

# Cracking The Nutshell

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## How Much Free Will Do You Have?

Posted on [March 26, 2015](#) by [Dolors](#) — [No Comments](#) ↓

### How Free Are Your Choices? Is Free Will an All or Nothing Concept?



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#### Introduction:

How much free will do you have? How free are your choices? Are they 100% free? Or... not free at all? How about something in between, say... 50% free, 25% free... 75% free? Can we still make sense of the notion of free will in a Universe

where things may not be as black and white as some physicists, neuroscientists and philosophers like to portray? Is free will quantifiable? What if I tell you that it may actually be up to you whether you are free to choose or not? And what does quantum mechanics have to say about all this? Let's find out...

The notion of free will is often presented as an all or nothing kind of scenario. Simplifying things in such a way creates more controversy and – let's face it – ideas are a lot simpler to conceptualise when we forget about those oh so important 50 shades of grey.... Some will say that either we are 100% free to will into our lives anything that we please, or else we are not free at all. That's it, unless we are 100% in control of every single thing that happens in our lives, free will does not make sense at all.

You cannot consciously control what pops up in your mind, Sam Harris says. You cannot account for all the causes that lead to a certain thought, or a particular feeling, or a particular choice, for that matter. We are slaves to long causal chains that are completely outside of our control – it appears. Since we can neither control all what happens to us nor break free of these causal chains we are subject to, free will must be an illusion.

### **Free Will = Control?? Free Will = Super-Powers??**

It's as if – according to this view – in order to have free will, we either must have some sort of super-hero powers, or at the very least, we must be able to control absolutely every factor that plays a role in our decision making process and we must be able to “will into being” anything that we please. Either we have this exclusive 100% self-determination power and the ability to control external circumstances and avoid the fate imposed by the Universe's long causal chains or free will cannot exist.

For instance, Jim Mooney in the comment section for my previous video, he thinks that our choices are limited, not totally free. We cannot choose to fly like Superman, for instance, he says. No, in general, we do not seem to be able

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to break the laws of physics as we please, I totally agree. And Jim, I must admit that you actually touch on very important and valid points in your comment. But I wonder... why oh why do we tend to load up the concept of freedom to the point of absurdity?

*Jim Mooney's comment:*

*"If you are in a human body your choices are limited. You can't fly like Superman, for instance. If you are poor, they are even more limited. So no choice is totally free – but a constrained choice. Anyone who has tried to quit smoking again and again, has a perfect demonstration that his "free will" is baloney – yet insists he has it ;)" "*

Instead of calling it free will, let's call it *"I think I need another dose of my concoction right now..."*

The concept of freedom implicit in the free will notion is not about having absolute or immediate control over what we can or cannot do. It is not about being able to break the laws of physics either. It is not about being able to choose our genes or the family and country we are born into. It is not about having total power or control over external circumstances or what happens to us.

### **Free Will, Decision Space and Awareness of a Realm of Possibilities:**

Assuming an intrinsically indeterministic, observer-dependent, non-realistic Universe – which seems a very plausible scenario given what modern science experiments are revealing about the nature of reality – assuming that, having freedom of choice means to be in a state of mind where we realise that our decision space – at any given moment, when we need to make a choice – has more than one branch in it, that the future is actually not set in stone. No matter how constrained or limited our decision space might have become, our free will would still remain intact, as long as we could still retain the ability to be aware of more than one possible future scenario.

My point being, decision space is not exactly the same as free will! Even though we may often talk about quantifying free will, what we are actually doing is quantifying our decision space, where decision space essentially means the total number of possible choices available to us.

The concept of freedom implicit in the free will notion is about our ability to be aware of a branching of possibilities lying ahead of us, consciously or unconsciously, given whatever circumstances we find ourselves in, no matter how narrow our decision space might have become... So, free will is about, first, being aware of this branching of possibilities and, second, being able to act on this awareness, by making our choice according to our own will or intent.

### **Free Will and the Unconscious Mind:**

Let me stress what I think is a very important point here: in my opinion, this awareness of the possibilities that are available to us, as well as the process of choosing one of the available possibilities, is quite likely to be a process that starts in our unconscious. We are still aware of the possibilities lying ahead of us and we still choose according to our own will or intent, but I think it is likely that all of this starts as a non self-reflective process, no matter what kind of choice we are making. Self-reflective consciousness would come afterwards, when the feedback loop is closed: when we are aware that we are aware, or when we are aware that we have made a choice.

What I am trying to say is that it is likely that we are only consciously aware that we have made a choice a little bit after we have already made the choice in our unconscious mind. But we already know about all that since at least Freud and Jung... That our self-reflective conscious mind is only the tip of the iceberg, that self-reflectiveness is only the bouncing of an image back and forth in the mirrors of consciousness, an image from a light source which in fact originated in the unconscious.

The crucial point here, I think, is to understand that the fact that our choices may originate in the unconscious does not in

any way make them any less ours or any less free, unless of course one belongs to the My-brain-made-me-do-it camp, a world view which assumes reductionism, determinism, realism (and a bunch of other –isms I can't quite put my finger into right now...); assumptions which are not only a little bit dated... but they are simply not justified at all, especially since the birth of Quantum Physics, the development of Systems thinking, aka holism, the study of complex systems and all that jazz... And all of this of course, ties in with the interpretation of Libet's experiments, the idea of an illusory Self, our answer to the question "who-am-I?" and a bunch of other important ideas which I will hopefully cover in a future video. Sometime.... One day, at some point....!

### **Life as a Game of Cards. How Are You Going to Play it? – The Psychology of Free Will:**

So... As the saying goes, think of your life as a game of cards. You may not be able to control the hand you are dealt with, but you can indeed choose the way you play it. Well, think of free will as the way you play the cards you have been given. You could be a prisoner locked up in a small cell, tied up, deprived of all your human rights, of food, water, the basic right to live... Still, at any given moment, during the short time you would have left, you would still have your free will intact.

You would still have the freedom to choose what you wanted to choose, given your particular external circumstances, and your own awareness of possible future timelines. The type of choices available to a prisoner are of course different than those available to someone who is not held in captivity, in the same way that the choices available to me are different than the choices available to you right now. We just find ourselves in different circumstances. But our circumstances do not directly diminish our free will, although of course they do shape our decision space.

The important thing is to understand the idea that the options available to you right now are the ones you are able to visualise in your own mind, consciously or unconsciously; you can be an active participator in the creation of your own decision space, given the cards you have been given, at any

given time. So... I would say that while in principle your free will always remains intact, no matter what circumstances you find yourself in, your decision space is not only influenced by external factors but also by your own mental attitude towards the idea of free will. In practical terms, this means that if, for instance, you are only able to visualise one single future timeline, then you are effectively turning off your capacity for free will.

If you see yourself as a puppet at the mercy of external circumstances, then I bet that you are quickly becoming one. As Henry Ford said... whether you think you can, or whether you think you can't, you are probably absolutely right. Which, in free will terms, this might as well be translated into: whether you believe you have free will or whether you believe you don't have it, you are probably absolutely right. If you tend to erect brick walls around yourself, then you are likely to see yourself trapped, unable to visualise any alternative options to choose from, in whatever situation you find yourself in. You are effectively narrowing down your decision space into just one possible option.

However, if you can be aware, in consciousness space, of there being more than one possibility, and hence create a decision space which contains two or more options, each of them leading to a different future timeline, and as long as you act on this awareness, then you are exercising your full capacity for free will. And to a certain extent, it is up to you how large your decision space can become. If life is treating you badly and on top of that you erect massive walls around you, it is likely that you will only be able to visualise one possible future timeline. You will see yourself as a victim of external circumstances and hence will be completely unable to make a free choice, for the simple reason that you won't see yourself as having any choices at all in life. You will literally make yourself a puppet of the Universe. I guess the irony of it all is that, even in this extreme case, it would still be up to you whether you want to see yourself as a victim, a simple observer, or as an active participator in the way your life unfolds....

Think about it: ultimately, it might be up to you whether you are able to fully exercise your free will or not! Your mental

attitude, the way you see yourself in the world, your openness or closeness to visualising a realm of possibilities, may play a huge role in how your life unfolds and how much you actively participate in it. What do you think of the idea that you can actually choose whether you are free to choose or not!? This one is definitely an amusing paradox to ponder about just before bedtime... And I bet Sam Harris would be incredibly amused by it... Ok, let's talk about another extreme definition of free will now, which I introduced you to in my previous videos, where I covered [Bell's Theorem](#) and also [Conway & Kochen's Free Will Theorem](#).

### **Discussion of the Free Choice Definition in Quantum Mechanics. 100% Free Choices??**

This definition of free will requires the ability to make choices which are 100% free from all past or external influences. This presumably would also include our past mental states, so effectively, this definition completely disregards our feedback memory systems, the fact that we tend to get stuck in certain patterns or habits, and so on... Think about it. This notion of free will is probably just as extreme as the notion I was discussing earlier which required that we must be able to 100% self-determine not only the way we play our cards but also the cards we play with.

In this case, a 100% free choice, in the context of a quantum physics experiment, is defined as the kind of choice that can only be correlated to variables in its causal future, but not its causal past. Note that, in this definition, the emphasis is not on self-determination or control, but rather, on the ability to make a choice which somehow does not depend in any way on past history or external influences of any kind. For all intents and purposes, a 100% free choice, according to this definition, looks like a completely random choice, that is, a choice which could not in any way be correlated with anything else in the past history of the universe or any other external events taking place away from us in space-like separated points of the Universe. A 100% free choice, according to Bell and Conway & Kochen, would be a choice which could only be correlated with events in its own future light cone.

As I was saying in [my previous video](#), requiring a human being to be able to perform a 100% free choice sounds a bit unhuman to me, because, it seems that we are equating this human free choice with a random choice. Are we humans really able to make completely random choices which are not influenced by anything at all? As John Conway points out, we only require that humans are able to perform some of their choices in this manner, of course not all of them. We could call this kind of free choices non-responsible, inconsequential free choices. It is almost as if, in the context of a quantum physics experiment, what we are requiring is that, at least sometimes, human experimenters need to be able to perform completely random choices, which are not at all influenced by their past history or external events.

**(to be continued.... Next video coming soon!)**

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