based on the programming he's accepted from others or come up with on his own, which, along with innate programming, determines what his priorities are & how to go about satisfying them.

Again, Max would say, "See! We make our present decisions based on prior events!"

f.n. 7 Because, as studies have verified, people can only consciously concentrate on a few things at once, at least some states have outlawed using cell phones while driving motor vehicles.

He's partly right: prior events + our reactions to them can narrow or broaden our possible present decisions/actions, but they can't pre-determine our decisions/actions. An individual can choose to let their past experiences completely control their current decisions/actions; however, if such a person has a healthy mind,⁸ such would still be the person's choice. Within the limits of their knowledge (i.e. experiences) + their mental capabilities (i.e. I.Q.), a person with a healthy mind can decide what to do Now independently of some or all experiences.

Humans' ability to quickly decide what is best for them to do in unique predicaments obviously helps us survive. Natural forces, the unique predicaments people face, will select out less capable minds.

3. Near-Future Plans

Deciding what we'll do in the near future is something that a person has more time to objectively consider, if they choose to. We often modify our near-future plans in accordance with events that occur before we can act out our original plans.

Environmental stimuli can affect the actions we end up performing, if we choose to decline to objectively consider the motives for our eventual actions, or if we choose to let those stimuli dictate our actions. A person with a healthy mind can also decide to objectively consider their motives + disregard the impact of some or all environmental stimuli. This dynamic is, I suspect, the heart of Ayn Rand's objectivist philosophy (my suspicion is based on my having carefully studied Dr. Nathaniel Branden's The Psychology of Self-Esteem, which Dr. Branden asserted is based on Rand's philosophy.).

Yes, it'd be safest + wisest for a person to carefully consider much environmental stimuli + be open to modifying their plans accordingly. If, for example, a car is speeding down the street, a person would be wise to postpone their plan to cross that street until doing so's safe. Yet the person, not the car, controls the decision.

Some animals, such as alligators, only need a mostly reactive/subjective C.N.S.. When something touches an alligator's tongue, its jaws snap shut, a helpful reflex for an animal that eats a lot of swimming prey. Alligators have tough hides, slow metabolisms, keen eyesight, + other traits that have enabled them to get by with their simpler C.N.S.

f.n. 8 An exception might be someone raised in an environment that was so psychology abusive that it suppressed their innate drive to achieve self-awareness + objectivity.

Humans, on the other hand, have tender hides, faster metabolisms, and relatively poor eyesight, and other traits that require far more creativity and proactive thinking in order for a person to survive, and definitely to thrive. Just as Nature will select out humans who plan so rigidly that they disregard dangerous environmental stimuli, so too will Nature select out humans who live too reflexively/subjectively.⁹

Despite our need to conform our plans to novel environmental stimuli, our ultimate actions will tend towards previous decisions that we've received positive results from before, which is in accordance with the principles discovered by the eminent behavioral psychologist B. F. Skinner. See his Science + Human Behavior, 1965. This process is what helps shape our brains into a mind, as explained in p.267 of Consciousness Explained.

I recall reading in Dr. Branden's The Psychology of Self-Esteem that people decide whether or not to operate their minds more objectively or subjectively. I agree, with the caveat in f.n.8 + its surrounding paragraph. Based on my personal experiences, I believe that a person's environment (e.g. one denying education + seeped in psychological abuse) can inhibit their innate drive to achieve the ability to objectively/proactively analyze themselves; I also believe that a person with an innately superior personality + I.Q. will be impelled + enabled to overcome such a repressive environment + achieve the ability to + see the value in considering themselves objectively/proactively.

Most people are in the habit of thinking subjectively/reactively. Even those capable of thinking objectively/proactively do not do so all of the time. I believe that the reason for both of these realities is that it takes a lot of mental effort + intelligence to think objectively/proactively, to take the reins of one's fate, to battle against chance and the wills of others, which can also make one unpopular with those who live more subjectively/reactively.

It doesn't take great intelligence or effort for one to objectively consider some of the options we have + some of the forces trying to

f.n.9 Max is a great example of this. Because he feels he must attack if insulted, he has been + will be imprisoned for batteries, unable to breed or obtain resources for offspring. Very reactive/subjective people are easily manipulated by those who are more proactive/objective. More proactive/objective people often use more reactive/subjective people to promote the more proactive/objective person's survival: voilà prisons.

influence us before we act in important matters. Even Bill the janitor does this, to an extent. For someone who's had their will dashed severely enough, such as Max, determinism offers comfort, an excuse for their failure.

4. Distant-Future Plans

Deciding what we'll do in the distant future is an expansion of the process described for near-future plans: we have more time to objectively consider what we'll do, & more events will occur during the longer interim spanning between our initial plan & actual performance. For example, Bill the janitor may be saving his money for his retirement, when he plans on buying a cabin cruiser & spending the rest of his days deep-sea fishing; yet events occur that Bill responds to by modifying his beliefs (i.e. despite his hard work, his employer fires him & steals Bill's retirement fund, which Bill lets shatter his soul) & thus our distant-future plans (i.e. Bill retires early, forgets about the cabin cruiser, & spends his days as a recluse, fishing in a local pond & talking to himself).

Again, a person has a choice to reasonably conform their plans to events that occur before the person acts out those plans, to ignore those events & try to fulfill their original plans, or look for alternative ways of carrying out all or part of their original plan. It'd be wiser for a person to be flexible & to consider interim events, which does not make such a person a mere puppet of those events.

Another factor can affect our ultimate actions, if we can't discern a way around it: other people's wills. Those who seek to flex their wills must grapple with the opposing wills of others. The wills of others (e.g. enemies, allies, bureaucrats) can manipulate the wills of large groups of less objective thinkers, resulting in wars and slaveries of various kinds. This can also happen on an individual scale, as in an abusive relationship. Even one person's will can overwhelm the will of less mentally capable people, overtly (e.g. Genghis Khan) or covertly (e.g. Nazi propagandist J.P. Goebbels).

The collective will of the society a person finds themselves in, culture, will also seek to shape its members' wills. A wise person will consider their culture, but not be enslaved by it. Society will, however, in some ways insist on conformity - laws, taxes, etc.

Being unable to figure out how to assert their own will over others' wills can cause the impotent person overwhelming stress. I believe this can lead to neuroses & even psychoses. As I believe is the case with Max, an impotent person can gain a false sense of competence by deluding themselves into believing that they never had a free will,

as that hurts less than admitting they're impotent.
It relieves the pain, having fate to blame.

5. Beliefs

Every plan + decision we make is influenced by our beliefs, which we adopt as we live for various reasons, e.g.: a) our caretakers taught them to us; b) our peers pressed us into adopting them; or, c) we adopt them in response to stimuli. How each of these processes work is slightly different, but what they all have in common is that a person can choose to objectively evaluate + modify beliefs before adopting them + can objectively reevaluate beliefs already adopted, with or without consideration of external stimuli.

For example, Bill the janitor was taught by his parents to trust people in authority, such as his employer. His fellow janitors — who believed their employer was honorable — further pressured Bill to trust him. Yet after Bill's employer fired Bill + stole Bill's pension, Bill reevaluated some of his beliefs, such as that his employer was trustworthy. Bill changed his beliefs.

A wise person, someone more likely to survive + procreate, will be open to adopting + modifying beliefs in accordance with reality. For example, Nature will select out someone who insists on believing that a grizzly bear isn't a danger or that touching a fallen high-voltage line is safe.

6. Approach to Life/Personality

This is the result of the beliefs we adopt (e.g. that people are generally good, or out to get us), social habits, and our unique physiological characteristics. Genetics, I believe, are a strong force in creating the personalities we display¹⁰: because genetics are a strong factor in determining an individual's physiological characteristics. A faster metabolism, a hyperactive adrenal gland, an underdeveloped pre-frontal cortex, overdeveloped Broca's + Wernicke's regions in the brain (i.e. the parts of the brain that control, respectively, the ability to speak smoothly + sensibly) may produce an assertive, slick-talkin', and short-sighted personality, the typical politician, lawyer, + gang leader.

According to my stepfather, even before I could speak sensibly, I'd be standing in my crib, shaking my finger, giving the world a piece of my mind. Still am, from my supermax cell.

Our approach to life/personality can limit the choices available to a

f.n.10 For the same reason people have different sets of clothes, they can have different personalities: different scenarios call for different uniforms or masks.

person (e.g. a person with an angry, antisocial, paranoid personality may be more likely to react with violence to a threat, being blind to the non-violent choices available to them) or broaden the choices available (e.g. a happier, trusting, confident person may be more likely to consider non-violent ways of reacting to a threat, while not considering the violent options). These limits or opportunities are created & tolerated by the individual with them. A healthy person's ability to objectively analyze their personalities/masks allows them to adjust their makeup, even deeply ingrained mental habits.¹¹

Although genetic factors sway the personalities we display, the nature of our personalities are ultimately chosen by the individual. The individual at least tolerates the personality they display.

7. Whether or Not to Focus Our Attention.

This is determined by our plans, our personalities, &/or stimuli of sufficient potency to demand our attention (e.g. being attacked by a grizzly bear, seeing sparks flying from a high-voltage wire as we start to pick it up). Although it'd be foolish to ignore these sample stimuli, we can do so.

As with their beliefs, plans & personality, a person can objectively analyze the programming they've accepted & the reflexes they possess, which ^{determine} whether or not to focus their attention. Then a person can modify their programming & undermine their reflexes.

8. What to Focus Our Attention On.

At any given moment a person's C.N.S. receives maybe thousands of stimuli from their sensory organs (e.g. eyes, ears, nose, tongue, & skin) & internal sensors. For example, a person may see strangers talking & the sun's glare, may hear the conversation & the sound of passing cars, may smell the residue of her boyfriend's cologne on her coat, may taste her saliva, may feel cold & the brush of the wind on her neck, may hungry, may be anxious to arrive somewhere on time, may be worried about paying her bills, while happily thinking about her boyfriend, who's cologne she smells.

My example is oversimplified, as it must be: with her sense of touch alone, the forenoted person will feel many things at once (e.g. the cold air,

f.n. 11 People do this when they quit smoking or other addictive habits.

A healthy human brain is remarkably plastic, capable of even re-assigning regions of itself to handle tasks normally handled by a region that has been damaged by a stroke. In a P.B.S. special, a Dr. Amen did a great job of explaining this, & probably also does so in his book, Change Your Brain, Change Your Life.

the soft faux fur lining her coat, the dampness in one of her socks, the weight of her backpack, etc.).

The overwhelming amount of stimuli we receive in a given moment requires us to ignore a lot of it + respond automatically to most of what we deem worthy of noticing — we can only focus our attention on a few stimuli at once (see F.n. 7 + the paragraph it's found in). As with Whether or Not to Focus Our Attention, what stimulus or stimuli we focus our attention on is based on our plans + their priority, our active personality, our beliefs, + the strength of the stimuli we're experiencing. What stimulus or stimuli we decide to focus on (e.g. thinking about our lover) can sway subsequent decisions we make about what stimuli to entertain or ignore (e.g. our sample she might ignore her hunger pains + the cold + lose herself in a romantic song playing on her iPod[™]), which can lead to habits that can modify our present actions, future plans, beliefs, + personality, each of which can sway what stimulus or stimuli we decide to focus our attention on in the future.

I emphasize can because it is ultimately up to the individual — if they're capable of objective self-analysis — what they let influence them.

La Conclusion

My classification of the types of decisions/actions people engage in is artificial, a helpful device for demonstrating how people can be + generally are responsible for their actions. In reality all of these types of decisions/actions meld with each other. The decision-making process of a healthy + mature person is, generally, a unified, fluid process, determined mostly by habits.

A healthy person is innately driven to achieve the ability to objectively analyze themselves. If/when a person achieves this state, they then have free will. Extreme conditions can, however, prevent a person from achieving that state or from exercising free will.

In Max's case, his belief that he has no free will is likely due to a neurotic reaction to his impotence at exercising free will or a scheme to manipulate others into engaging in extremist behavior (tel que suicide bombers, suicide cults, etc.).

I'd appreciate Your comments,
Nate.

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