



# PLATO ESSAY CONTEST WINNERS

The prompt for the 2013–14 PLATO Essay contest was:

*Do human beings have free will?* Please give the best reasons that you can in defense of your position, taking pains to explore possible objections to your view and to explain how you would reply to those objections. In your answer, make sure to explain how you define the term ‘free will.’ Also, if you hold that people lack free will, please explain how they can be held responsible for their actions.

We present here the three winning essays, each of which examine questions of free will in different ways.

Congratulations to Jared, Sydney, and James!

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## FIRST PLACE WINNER

### Probabilistic Chains

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Free will is one of the grandest and most persistent illusions we experience throughout our lives. It is ingrained into our experience and crucial for systems of economy and justice. Even those who accept the notion of free will as irrational cannot make decisions without belief in an open future. Common sense suggests Libertarianism, a belief in radical freedom, or at least the Compatibilist position that a determined future does not eliminate the possibility of free will. A closer examination of the facts reveals that Libertarianism is mysterious and that Compatibilism is, as Kant said, no more than “a wretched subterfuge.” Despite unanswered questions about laws governing the physical universe, Hard Determinism is more consistent with the facts than other theories. Although quantum mechanics demonstrates that some events in the universe are decidedly indeterminate, the theory does not imply freedom, since the future is not controlled by individual choice but constrained by probability.

Hard Determinism claims that because humans are physical systems, they obey physical laws, and because physical laws allow us to predict the behavior of physical systems, human behavior is causally necessitated by physical law. Imagine the simple causal chain in the relationship between a hammer and a nail. If a hammer were brought down forcefully onto a nail halfway embedded in a wooden block, the nail would sink into the block. There is no other possible outcome in this chain of events. Suppose that the operator of the hammer who sets the causal chain in motion is also a physical system operating under unalterable laws: when the machine senses a nail in a wooden block, it strikes with the force necessary to drive it into the block. In this system, since the first cause is necessitated, all future causes are constrained as well, leaving the system with only one possible

outcome. According to Hard Determinism, the universe has operated under a specific set of physical laws from the beginning. Given the laws of nature and states of affairs in the past, the future for humans is no more open than for the nail being struck by the hammer. All physical systems, including humans, can have only one possible future.

To defend their position, the Hard Determinists explain how the illusion of free will is produced in humans during the process of deliberation. When one deliberates, he is experiencing conflicting desires and must ‘choose’ how to act. According to eighteenth-century Hard Determinist Baron d’Holbach, forces of similar strength conflict in the brain without the knowledge of the agent who falsely believes that he is deliberating. When one force overwhelms the other, the agent is convinced that he has made a choice. The so-called choice is as causally necessitated as the hammering of the nail, but the individual seems to have deliberated because the brain “experiences such rapid modifications that it is fatigued.”<sup>1</sup> According to Hard Determinists such as Baron d’Holbach, this explains the “the inconstancy of man.”<sup>2</sup> Persons essentially behave inconsistently and view their behavior as spontaneous because they are influenced by conflicting, unseen natural forces beyond their knowledge and control.

The absence of an open future leads to some counterintuitive conclusions. Peter van Inwagen notes that if one were to roll back history in a deterministic universe, events would play out in the same way.<sup>3</sup> While this seems strange, it is physically and logically possible. Imagine the big bang as a chemistry experiment writ large. It is relatively easy to predict the results of a small-scale chemical reaction. For instance, combining a gram of sodium and a gram of

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## 1ST PLACE: PROBABILISTIC CHAINS (CONTINUED)

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chlorine in the right way yields two grams of salt every time. No chemist would predict otherwise. In fact, it would be absurd to say that rolling back the reaction a few seconds could lead to a different result. For Hard Determinists, the same principle also applies to human history. Roll the clock back to 1945, and the Allies would win World War II before the end of the year every time. Why? The causes necessitating Allied victory would be in place. Oppenheimer would be working on the nuclear bomb, the Germans would be losing the Battle of the Bulge, and Axis governments would be running out of supplies.

To reject these claims, a Libertarian would have to prove there is something mysterious and immaterial about humans that allows them to develop agency and to defy physical law.<sup>4</sup> The only evidence Libertarians have produced to defend their position is subjective or unproven. Libertarians often defend human freedom by endorsing the concept of agent causation, the idea that persons are agents who can cause events but are not themselves caused by earlier events. Van Inwagen summarizes the standard argument in defense of agent causation as “a process’s having one outcome rather than one of the other outcomes it might have had as an event. For it to be up to an agent what the outcome of a process will be is for the agent to be able to cause each of the outcomes that the process would have.”<sup>5</sup> Basically,

van Inwagen says that since humans face an open future, humans must have free will. But this assertion presupposes what needs to be shown. The primary question in the free will debate is whether it is rational to believe in an open future for humans. van Inwagen’s argument does nothing to answer this question.

Our current understanding of physical law challenges d’Holbach’s mechanistic world picture by revealing an irreversibly indeterministic universe. Quantum mechanics indicates that particle behavior is random and highly probabilistic. The theory appears to challenge the Hard Determinist position that there is only one physically possible future, and to reinforce the Libertarian picture of an indeterminate gap between present and future. However, it is possible for a Determinist to affirm there are multiple physically possible futures without contradiction. It is easy to make the mistake of associating an indeterminate future with agency, but in probabilistic cases agency is not required for an indeterminate future. Nor is it possible.

Consider an individual whose decisions were at the mercy of the odds. Although his future would be indeterminate, it would not be free since his future would not be up to him. Additionally, the random behavior in the quantum mechanical model yields a predictable universe because scientists are capable of predicting large-scale particle behavior. Imagine shining a flashlight at a glass window. Most of the light would shine through the window. For the purposes of the example,

say that figure is 96 percent. Scientists cannot predict which photons (light particles) will penetrate the glass and which will not. However, they know 96 percent will always make it through the glass and 4 percent will not. Thus, under the quantum mechanical model, large aggregations of particles (including humans) behave predictably and consistently, and since individual particles behave randomly, there is no room for agency on any level.

After prematurely dismissing the quantum-mechanical problem, van Inwagen makes an appeal to subjective experience, asking if the reader can “really believe” a non-trivial choice (i.e., choosing a career) is not up to him.<sup>6</sup> He appeals to the societal value of belief in free will by suggesting that agents, free or not, cannot make practical decisions without belief in an open



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future. He states that if an unimpeachable source informed him that his life is determined, he would have to admit he no longer understood the world. Van Inwagen concludes that agent causation offers the “smallest mystery available.”<sup>7</sup> While this is true from the subjective standpoint of Peter van Inwagen, he advances no argument anchored in real, objective evidence. True, most humans believe in an open future and it would be inconvenient to do otherwise, but everything we know about physics indicates that humans are nevertheless unfree.

Compatibilists attempt to reconcile the theories of free will and Determinism, but this theory is perhaps the most incoherent of all. Traditional Compatibilists such as W. T. Stace argue the problem is semantic, and what is commonly considered free will can exist in a deterministic universe. The mistake is to define “free” as “uncaused.” A voluntary act is one that is caused in the right way. Stace argues that if a person makes a choice based on their desires and action is not constrained by outside forces, he is acting freely.<sup>8</sup> Stace’s semantic solution broadens the definition of free will beyond what is usually considered free behavior. It extends the possibility of free will to animals generally considered unfree non-persons. A dog can choose between rolling in grass and chasing a ball, and if his behavior is consistent with his internal desires, his act is free. Yet, we would consider human will to be freer than that of dogs, because while dogs appear to act impulsively, humans are reflective, evaluating and choosing which desires they act upon. Stace also fails to acknowledge an important implication of Determinism. He concedes that actions are determined by causal chains, but he does not explain how desires belonging to causal chains are consistent with an open future. If one’s desires are not one’s own, but instead the result of unalterable natural forces, one cannot have free will. That is the premise of Determinism, and because traditional Compatibilism accepts this premise, it must reject the idea of an open future.

In response to these criticisms, some Compatibilists have refined their theory. Deep Compatibilists such as Harry Frankfurt argue that human will is different from that of other animals because humans form second order desires. Animals are part of a class called wantons, beings which act on their strongest desires in every case. Persons are distinct from wantons because they form second order desires to determine what they want to want.<sup>9</sup> How-

ever, the distinction between persons and wantons is weak. One could argue that second order desires are illusory and are really just a conscious recognition of one’s strongest desires. The theory also suffers from an infinite regress, because the agent needs to want his second order desires, third order desires, and all desires that follow. Overlooking the regress leaves the theory with an equally fatal flaw: if the chain of desires is finite, as in a second-first order relationship, it is possible for a second order desire to be caused. For instance, if a person chooses to eat ice cream, their desire to desire ice cream might originate from past experiences of enjoying ice cream. If those past experiences were also caused by caused desires, then the person’s will is determined.

Even if one accepts the theoretical argument for Hard Determinism, it is difficult to accept its practical implication that humans are not morally responsible for their actions. If everyone’s actions are causally necessitated and no one can act differently, individuals could no longer be held responsible for their actions. A Hard Determinist would not be concerned with this outcome. Our subjective experience often blurs objective reality, but our view can be corrected through the lens of reason. Instead of mourning the loss of conventional morality, a Determinist might seek to replace it with social engineering that produces socially desirable behavior. It is irrational to accept the logic of determinism in theory and then reject it due to the practical demands of morality.

Hard Determinism initially might seem outdated, but the evidence suggests that, with modification, it is still the most rational position to maintain in the contemporary world. Libertarians fail to provide objective evidence to the contrary, and both Compatibilism and Deep Compatibilism fail to show how an open future is possible in a deterministic universe. Although determinism has disturbing moral implications and challenges subjective experience, it is senseless to reject the facts implied by the known laws of physics to comfort our gut convictions.

### Notes

1. Baron d’Holbach, “We are Completely Determined,” 408.
2. Ibid.

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## 1ST PLACE: PROBABILISTIC CHAINS (CONTINUED)

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3. Peter van Inwagen, "The Powers of Rational Beings: Freedom of the Will," 423–24.
4. Ibid., 421–22
5. Ibid., 430
6. Ibid., 432.
7. Ibid., 433.
8. Walter T. Stace, "Compatibilism," 446.
9. Harry Frankfurt, "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person," pp. 451–54.

### Works Cited

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## SECOND PLACE WINNER

### Freedom in Degrees

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#### I. Introduction

Man would not be satisfied even if he had the whole world, yet he yearns for it still. The presence of such weighty influences is only bearable through our sense of progress, which exists only alongside our unique will, both bounded and free. The freedom to progress towards the attainment of some object, the achievement of some goal, the conformity to some standard or the fulfillment of some purpose is the utmost freedom we can have within the confines of our human nature. We have free will—a sufficient degree of freedom to act in accordance with the paramount demands of our existence, those refined desires which bring about progress—because of the condition of self-ownership unique to mankind.

#### II. Appropriate Freedom

The free will we desire not only grants us freedom to move in accordance with our influences, but freedom to influence our influences. In other words, we are free if we are not powerless over our influences, external or internal. An influence is any factor affecting the state of an agent: appetites, values, desires, principles, substances, threats, physical force, sensations, stimuli, emotions, standards, habits, morality, etc. Shackles are an external influence subverting free will as

long as it prevents us from acting in the manner we desire. Alcoholism is a subversive internal influence if it causes us to act in an undesirable manner. While restraints by shackles or alcohol may be superable, their influence will detract from our free will by limiting our exercise of the will to an inappropriate degree.

The will can best be thought of as a manager, whose role exists only due to our internal influences, or employees, reacting to external influences or the market. While the manager has a degree of command over his employees, he cannot control everything they do nor does he desire to exert time and energy doing so. Conversely, the manager regards the demands and advice of his employees, so both the manager and employees are influenced as they are influential, albeit in varying measure. There are some employees, such as hunger and thirst, who cannot be fired because they keep the company, or self, in operation. Other employees, such as values and standards, would not be fired because they lead the company in the right direction. Then there are employees who do minimal work but do not impede the company. These influences, such as a fondness for chocolate, can be resisted if necessary, but the manager does not fire them without good reason. A free will is free in the same sense a manager is free to do his job—unconstrained by factors inside and outside