



DO WE HAVE FREE WILL?

FRANK PASTORE

In the external, or physical, world, we're all aware of standard cause and effect, right? You know, "Object A acts upon Object B with Force X." We all get that, because it applies to just about everything -- from electrons to athletes.

But now consider events in your internal, or mental, world. What causes your thoughts?

Some of our thoughts have external causes, like when we touch something and suddenly realize it's hot. We don't deliberate whether or not to pull our hand away, right? Our brain has already fired the instruction to do so -- involuntarily. In some strange sense, "we" didn't really pull our hand away at all -- because "we" didn't choose to do it. Our brain did it before consulting us.

A second cause of our thoughts is internal. Say you're thinking about giving a big presentation and as you do so, you get increasingly nervous, and your blood pressure and your heart rate jump up. Now, nothing external is acting upon you. You're doing all the "causing" internally, right? Your anxious thoughts are causing your brain to send signals to your heart, and we get that.

But now, I want you to consider a third category of your thoughts -- it's your conscious choices -- something as simple as choosing where to go for lunch.

Now when you introspect, when you think about your thinking, do you believe that you're the active agent in charge of the process, or that you're just a passive recipient of the instruction -- that you have no choice in the matter, it's all external forces -- be they environmental, genetic, chemical, biological, or neurological?

In other words, do you think all your thoughts have external causes beyond your control, or do you think that you control some, if not most, of your thoughts?

Now let's stay with our lunch example for a second... back to the question...I ask you "Where do you want to go for lunch today?"

Now, if all you are is a brain, an exhaustively physical system of neurons and synapses, then there's no "you" that's gonna be making a "choice" at all. Your thought processes are basically just a complex series of colliding electron-dominoes crashing into one another. It's just physical cause and effect, right -- something that can be exhaustively understood in terms of physics and chemistry? There's no "you" that's an agent that's deliberating, or choosing, or exercising free will.

And that's why, if you are just a brain, you cannot have free will. You would just be a physical machine – a very complex but programmed computer.

But, if you're something more than your brain – if you're the thing that has the brain – then, when I ask you “Where do you want to go for lunch?,” you're going to start deliberating – you're going to be weighing your taste preferences, the commute time, perhaps even counting calories. You'd be weighing various reasons to choose one place over another. You wouldn't be caused to think about any of these things. You would choose to think about these things, and you could stop anytime you wanted to.

So, what we have here, therefore, are two different types of things: an immaterial mind and the material brain. You are the thing that has the brain – you are not your brain.

Now look, even if you were the world's foremost brain expert, and you knew what was happening with every electron in someone's brain at a specific, particular moment, you still wouldn't have a clue about what's going on inside that person's mind. Surgeons can have access to my brain, but only I have access to my mind.

This is what makes you human and not a machine.

Psychology, the study of the mind, is not reducible to physics, and biology, and chemistry. Yet, there are many materialists – people who believe that physical matter is all that exists, that the only reality – including every thought, every feeling, every mind, every will, all of this is totally explained in terms of matter in motion, simply physical phenomena. These materialists believe that we're no more than robots and that free will is an illusion, a myth.

Now, why do they believe this? Because they understand that the moment they acknowledge that free will exists, that there really is an immaterial you beyond the physical realm, that there really is a mind, not just a brain, then there has to be something non-physical that accounts for our non-physical minds.

Now when you exercise your free will and you choose to think about all of this – you're gonna probably reason – just like I did – that there is a Great Mind that accounts for the origin of your mind.

But again, that's your choice – it's evidence of your free will.

I'm Frank Pastore for Prager University.