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LIVING WITHOUT FREE WILL

BY KYLE HILL, JREF RESEARCH FELLOW

*I was going to write this essay. I could not have decided otherwise.*

Kyle, nice assertion. But how do you know that you could not have decided otherwise? Did you try to decide otherwise, but found that some invisible force made you write this essay?

If I task you to decide between writing an essay on the Mayan calendar or not writing the essay, are you claiming that whichever way it turns out, that it was foreordained?

If so Kyle, you need to review these two links:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Argument\_from\_consequences

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Falsifiability

*I do not mean that if I was laying on the couch that this essay would have written itself, in a fatalistic sense, but given my genetics, my childhood, the experiences I have had and the people I have met, the prior state of the universe and my brain chemistry at this very moment, I was going to write this essay.*

Kyle, we're still waiting for some evidence to support your assertion. It sounds an awful lot like an appeal to consequences.

In order for your assertion to be falsifiable, you need to argue in the present, not take credit for things that happened in the past.

*After reading Sam Harris’ new book Free Will I can say that I am fairly convinced that our common sense notion of free will does not exist. This idea of free will could be defined as the subjective feeling that your conscious self is the author of your thoughts and actions.*

Kyle, you are redefining a term to fit your needs. Here is the definition of free will as given in Dictionary.com

"1. Free and independent choice; voluntary decision.

 2. (Philosophy) The doctrine that the conduct of human beings expresses personal choice and is not simply determined by physical or divine forces."

Kyle, nowhere in either definition is free will defined as a "feeling." Now for the definition of "feeling" (#4 is applicable here): "The general state of consciousness considered independently of particular sensations, thoughts, etc."

Kyle, feelings deal with the conscious mind *independent* of thoughts. That's why people often say, "thoughts and feelings." Free will, on the other hand, is impossible without thought. Therefore, your redefinition is invalid.

*My goal here is to generally lay out Harris’ argument against free will and then consider what it has meant for me to live a life without free will. Many of religious faith and an inordinate fondness of free will (as it allows for their eternal punishment of course) should be surprised to hear that it is not much different.*

Kyle, let's leave the ghost worshippers out of this. They have nothing intelligent to add to *any* discussion on *any* topic.

*One of the points in Dr. Harris’ book is that free will is an illusion of an illusion. While I admittedly had to read the page on which this quote was located perhaps ten or so times, I believe that I now understand what he meant. Not only does our commonsense notion of free will run counter to what we know about science generally and neurology specifically (making it an illusion), we can realize ourselves, subjectively, that it does not exist (an illusion of an illusion).*

Kyle, whatever we may realize has no bearing on the issue. It is evidence that has bearing on the issue. The evidence will determine whether or not it exists, not our subjective feelings.

*That is to say, if you simply pay attention to how thoughts and intentions merely pop out of the void and into your mind,*

Kyle, what is a void? unless physicists who study quantum mechanics are wrong, there is no place in the Universe where you can find "a void." So assuming this void does exist, how does it form thoughts and intentions? How does it transport them into your mind?

Brain researchers can pinpoint exactly where certain emotions and thoughts occur in our brains. But your statement claims that these are not the places where the thoughts are originating. What evidence do you have that these thoughts are originating in a void and are then transported to specific areas of the brain?

*through mechanisms that are completely mysterious to you, you realize that your conscious “self” is simply a witness to choices that have already been made.*

Kyle, those would be the choices that were made in the void that scientists don't believe exists?

*You are not aware of what your thoughts or intentions or wants or desires are until they materialize in consciousness through avenues that you have no control over.*

Kyle, Libet's 2003 experiment that tested the mind's "veto power" proved that we do have control over some intentions. That meets the definition of free will. No, not your definition Kyle - the one in the dictionary; which is the only one that matters.

*In this view, paraphrasing Harris, you are no freer to choose the next thing you think than the next thing I write.*

Kyle, if you can't choose the next thing you write, how come it doesn't come out in gibberish? Does the void know English?

*Because we know that all human action is determined by brain states, why doesn’t this conception of biological determinism extend to all brain states? The same brain functions that force someone to count to 47 every time they enter a room, for example, are the same brain functions that make you turn left instead of right down a sidewalk. We are nearsighted in the application of our knowledge about the brain. Once we admit that people are not the causal agents of their thoughts and actions depending on brain states, we have readied the coffin for commonsense free will.*

Kyle, your pronouncement of the death of free will is based on the assumption that we are not the causal agents of our thoughts. That is called "Begging the Question." You cannot assume your conclusion in your premises - you must first prove your premises.

*To make the absence of free will subjectively clear, Harris outlines the following thought experiment:*

Kyle, "thought experiments" are not evidence. They are attempts to persuade, in the absence of evidence.

*Think of a city, any city. There will most likely be a blank period and then names of cities will simply appear in consciousness.*

Kyle, that blank period can easily be explained by the fact that it takes time for memories (such as the names of cities) to be retrieved from the neural networks that store them. I wouldn't describe that process as "simply appear." I would describe it as the conscious mind responding to a request to retrieve information from networks that have stored data. You are using the phrase "simply appear" to misrepresent what goes on in the brain.

*Where was your choice?*

Kyle, I picked Tehran because the way things are going, it may soon be replaced by a mushroom cloud.

*For example, did you choose for only Tokyo and Cairo to occur to you?*

No Kyle, I picked Tehran.

*Tokyo and Cairo may have come into your head and then you deliberated between the two, finally choosing Tokyo. But why?*

Kyle, I don't know why. You are the one who is claiming to know why. You told me to pick a city so I searched my memories for names of cities and the first one I thought of was Tehran.

*Surely you can come up with some rationalization, but why that particular rationalization?*

Kyle, I didn't offer any rationalization - I simply told you that I picked Tehran (the mushroom cloud part was just a joke).

*Did you choose that reason?*

Kyle, I believe that I chose not to search my brain for any more city names because one was all you asked for.

Haven't you ever taken a psychological test where you were asked to say the first thing that came into your mind when shown a picture or given a word?

Those tests aren't that unusual. They must have liked my answers because I was released a short time later.

*Did you choose to deliberate only between Cairo and Tokyo? What about Dublin? You are probably aware of this city but did not think of it.*

Kyle, I'm aware of the names of thousands of cities but did not think of them. What's your point?

*You are not free to choose that which does not occur to you.*

Kyle, really? If it doesn't occur to me then I am not free to choose it?

Absolutely fucking brilliant.

*There is no free will here.*

Kyle, agreed. Whatever gave you the idea that there was a dispute over being able to exercise free will on things that do not occur in the brain?

*If you closely pay attention to how thoughts, desires, intentions, and wants mysteriously arise in consciousness,*

Kyle, "mysteriously" doesn't apply to all thoughts. For instance, when someone is attacked by a bear, I don't see what you find mysterious about forming the intention to run.

*through no control of your own, free will disappears right before you. For free will to be true, you would have to choose what you think before you think it.*

Kyle, you set up an impossible situation, and then declared that this impossible situation is required to prove free will. If you can't see the flawed logic in that argument, then reread it until you can.

Here's a hint Kyle, choosing IS thinking, so it is impossible to choose before you think.

*The impossibility of this task makes the conclusion ever clearer: free will is an illusion.*

Kyle, the reason the task is impossible is because it is nonsensical. Therefore, no conclusion can be drawn.

*I think the more important discussion is the one that we need to have after we realize that free will is nonexistent.*

Kyle, then we may not be talking for quite some time. Despite your assertions, free will has not been proven to be nonexistent. See: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neuroscience\_of\_free\_will

Kyle, take special note of the part where the article states that there is no scientific consensus on the subject of free will.

*Many people think losing free will would mean losing the ability to punish criminals, or other activities that ascribe willful responsibility.*

Well Kyle, if people aren't responsible for their actions, on what grounds could you punish ... anyone?

*However, as Harris points out, we do not need free will to preserve these institutions. You do not need to ascribe free will to a bear in order to justify keeping it away from small children.*

Kyle, keeping a bear away from children has nothing to do with whether or not the bear has free will. It is simply a necessary action to protect children.

*The bear’s actions are a result of its genetics, brain chemistry, previous interactions with the world, etc., and does not “choose” to harm people or not, it is just a bear.*

Kyle, nice assertion. But experiments show that animals do think and can make choices. A bear may choose to attack a small child, but might choose to flee if confronted by a pack of hunters. In both situations it was "just a bear" yet it reacted quite differently depending on the circumstances.

*Realize that you are as beholden to the prior states of the universe as the bear is. We can still lock up dangerous criminals, as we can keep bears away from children, but punishing them for having a certain brain then becomes morally problematic.*

Kyle, if you lock up dangerous criminals to protect children, you *are* punishing the criminals. Your admission that it is "morally problematic" exposes the contradiction in your position: a contradiction from which you cannot escape.

*This view also makes hating (as opposed to fearing) people like psychopaths irrational and encourages compassion towards their predicament (worthy goals for any philosophy).*

Kyle, my compassion lies with the victims. The psychopaths are dealt with on an individual basis depending on what they did, taking into consideration any mitigating factors (for example: a brain tumor).

*For me, the realization that we live without free will ....*

Kyle, Rationalists only accept as true, those things that have been proven to be true through the application of the scientific method. To accept something as true before it has been proven true is not skeptical thinking ... it is wishful thinking.

*I have recently transitioned into a field of study that I am not sure is the right fit for me. I am uncertain and hesitant about my future. But knowing that my conscious self is ultimately not the author of my actions, I have eliminated regret from my life.*

That's too bad Kyle, because regret is one of the most powerful emotions we possess for helping us to improve upon improper actions that we have taken in the past.

*For any personal choice that you may regret making, the absence of free will means that given the state of the universe at the moment you made the decision, you could not have chosen otherwise.*

Kyle, you've just secured the serial killer vote. In fact, considering how many people would love to believe your statement, you could probably get enough votes to win a seat in Congress.

*To think you could have chosen otherwise is to either merely think the thought “I could have chosen otherwise,” or to say that the choice could have been different in a different universe.*

Kyle, a different Universe? Now your argument is just getting silly.

*This liberates me. It is also exciting.*

Kyle, neither of which makes it true. But I'm real happy for you. Christians operate pretty much the same way; it doesn't matter to them whether or not it's true ... only that it makes them happy.

*You and I are fundamentally unaware about what we are going to do or think or say next. I no longer bemoan some of my quirkier tendencies and desires.*

Kyle, perhaps if you did, you could do something about them.

*It becomes harder in a world without free will to lament over your failures.*

Kyle, what do you mean "harder?" In a world without free will, why would you lament over failures at all?

*You are neither in control of forces outside of yourself (nature, other people, etc.) or the forces inside yourself (your thoughts, beliefs, intentions, etc.).*

Kyle, humans are in control of many things outside themselves. For example, we control water flow by building dams so that they can irrigate farmland. Regarding the forces inside ourselves, I already mentioned the veto experiment which proved that we can control some of our thoughts. Free will doesn't require that we control all of them.

*Where can you then lay the blame?*

Kyle, if your view is correct ... you can't.

*Either way you had no choice in the matter, so pick yourself up, dust yourself off, and move on.*

Kyle, you really don't see the similarity with Christianity, do you? They too have a convenient scapegoat: their Satan is your Void.

*Removing free will from your life simultaneously eliminates wasteful emotions like regret and harmful beliefs like religious notions of culpability.*

Kyle, you have found an excuse for all your mistakes and failures. It wasn't really your failure, it was that damn Void's.

Also Kyle, let's dismiss religion as it has nothing to offer on any subject. Culpability extends beyond religious notions; and you have yet to prove that culpability is a harmful belief.

*Knowing what we now know about free will, religious morality takes another hit.*

Kyle, "religious morality" - nice oxymoron.

*What kind of moral system punishes you for all eternity over thoughts or actions you do not control?*

Kyle, whether or not you control your thoughts or actions has no bearing on the fact that eternal torture is sick by any standard.

*Why place never-ending blame on something that does not exist?*

Kyle, why place never ending blame at all? That's monstrous.

*Imagine the imaginary story of Moses in Egypt. God unleashes a number of plagues upon Egypt when the Pharaoh will not let the Jewish people go. This is not because the Pharaoh is immune to compromise; it is because God had “hardened his heart.” Therefore God is inflicting torment upon a whole city of innocent people based on a choice the Pharaoh made over which the Pharaoh had no control. This is analogous to our discussion about free will.*

Kyle, don't you find it embarrassing that your beliefs exactly mirror wacky Christian beliefs?

Well, you should.

*We now know that human thoughts and actions are determined by brain states and prior variables in the universe that we cannot control, much less choose.*

Kyle, "We now know?" That's awfully presumptuous considering you don't have a scientific consensus backing you up. You should have said, "I now believe."

Kyle, here's some sound advice: when you don't have a scientific consensus backing you up ... don't assert - be humble. That way, if it turns out later that you're wrong, you won't have to eat as much crow: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eating\_crow

*What kind of moral person would punish another for a choice that has everything to do with their luck in parents, or their genetics, that determine their brain state at any particular time?*

Kyle, that was my point earlier. According to your worldview ... you couldn't.

*(The religious idea of “thought crime,” or being punished for “impure” thoughts you think over which you have no control, as Christopher Hitchens likened it to, rests firmly on free will.)*

Kyle, let's leave those screwy ghost worshippers out of this. On one hand they claim they have free will which is how they get their God off the hook for all the evil things He does, while on the other they preclude the possibility of free will by believing in an omniscient being: One who knows the future. So they don't know what they believe.

*Life without free will is not very much different from one with the illusion of it.*

Kyle, if your view becomes accepted, what need would we have for a judicial system? I would say that's a pretty big difference.

*If you closely pay attention to how your unauthored thoughts and actions actually morph into choices in your life, you can know this to be true.*

Kyle, that's not how science works. We can know something to be true only upon the presentation of irrefutable evidence.

*In acknowledging this we lose detestable religious culpability, unscientific notions of dualism, and irrational moral punishments,*

Kyle, I didn't have to acknowledge your position to lose religious culpability and unscientific notions of dualism. But I think you are the one who holds an irrational belief regarding moral punishments since you admitted that your position was "problematic." Now that's what I call ... an understatement.

*and gain a reprieve from regret, an increase in compassion for those who are simply unlucky to have the brain that they do, and an excitement about what we will do or think next.*

Jesus F. Christ Kyle, I feel like I'm talking to Peter Pan.

*Removing the confined parameters of choice and opening ourselves up to the great machinery of the universe, clashes with our fear of uncertainty, but is, counterintuitively, immensely freeing.*

Well Kyle, of course it's immensely freeing to have found an excuse to avoid responsibility for all your mistakes and failures. But I repeat myself. But that's not my fault. I'll just blame it on ... "The Void."

Now, taken from the comment section that followed Kyle's essay:

Examine Your Motivations, Kyle

by Greg Scott Neuman

I'm not going to pretend to know whether or not free will exists. That's a question brilliant people have argued about since the invention of language, and I doubt we're going to solve it here.

However, your motivation for rejecting free will seems to be rooted in your own desire to free yourself of responsibility and worry (and to take a shot or two at theists while you're at it). It allows you to adopt an "I'm not at fault for my bad decisions, so no one has the right to judge me and I don't have to worry about the repercussions." I imagine that would be liberating.

Theists do something similar when they reject science (which requires intelligence and effort to understand) in favor of religion (which merely requires blind acceptance of answers given by others). Both you and they are taking complex, troubling aspects of the human condition and applying a philosophy that conveniently lets you reduce them to "not something I have to worry about."

While Harris' hypothesis might or might not have merit, your enthusiastic acceptance of it seems more about what you want to be true and less about what is true.

Greg, I couldn't have put it any better if I had written that myself.

Now for my final comment:

Kyle, not only is powerful evidence from neuroscience against your position, with the experiment that proved humans have veto power (Libet 2003), but quantum physics has also weighed in against your position by showing that randomness can be amplified without limit:

http://www.ethlife.ethz.ch/archive\_articles/120510\_Zufaelligkeit\_Colbeck\_su/index\_EN

Kyle, this is important because your entire case against the existence of free will rests on your belief that our Universe is entirely deterministic. Evidence from multiple fields of science ... disagrees with your position.

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THE SCIENCE SEGMENT

HOW ELEMENTS HEAVIER THAN IRON ARE PRODUCED

The Big Bang produced lots of hydrogen and helium and a smidgen of lithium. All heavier elements found on the periodic table have been produced by stars over the last 13.7 billion years. Astronomers analyze starlight to determine the chemical makeup of stars, the origin of the elements, the ages of stars, and the evolution of galaxies and the universe. Now for the first time, astronomers have detected the presence of arsenic and selenium, neighboring elements near the middle of the periodic table, in an ancient star in the faint stellar halo that surrounds the Milky Way. Arsenic and selenium are elements at the transition from light to heavy element production, and have not been found in old stars until now.

Stars like our Sun can make elements up to oxygen in the periodic table. Other more massive stars can synthesize heavier elements, those with more protons in their nuclei, up to iron by nuclear fusion—the process in which atomic nuclei fuse and release lots of energy. Most of the elements heavier than iron are made by a process called neutron-capture nucleosynthesis.

Although neutrons have no charge, they can decay into protons after they're in the nucleus, producing elements with larger atomic numbers. One of the ways that this method can work is by exposure to a burst of neutrons during the violent supernova death of a star. We call this process the "rapid process." It can produce elements at the middle and bottom of the periodic table—from zinc to uranium—in the blink of an eye.

Researchers looked at an ultraviolet spectrum from the Hubble Space Telescope public archives to find arsenic and selenium in a 12 billion year-old halo star dubbed HD 160617. These elements were forged in an even older star, which has long since disappeared, and then—like genes passed on from parent to infant—they were born into the star we see today.

The team also examined data for this star from the public archives of several ground-based telescopes and were able to detect 45 elements. In addition to arsenic and selenium, they found rarely seen cadmium, tellurium, and platinum, all of which were produced by the rapid process. This is the first time these elements have been detected together outside the Solar System. Astronomers cannot replicate the rapid process in any laboratory since the conditions are so extreme. The key to modeling the process relies on astronomical observations. Understanding the rapid process helps us know why we find certain elements like barium on Earth, or understand why uranium is so rare.”

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FAMOUS QUOTES

H.L. MENCKEN (no biography - previously quoted)

"A MAN FULL OF FAITH IS SIMPLY ONE WHO HAS LOST THE CAPACITY

FOR CLEAR AND REALISTIC THOUGHT."

http://www.randi.org/site/index.php/swift-blog/1691-living-without-free-will.html