

Determinism vs. Free Will

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These are thoughts that I have been thinking about for many years. I am getting them down on “paper” the 1st time however. They may be a bit disorganized.

At the end of the 19th century, it looked like physics was almost completely worked out. It was deterministic. Given the positions and velocities of all the matter in the world (including their masses & electric charges), their future (or past) positions and velocities were determined at any other time. We couldn't actually do such calculations – we didn't know all the positions and velocities – or capabilities for such calculations. Then came quantum mechanics in the early 20th century. A wave (sort of probability) function represents a system. It evolves until a measurement is made. When that happens, the wave function collapses to an eigenstate, with probabilities of that state determined by the wave function. Then it starts evolving again. What constitutes a measurement is unclear to me. Nevertheless physicists can use the theory very effectively in explaining many phenomena. The earlier physics is called classical physics. Also Einstein's special and general theories of relativity are considered classical physics. Classical physics is deterministic. Quantum physics is not. (Actually there was talk of “hidden variables” which would remove the in-determinism – But there are arguments that show that this is impossible unless (if I remember correctly) the hidden variables have influences faster than the speed of light). Classical physics might seem contrary to religion. However Calvinism, at least, also believed in determinism – because God already knew everything that would happen in the future.

However quantum mechanics would seem to open a door to free will that classical physics would have closed. Though not definite relation has been established.

Now, let us do some common sense reasoning about free will and determinism. If all anybody does is determined, then why should a criminal be punished for a crime – he did not have free will to not commit the crime. Well, those punishing him, assuming they do, are also determined – they have no choice either. Perhaps the punishment determines the criminal to change his ways – or not change them. In either case, it is determined. But suppose someone stubbornly believes in free will. Is there a use to arguing with him? He is determined to do so. The determinist may give up the argument, realizing (in his mind at least) that the in-determinist is determined to believe in free will. In fact, if you are a determinist, there seems no reason to try to do anything. Whatever you try, the future is determined (or so you believe.) You cannot try to try. Either you try or you don't – it is determined either way. For our efforts to continue and to continue to have hope for them, I think we must adopt some form of free will. Perhaps it is a false belief. But if it is false, those who believe it have no choice.