

Predisposed Agency: A New Term for Free Will Because Our Will Isn't So Free

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Abstract

This paper proposes that we rename free will, also called libertarian free will, to the more accurate characterization of “predisposed agency.” This is needed for two reasons: First, classical compatibilists have redefined free will to mean something quite different than and in fact contrary to libertarian free will, and thus have introduced needless confusion into the concept. More importantly, even those who believe in libertarian free will recognize that our will is not so free in that we are predisposed toward the decisions we make and the actions we take due to our genetics and our environment, which include our temperament, our character, our past experiences, our past decisions, our habits, the people we have been with, and the situations we find ourselves in, among other things. But the term “free will” totally ignores the fact that we are predisposed toward certain actions. The danger in this is that if we use the lexicon of free will, and believe in free will, then we are apt to judge others harshly for their actions since if they have free will then it would seem they bear both full responsibility and blame for their actions. But this seems unfair since each of us is predisposed to think, decide, and act as we do. The author proposes a distinction between having responsibility and deserving blame and praise. Specifically, it is argued that if we do have agency (or libertarian free will) then we are fully responsible for what we do, but due to our predispositions, which we necessarily and unavoidably have and are often largely out of our control, we frequently do not deserve full blame or praise.

Keywords

Predisposed Agency, Agency, Free Will, Libertarian Free Will, Partial Free Will, Limited Free Will, Compatibilism, Classical Compatibilism, Determinism, Determinists, Moral Luck, Responsibility, Blame, Praise, Stanford Prison Experiment

1. Changing the Lexicon in the Free Will vs. Determinism Debate

The concept of “free will” is outdated, yet this terminology is ingrained in our philosophical discourse. It is a poor description of the human attribute that we use for our decision-making and intentional actions. Moreover, it has become a source of confusion due to the introduction of a new, substantially different, and competing definition of what free will signifies. This paper proposes that we rename free will to the more accurate characterization of “predisposed agency.” We will see that predisposed agency not only captures the thinking of those who believe in free will, but also properly reflects the realities of our recent empirical studies of the brain and our everyday experiences. It adds something important to the term free will and thus incorporates what the term free will ignores. It is the term that best reflects my own thinking, although in the past I had no better term than free will to exemplify my views.

When referring to free will I am specifically addressing what is known as libertarian free will, which until relatively recently was both the modern academic view of free will and the way the term is used in everyday language. Eddy Nahmias explains this type of free will when he asserts that a full theory of our decision-making will be grounded on the idea that human beings are “unique, creative, unpredictable, imaginative, autonomous agents who are the sources of our actions.” (Nahmias, 2018: p. 3)

In a prior paper I described libertarian free will as follows:

It is the view that at least some conscious decisions a person or agent makes are decided by them and not by the many external and internal influences which act upon them. This type of free will is non-random in the sense that each decision unambiguously flows from the agent and does not just randomly occur for no reason at all and with no clear genesis or source. The agent is the author or source. It is the agent who chooses from among competing desires, instincts, habits, motivations, personal character and personality traits, and other mental states—even if that choice is to let one’s instincts or desires run their course. This means as to the decision made, the agent could have chosen otherwise than they did. Although the decision can be and normally is influenced by both internal and external factors, these factors do not cause the actual decision that was made—the agent does. As Balaguer puts it, “(a) you did it, and (b) nothing made you do it.” (Balaguer, 2014: p. 129; Firestone, 2017: p. 65)

It is this type of free will which currently is more a source of confusion than of clarity in the free will vs determinism debate. We should discern here that libertarian free will is incorporated within and consistent with predisposed agency. It is reflected in the word “agency.” However, the agency aspect tells only a part of the story of human decision-making and intentional actions. Things are not so simple. We need to explore the “predisposed” component of predisposed agency

to understand the full picture, which we will do in Sections 2.2 and 3.1.¹

2. Why We Need a New Term for Free Will

There are at least two reasons why we need a new lexicon for free will. First, classical compatibilism has muddied up the meaning of free will. Second, our free will is not so free as there are numerous factors which influence our thinking, choices, and actions, many of which are largely beyond our control, but which the term free will ignores.

2.1. Classical Compatibilism Radically Changed the Definition of Free Will

The first philosophers who called themselves compatibilists claimed that free will and determinism were compatible, but engaged in a kind of subterfuge because they changed the definition of free will to achieve the compatibilism. Many such compatibilists exist today. They assert that free will is present when we make choices or decisions free from undue coercion or impediment, but not that we could have chosen otherwise than we did. In fact, they go along with the determinist view that we could not have ever chosen contrary to what we did choose. But if we cannot choose differently than we do, then we do not have free will as that term is normally understood. The Stanford Online Encyclopedia of Philosophy explains this version of compatibilism, which it calls “classical compatibilism,” and how its view of free will contradicts libertarian free will:

According to one strand within classical compatibilism, freedom is nothing more than an agent’s ability to do what she wishes in the absence of impediments that would otherwise stand in her way... For the classical compatibilist, then, free will is an ability to do what one wants ... [But] if determinism is true, and if at any given time, an unimpeded agent is completely determined to have the wants that she does have, and if those wants causally determine her actions, then, even though she does do what she wants to do, *she cannot ever do otherwise*. She satisfies the classical compatibilist conditions for free will. But free will requires the ability to do otherwise, and determinism is incompatible with this. (Stanford Online Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Compatibilism: 2.1-2.2.)

So classical compatibilism construes free will in a way that contradicts our normal view of free will. Indeed, classical compatibilism presents us with a contrary and competing definition of free will. The commonly understood version of free will, both in our modern philosophical literature and our everyday speech, defines it as being present if we could have acted otherwise than we did, but the classical compatibilists claim that we have free will even though we couldn’t have acted otherwise than we did—as long as we were not forced or

¹It is incumbent on me to acknowledge that the genesis of this paper was from some thoughts on this subject written by one of my students, Vincent Miller, who, after reading my earlier paper on free will, convinced me that the term free will was inadequate and needed to be changed.

coerced into choosing and acting as we did. We thus now have two incompatible definitions of free will which are simultaneously being utilized in the free will vs. determinism debate.

This alone would be a good reason to change our terminology and abandon the term free will. However, one could assert that we need not give up on the term free will as this problem could be eliminated by having the compatibilists use a different term to describe their beliefs. This would solve the confusion. However, not only is there virtually no chance of this occurring, but more importantly, there is another reason that is at least as strong as this one, and probably much stronger, to change the term free will to predisposed agency, and to which we now turn our attention.

2.2. Free Will Is Not So Free

Even those who believe in libertarian free will agree that we are strongly influenced by our genetics (nature) and environment (nurture). Free will assumes that nature and nurture leave multiple paths or options open which you could choose to take, and further, that you could have chosen to take another path than the one you did. Here the environment encompasses all your past experiences and includes your upbringing and the situations in which you have found yourself. But the problem is that you have no control over your genetics and had little to no control over your environment when you were young and when your character and personality were largely formed. Further, you make many of your decisions based on your early-formed character and personality.²

Indeed, many of the situations you have found yourself in were not of your making or choice. When you were born you had no choice as to your parents, your race or ethnicity, the wealth of your family, and the country and community in which you grew up. You had no choice as to the lessons and morals your parents would teach you, and you were not in charge of the examples set by many of the other people in your life. But if you had little to no control over all these significant aspects of yourself and these influences on your character, decisions, and actions, then how are you fully free when you make those choices? Your free will appears to not be so free.

Jean-Paul Sartre, the champion of libertarian free will, notices this problem, and skillfully makes the case against his own position:

The decisive argument which is employed by common sense against free-

²For example, here are some excerpts from a recent article in Live Science: “Our personalities stay pretty much the same throughout our lives, from our early childhood years to after we’re over the hill, according to a new study. The results show personality traits observed in children as young as first graders are a strong predictor of adult behavior ... Among the findings: Talkative youngsters tended to show interest in intellectual matters, speak fluently, try to control situations, and exhibit a high degree of intelligence as adults. Children who rated low in verbal fluency were observed as adults to seek advice, give up when faced with obstacles, and exhibit an awkward interpersonal style. Children rated as highly adaptable tended, as middle-aged adults, to behave cheerfully, speak fluently and show interest in intellectual matters. Those who rated low in adaptability as children were observed as adults to say negative things about themselves, seek advice and exhibit an awkward interpersonal style.” (Live Science Staff, 2022)

dom consists in reminding us of our impotence. Far from being able to modify our situation at our whim, we seem to be unable to change ourselves. I am not “free” either to escape the lot of my class, of my nation, of my family, or even to build up my own power or my fortune or to conquer my most insignificant appetites or habits. I am born a worker, a Frenchman, an hereditary syphilitic, or a tubercular... Again, it is necessary “to obey nature in order to command it”; that is, to insert my action into the network of determinism. Much more than he appears “to make himself,” man seems “to be made” by climate and the earth, race and class, language, the history of the collectivity of which he is a part, heredity, the individual circumstances of his childhood, acquired habits, the great and small events of his life. (Sartre, 1943: p. 619)

Thomas Nagel, in his celebrated and controversial article “Moral Luck,” addresses similar concerns with his notions of constitutive and circumstantial luck. Turning first to constitutive luck, we should note that it addresses both genetics and one’s early upbringing. It focuses on the things which constitute who each of us are, including the character and values we each have. Nagel describes constitutive luck as “the kind of person you are, where this is not just a question of what you deliberately do, but of your inclinations, capacities, and temperament.” (Nagel, 1976: p. 367) It is clear it is the nature or inclination of some of us to be patient, while others are short-tempered, some are jealous and some are content with who they are and what they have, some people prefer tennis while others prefer chess, and some are doers while others are thinkers and dreamers. Some people are inclined to lie, and others are inclined to tell the truth. As Nagel explains, “a person may be greedy, envious, cowardly, ungenerous, unkind, vain, or conceited...it is largely a matter of constitutive bad fortune.” (Nagel, 1976: p. 371)

Circumstantial luck, on the other hand, notes the integral role that the environment plays in our actions. Nagel explains his notion of luck in one’s circumstances as “the kind of problems and situations one faces.” (Nagel, 1976: p. 369) Nagel argues that what one does has a lot to do with the circumstances in which one finds themselves, and further, does not seem to be best explained by a will which is totally free to do as it chooses. Nagel gives us an example from Nazi Germany to demonstrate his point.

The third category to consider is luck in one's circumstances. I shall mention it briefly. The things we are called upon to do, the moral tests we face, are importantly determined by factors beyond our control. It may be true of someone that in a dangerous situation he would behave in a cowardly or heroic fashion, but if the situation never arises, he will never have the chance to distinguish or disgrace himself in this way, and his moral record will be different.

A conspicuous example of this is political. Ordinary citizens of Nazi Ger-

many had an opportunity to behave heroically by opposing the regime. They also had an opportunity to behave badly, and most of them are culpable for having failed this test. But it is a test to which the citizens of other countries were not subjected, with the result that even if they, or some of them, would have behaved as badly as the Germans in like circumstances, they simply did not and therefore are not similarly culpable. (Nagel, 1976: pp. 371-372)

So we can see that people's actions have a lot to do with the situations in which they find themselves. The otherwise kind person may act in an unkind manner when put into life and death circumstances.

Considering both constitutive and circumstantial luck, one can see how factors outside our control play a large role in what we choose to do. A belief in free will indicates that one thinks that humans are the authors and in control of their actions, but a fair evaluation strongly indicates that our authorship is greatly shaped by things which are fully or substantially out of our control. Although Nagel draws a conclusion that goes further than is warranted by his examples, he still brings home the point that our agency seems compromised by all the things which are not in our control.

The area of genuine agency, and therefore of legitimate moral judgment, seems to shrink under this scrutiny to an extensionless point. Everything seems to result from the combined influence of factors, antecedent and posterior to action, that are not within the agent's control. (Nagel, 1976: p. 372)

While I believe Nagel goes way too far and have argued in my earlier paper on this subject that it is likely that we have genuine agency and control over our actions and moral character,³ it is certainly true that we are more likely to make certain decisions and take specific actions due to the influences which Nagel sets forth. Although I believe that we can resist any given influence, it is often difficult to do so. It becomes more difficult to do so when those influences are many and when they have been imbedded in our memories and have become our habits. Indeed, it seems obvious that in many and in probably the great majority of situations, we are much more likely to decide to do some things rather than others. That is why predisposed agency is the more appropriate label for our conscious decisions and actions, as we will explore in the next section.

So free will is not free in the sense that the term glosses over the numerous factors which strongly influence our decision-making—and the glossing over comes at a cost as it has a tendency to lead us to be unsympathetic to the actions of others when they succumb to the myriad of influences which push their decisions and actions in a definite direction. Indeed, people are often swept away by

³I am here viewing moral character as a product of our actions. So, for example, if we habitually lie then our character is one of being a liar, while if we almost always tell the truth then we have a truth-telling character. Notice that our character changes as our actions change, as the liar can choose to tell the truth from this time forward into the future.

a torrent of those influences. But if we ignore the constitutive and circumstantial luck which is often largely out of their control, there seems no reason not to harshly judge the actions of others of which we disapprove, no matter what the influences, challenges, and obstacles they face. After all, if others are fully free then why not fully blame them for their wrongdoings? So there is a consequence or cost of using the term free will, as it ignores the obstacles one faces and the judgments that they fairly deserve. We will see that our new term of predisposed agency solves this concern as it can accommodate the ideas of responsibility and blame in a way that considers both our agency and the predisposed nature of that agency.

3. Why “Predisposed Agency” Should Be the New Term

3.1. The “Predisposed” of Predisposed Agency

In the last section we began to explore the idea that our genetics, our early upbringing, our character, our habits, the circumstances in which we find ourselves, and all our past experiences play a large role in what we decide to do in any given situation. It makes certain actions more probable than not. This does not preclude our ability to say “no” to the dominant influences and set out on a different path, but certainly often makes it challenging to do so. It seems reasonably clear that these factors influence us to such an extent that our actions are predisposed in the sense that it is more probable, given our genetics, our character, our past, and our situations, that we are going to act in a specific way. Indeed, those who know us well can certainly better predict our actions than a complete stranger would or that random chance would indicate.

The notorious Stanford Prison Experiment is an example of how much our actions are shaped and molded by the circumstances in which we find ourselves. Male college students played the roles of guards and prisoners in a mock jail set up on the Stanford campus. Within days some of the guards were engaging in increasingly inappropriate actions which humiliated the student prisoners, including having them remove their clothes, wear bags over their heads, and relieve themselves in a bucket in their cells. The guards had become so brutal that two prisoners had some form of nervous breakdown, one developed a nervous rash all over his body, and one went on a hunger strike. The experiment had to be prematurely terminated after only 6 days due to concerns over the welfare of the student prisoners because of the abuse being perpetrated by those students taking the role of guards. (See [Stanford Prison Experiment, 2023](#) and [Wikipedia, 2023c](#))

This study shows the power of the situation to influence people’s behavior. Indeed, American college students who were put into an environment which seemed to prime them for immoral behavior, took actions which trumped what one would reasonably have expected from them given their upbringing or constitutive luck. So luck in one’s circumstances should be taken very seriously.

But we certainly do not want to downplay the impact of our genetics and upbringing—constitutive luck. In fact, our genetics may play a bigger role on our

world view and orientation than we might expect. Do we tend to see the glass as half-full or half-empty? For many people that may depend on a particular gene, sometimes referred to as the happiness gene. Here is a summary of one study in the field:

The researchers also looked at the relationship between people's well-being and the mutation of a gene that governs serotonin, a chemical linked to feelings of happiness. The research is controversial, but some studies have found that individuals with a mutated, shorter copy of this gene report lower happiness levels. For this part of the study, the researchers looked at people in 30 countries and compared how many people had the mutation in each country. They found that Denmark and the Netherlands have the lowest percentage of people with the mutated shorter copy of the gene, and also ranked the happiest. Italy had the highest percentage of people with the mutation and ranked the least happy of the 30 countries.

Finally, the researchers looked to see if the link between genetics and happiness was passed down from generation to generation. They examined well-being surveys from a group of Americans, and then traced the origin of their ancestors. They found that the happiest Americans descended from immigrants from the happiest countries. (Dickerson, 2014: Live Science online)

Not only do our genes impact our happiness, but it is also well-documented that genetic makeup predisposes some people to have an increased risk of criminal behavior, and that the risk is exacerbated by factors such as coming from a low socioeconomic background.⁴ Indeed, it seems clear that much of the way we are and act is due to both our genetics and our early upbringing, things over which we had little control. We therefore are not beings who have unrestrained free wills, but rather are largely a product of our genetics and environment. They are a part of us and cannot be easily dismissed or ignored. Given these factors, our actions are predisposed. In many and undoubtedly most situations, it is more probable that we act in one way rather than in another way.⁵

That our predispositions accompany us when we make decisions is certainly not a new concept in philosophy. Nietzsche reminded us that there is no person who is fully objective and neutral since we carry our experiences, cares, interests, concerns, agendas, and biases with us when we view and interpret the world. In his book *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche called "contemplation without interest" a "nonsensical absurdity" and explains that we necessarily use *our*

⁴See, for example, the article *Genetics and Crime* which reviews many of the studies in this area. (Baker et al., 2010)

⁵We should mention that there are some situations where the probability that we take one action or a second action are roughly equal, and we could say that one choice or action is not more probable than the other. This occurs when one is in a hard choice situation where the options or choices are equally appealing or are incomparable in a way that we cannot conclude that one option is better than the other. Here we are roughly equally disposed to two options, although we should note that in most cases there are other options that we are less disposed toward and which we do not even take time to consider. We will explore hard choices in our next section on agency.

perspectives and *our* interpretations to understand things.

Henceforth, my dear philosophers, let us be on guard against the dangerous old conceptual fiction that posited a “pure, will-less, painless, timeless knowing subject”; let us guard against the snares of such contradictory subjects as “pure reason,” “absolute spirituality,” “knowledge in itself”: these always demand that we should think of an eye that is completely unthinkable, an eye turned in no particular direction, in which the active and interpreting forces, through which alone seeing becomes seeing *something*, are supposed to be lacking; these always demand of an eye an absurdity and nonsense. There is *only* a perspective seeing, *only* a perspective “knowing” ... (Nietzsche, 1887, III, 12: p. 555)

In other words, each of us is predisposed toward certain perspectives and decisions. We each have a world orientation based on our past. We are not a blank slate from which decisions are made. In fact, there is recent research which indicates that many of us are predisposed to being politically liberal or conservative, and a significant portion of our political predispositions is likely rooted in our biology. In the book *Predisposed: Liberals, Conservatives, and the Biology of Political Differences*, political scientists John Hibbing, Kevin Smith, and John Alford come to the following conclusion:

In this book we make the case that political variations are part of an incredible range of differences in the way people respond to the world. Just to give you a brief teaser, it turns out that liberals and conservatives have different tastes not just in politics, but in art, humor, food, life accoutrements, and leisure pursuits; they differ in how they collect information, how they think, and how they view other people and events; they have different neural architecture and display distinct brain waves in certain circumstances; they have different personalities and psychological tendencies; they differ in what their autonomic nervous systems are attuned to; they are aroused by and pay attention to different stimuli; and they might even be different genetically. At least at the far ends of the ideological spectrum, liberals and conservatives are emotionally, preferentially, psychologically, and biologically distinct. This account is not just based on casual observation or armchair analysis. Science—both social and biological—is our co-pilot. (Hibbing, Smith, & Alford, 2014: p. 6)

Hibbing, Smith, and Alford have conducted their own research and also carefully reviewed the other studies in this area. In Chapter 7 of their book, titled “Politics Right Down to Your DNA,” they conclude that there is a genetic component which predisposes our political views. Here are some excerpts from their summary of the relevant research:

The blockbuster implication, of course, is that social attitudes, including political temperament, are genetically influenced... Political temperament, in short, seems to be at least partially heritable... What such a coefficient

means is that an estimated 40 percent of the variance observed in political attitudes can be attributed to genetic influence... Hatemi and his colleagues found four chromosomal regions that seem to correlate with ideology. Those regions are known to include a number of genes related to the regulation of social behavior, which makes sense given that politics is a form of social behavior. (Hibbing, Smith, & Alford, 2014: pp. 186, 188, 190-191)

Indeed, these researchers point out that in the political arena as well as in the other areas of our life, both our genetics and the environment affect our brains and thereby predispose our behavior in specific directions. “Behaviorally relevant political dispositions exist; they have been constructed in part by genetics, and they permeate every part of our brains.” (Hibbing, Smith, & Alford, 2014: p. 199) They go on to further explain that our brain biology is shaped not just by our genes, but also by our experiences as our brains are elastic and change as we have new experiences. So the environment or nurture impacts and changes our brain biology, and these experiences and our changing brains predispose our behavior toward certain actions. In other words, a portion of our biological dispositions are due to our genetics, while a portion of our biological dispositions are due to our environment—and both our genetics and our environment predispose us toward certain decisions and actions, including our political orientations and views.

Another example of our predisposition to think and act in a specific way is the confirmation bias, a bias that seems to be hard-wired in each of us and leads us toward continually viewing the world with a bias toward our preexisting views. As such, we are not fully open-minded beings, no matter how hard we try to be. We are predisposed to believe what we already believe, and of course, what we already believe will be based largely on our past experiences. In an article in *Scientific American*, science writer Michael Shermer explains the confirmation bias and gives us a good example of how it is expressed in the political arena.

This surety is called the confirmation bias, whereby we seek and find confirmatory evidence in support of already existing beliefs and ignore and reinterpret disconfirmatory evidence. Now a functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) study shows where in the brain the confirmation bias arises and how it is unconscious and driven by emotions. Psychologist Drew Westen led the study, conducted at Emory University, and the team presented the results at the 2006 annual conference of the Society for Personality and Social Psychology.

During the run-up to the 2004 presidential election, while undergoing an fMRI brain scan, 30 men--half self-described as “strong” Republicans and half as “strong” Democrats--were tasked with assessing statements by both George W. Bush and John Kerry in which the candidates clearly contradicted themselves. Not surprisingly, in their assessments Republican subjects were as critical of Kerry as Democratic subjects were of Bush, yet both let their own candidate off the hook. (Shermer, 2006)

There are other ways that we are naturally predisposed to act. For example, in his book *Predictably Irrational: The Hidden Forces That Shape Our Decisions*, Dan Ariely, a professor of psychology and behavioral economics at Duke University, explains that we have a predisposition to act in certain irrational ways and that advertisers successfully exploit this. For example, given three choices most people will take the middle choice, so advertisers put the item that they most want to sell and that will yield them the most profit as the middle choice. A variation of this occurs when restaurants put a very expensive item on the menu which they know few people will order because they also know that this will make it more likely that one buys the second most expensive dish—which is priced to deliver the highest profit margin. (See Ariely, 2009: p. 4)

Another example from Ariely is our irrational propensity to buy things that are advertised to be free, or which state that the advertiser will throw in something free with the purchase. Of course, the products are almost never really free, with the result that we often end up buying things we do not need, and many times do not even want. (See Ariely, 2009: chapter 3)

Summarizing these points, it is clear that human beings are predisposed toward making one decision over another due to the fact that as a species, we have human needs and human desires and are hardwired to view the world in specific ways. But we have not only human predispositions, but also individual predispositions due to the unique DNA each of us have and the unique experiences each of us have undergone. Indeed, our will is not so free in that we are predisposed toward particular decisions and actions by our temperament, our talents and abilities, our character, our past experiences, our past decisions, our habits, the people we have been with, and the situations we find ourselves in, among other things.

Neuroscientific studies support characterizing our ability to choose as predisposed agency. Experiments have revealed that our brain does much of the processing of information before we make a conscious decision. In other words, unbeknownst to us, our brain is constantly assessing and evaluating our situations, with input from our genetics and experiences, and then presents our consciousness with tentative choices to make and actions to take. Our unconscious brain is evaluating our options, and doing so with everything at its disposal, including our genetics and temperament, our character, our past experiences, our past decisions, etc. So even before we make a conscious decision, we are disposed to choose a certain way. We will probably make a decision that is in keeping with the unconscious thoughts which are presented to our conscious self. Again, our actions are predisposed. Let us briefly look at three neuroscientific studies in the field which support this analysis.

In Soon, Brass, Heinze, & Haynes (2008), researchers looked at brain scans which observed unconscious brain activity known as the readiness potential, and were able to predict up to 10 seconds beforehand and with 60% accuracy which of two buttons a person would push. A similar experiment by Fried, Mukamel, &

Kreiman (2011), using implanted electrodes, claimed an 80% accuracy rate in prediction based on brain activity 700 milliseconds before the person became aware of the decision. A third study by Schultze-Kraft (2015) concluded that the unconscious readiness potential can be overruled by the thinker up to a mere 200 milliseconds before the action is taken. Thus, one can reverse their earlier tentative thoughts or “decision” a mere fraction of a second before they act.

I think we can draw some conclusions from these studies. First, ignoring for the moment what I have in a prior paper called hard choice situations, in other circumstances we are more likely to make some choices than others, and this is reflected in our unconscious brain activity. In other words, it is probable that we will make a specific choice over an alternative based on factors of which we may not even be aware. What are those factors? The ones we have been discussing, such as our genetics, our upbringing, our character, etc. However, once we become conscious of the decision being advocated by our earlier unconscious brain activity, we have the ability to say “no” to that decision and reach a different decision, a claim supported by the third study summarized above. So we could say that our decisions are predisposed in the sense that it is more likely we will make some choices over other ones. That is why we can make predictions about someone’s actions even before they are conscious of their actions, though not with full accuracy.

But of course, this conclusion is not surprising at all, as common sense tells us that our upbringing, our genetics, our experiences, and the situations we find ourselves in make us more disposed toward certain actions than others. Further, notice that this is what the label free will ignores, as it only focuses on our freedom of choice and not on the predisposed nature of that choice. However, we all know that due to the types of people that we are, we are more likely to make some choices than other ones. Our actions, if we have freedom to do otherwise, are still predisposed based on who we are.

Drug addiction is a good example of predisposed agency. Genetics, account for about half of a person’s risk of addiction. (See [American Addiction Centers, 2023](#)) Environmental factors account for the rest, although we need to note that if we have predisposed agency then these factors are influences on and not causes of our behavior. Specifically, a person’s risk of addiction increases due to factors such as trauma, abuse, parental substance abuse, living in a high crime area, and having low socioeconomic status.

In spite of the influences of genetics and environment which predispose some people toward drug addiction, most drug addicts get off the drug they abuse for periods of time in their lives. Although the relapse rate is high, roughly 75% of people who seek addiction treatment are in recovery⁶ and achieve some level of success in kicking their drug habit. (See [Jones et al., 2020](#) and [AddictionHelp, 2023](#))

⁶Recovery is defined by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) as follows: “Working definition of recovery from mental disorders and/or substance use disorders: A process of change through which individuals improve their health and wellness, live a self-directed life, and strive to reach their full potential.” ([SAMHSA, 2023](#))

For example, the Resurgence Behavioral Health website notes that over 2/3 of people in recovery will relapse within weeks of beginning drug rehab, but after three years in recovery, the risk of relapsing reduces to around 9.6%, and after five years there is a 7.2% chance of relapsing. (*Resurgence Behavioral Health, 2023*) Philosopher Daniel Shapiro examined the data in this area and concluded that “most drug users, whether they use legal or illegal drugs, do not become addicts, and few addicts remain so permanently.” (*Shapiro, 1998: p. 299*)

Putting these statistics together, we see that those who are addicted will not necessarily stay that way the rest of their lives. Each day that an addict abuses drugs makes it likely that they will do so the next day. However, even for the addict, future drug use is not inevitable; rather, it is only probable. To say they have free will would be to recognize that they have the ability to stop their addiction but would also ignore that their behavior in the future is predisposed. Their actions are not made in a vacuum, but are strongly influenced by their genetics, their experiences including their past decisions, and their situations, and these factors make some actions more probable than not. They possess agency in that they have the ability to stop using drugs, but that agency is shaped, tainted, and compromised by their prior drug use. Due to their addiction, they are more disposed to act in a certain way. If they possess agency or libertarian free will, which I will argue in the next section that they do, it is predisposed agency.

3.2. The “Agency” of Predisposed Agency

When we think of someone exhibiting agency, I believe we think of someone who is the author of their actions. They weigh many factors and influences and decide which among them to follow, which to consider, which to accommodate, which to ignore, and which to reject. They control their decisions. They exercise autonomy. They are the source of their actions and could have chosen differently. In other words, they exercise their free will. It is not determined or fated which decisions they will make and which actions they will take. So I think you have probably noticed that I am viewing agency as synonymous with libertarian free will.

Now of course, whether we have such agency or libertarian free will is a contentious issue. In this section I want to review the argument set forth in my prior paper on this subject which reasoned that we likely do possess free will or agency. Then I will reference the apparent growing recognition of the possibility, if not probability,⁷ by the neuroscientific community of human libertarian free will/agency, a group whose members, not so many years ago, were largely skeptical of the presence of free will.

First, when tackling the free will vs. determinism debate, we should observe that it has never been proved that the world is fully deterministic. The majority

⁷To be clear, I am not claiming that most neuroscientists believe that humans *definitely* possess agency or libertarian free will; rather, my claim is more modest in that it appears that many neuroscientists are beginning to accept that we might well have such agency, and perhaps that it is probable that we do so.

of physicists now believe that at the subatomic level the universe operates with a degree of randomness, and, as such, they conclude that the best way to describe the quantum or subatomic world is probabilistically. Science journalist Miriam Frankel explains this view as follows: “The quantum realm of atoms and particles has randomness at its core. At least that’s what the maths of probabilistic quantum wave functions implies.” (Frankel, 2021)⁸ So, the conjecture that the universe fundamentally operates according to deterministic law is at best dubious given the most recent scientific findings and beliefs.

Further, it has certainly not been ruled out that the macro level of reality which humans experience may display some degree of randomness so that some things are best explained by probabilities and not necessities. This should not be too surprising since everything in the macro world is composed of and constituted by the quantum or subatomic world. Some possible candidates for macro non-determinism in the form of probability and/or randomness include mutations,⁹ the flipping of a coin, and human decision-making (free will).¹⁰

Moreover, determinism asserts not only that everything that has ever happened had to have happened, including each and every human action, but also that everything that anyone has ever thought had to have been thought, and at that precise moment when it was thought, and further, that this is true for every conscious being from the dawn of our universe to the present time and could not be otherwise. But this has never been proved, and further appears to be unprovable, which would make it an unscientific claim.

Now of course, it is one thing to believe that the world is not fully deterministic, but it is another to believe that any indeterminism in the world allows for libertarian free will. I have previously argued that certain situations, which I call hard choices, are strong candidates as examples of free will choices. Using the technique of inference to the best explanation, I explained that hard choices, a term I borrowed from Ruth Chang (See Chang, 2012), seem best explained by free will as opposed to the two alternatives of hard determinism or randomness. Moreover, I argued that if it is likely that we exhibit free will in hard choice situations, then we have free will at all times, although in many situations its presence is not so obvious to us, as when the dominant influences in our lives all coincide and lead us in the same direction.

⁸Wikipedia’s 2023b heading of “Quantum Mechanics” explains one of the dominant views on this subject as follows: “The views of Niels Bohr, Werner Heisenberg and other physicists are often grouped together as the ‘Copenhagen interpretation.’ According to these views, the probabilistic nature of quantum mechanics is not a *temporary* feature which will eventually be replaced by a deterministic theory, but is instead a *final* renunciation of the classical idea of “causality”... Copenhagen-type interpretations remain popular in the 21st century.”

⁹For example, Wikipedia describes the cause of cancer-inducing mutations as follows: “One 2017 study claimed that 66% of cancer-causing mutations are random...” (Wikipedia 2023a under the heading “Mutation.”)

¹⁰Balaguer, after reviewing the medical literature, explains that there is no proof that our brain’s processes are deterministic, and further, they seem to be probabilistic: “There isn’t a shred of evidence given for the claim that all of the causation involved in the brain is deterministic causation... Current neuroscientific theory treats a number of different neural processes probabilistically, and any decent textbook on neuroscience will point this out. For instance, synaptic transmission and spike firing are both treated probabilistically.” (Balaguer, 2009: p. 10)

There are two types of hard choices: The first occurs when the options or choices are equally appealing, what Mark Balaguer calls torn choices. Balaguer describes torn decisions as occurring when the “agent’s reasons are neutral between a set of tied-for-best options.” (See [Balaguer, 2004: p. 384](#))

The second type of hard choice involves my idea of incomparable options or choices. In this situation, the reasons for making each choice are incomparable so the options cannot be assessed as to whether one is better or worse, or whether they are equal to each other, so the decision-maker is unable to conclude that the options are tied-for-best. In many cases what I believe occurs is that our mind reaches an impasse precisely because it cannot compare the reasons due to their incomparability. Indeed, we are perplexed, confused, and stuck because we do not know whether the competing options are tied, whether one is the better one, or whether there is no better one. Here is one of my previous descriptions of a situation involving incomparable choices or options:

When having a difficult time making a decision, have you ever compiled a list of reasons for and against each choice? Did it help you make your decision? I have made such lists on several occasions, and it has never helped me at all. What I saw when I made the list was that there were good reasons supporting each possible decision, and in effect I saw why I was unable to come to a decision. Making the list brought me no closer to deciding which of those reasons were strongest—because the reasons on one side were not stronger than the reasons on the other side, nor could I assess them as equal—they were just different. They were independent considerations that were not comparable in a fashion that aided me in making my decision.

I understand now that when faced with competing considerations of different kinds, there is no way to make the best decision because there is no surefire way or standard to weight certain considerations over others, or to know what the future outcomes of those decisions will be. There often is just no right or best decision, but nonetheless there are good reasons for whichever decision is made, and of course, the same is true for the alternatives which were not chosen. In fact, some people realize this and routinely after making a choice continue to fret that things may have worked out better if they had chosen one of the other alternatives—and of course they are right. Their choice was made in a world with imperfect knowledge about the future, often with many people and variables to consider, and at times with no standard from which to judge. ([Firestone, 2017: p. 71](#))

In such a case, it would seem that it is unlikely that you were determined to make the choice you made because there is no best choice. Note that the best choice does not need to equate to the most rational choice. When we choose, we certainly consider both our emotional desires and our rational needs. Given that we are both emotional and rational creatures (and often irrational beings too), it appears that when the choices are equally appealing or incomparable to us, for

emotional and/or rational reasons, that the action we choose is unlikely to be determined. It seems that we are the ones who must make the choice because our brain has no reason or basis that would necessitate that we make either choice over the other one.

Further, in hard choice situations, your choice would not be random because there may be a myriad of good reasons for you to make the choice you made, even though there are also good reasons to make the other choice. For example, if I decide to move my residence, I may narrow my alternatives to two cities, both of which I believe would be good for me but for very different reasons. Note that I am no longer considering all the other cities because I do not think that they offer me what these two cities offer. It is not random when I choose one of the two cities as I have good reasons for either choice, but it also appears that my decision could not be determined if the two cities are incomparable in a way that I am never able to conclude that one is better than the other, even though I ultimately choose one of them, nonetheless. It seems that in such a case, the exercise of my free will is a better explanation for my choice than is either randomness or determinism since my choice was not random and it further seems that it is unlikely that it could have been determined.¹¹ In my prior paper, I explain my conclusion as follows:

Put another way, if the options are incomparable, the ultimate decision we make seems necessarily underdetermined by the reasons for making each choice. Once we know and list all of the reasons for each possible decision, we still do not know what to do—we still do not see or believe that one choice is clearly better based on its supporting reasons. And this belief may be based on a good reason—in cases similar to our moving scenario, there just is no such a thing as a better or right choice. The alternatives do not present us with overwhelming and winning reasons that necessitate any given decision. If not, then how could our decision be determined?

Indeed, if the reasons do not have the power to present us with an option which we had to have chosen, then any choice we make must be underdetermined by the reasons or options. It would seem that we will have to choose from the competing reasons even though those reasons do not necessitate that we choose them as they are not clearly better or superior than the reasons supporting the competing alternative choices, nor even clearly equal. (Firestone, 2017: p. 78)

¹¹For a more thorough example of one deciding whether to move their family to a new city and how that could be a situation of a hard choice, see my paper on free will. (Firestone, 2017: pp. 72-79)

¹²We should note that just because our decision-making occurs in our physical brain, we need not conclude that it is the firing of neurons that is the primary cause of our actions. Rather, our intentional conscious decisions, which are reflected by our brain activity, can be viewed as the cause. Nahmias explains this as follows: “Interventionism suggests that psychological variables (e.g., beliefs and intentions) can be picked out as the cause of effects (such as decisions and actions) over the neural variables that realize them (or on which the psychological variables supervene).” (Nahmias, 2018: p. 10)

What about the neuroscientific studies in this area?¹² Neuroscientists are beginning to see that their earlier interpretations of their experiments were questionable, and that more recent experiments seem to lend some support to the presence of free will, or what I am calling agency.

Interestingly, early neuroscientific studies, especially the famous 1983 Libet experiment where subjects were asked to note the position of a moving dot when they became aware of their conscious decision to move one of their fingers, presented a challenge to the belief in libertarian free will because it was observed that our brains were unconsciously active before we made the conscious decision, and it was erroneously inferred that our decisions could not exhibit free will because we were not even conscious of those decisions when the decision was made. (See Libet, 1983) However, more recent studies have not only pointed out the numerous problems and limitations of Libet's experiment and similar studies,¹³ but have also provided some measure of support for the presence of libertarian free will or predisposed agency.

For example, philosopher Mark Balaguer reviewed the leading neuroscientific experiments and specifically focused on the 2011 Haynes study which had found that there were neural processes in the PC and BA10 regions of the brain that preceded some conscious decisions by as much as 7 - 10 seconds, and further, that these early neural processes had some predictive powers as to what actions would be later taken. However, because the prediction rate was only a little better than chance,¹⁴ Balaguer made a strong case that this early unconscious brain activity reflected only preliminary unconscious thoughts about a possible future action and was not a final decision. The unconscious brain activity did not rule out libertarian free will/predisposed agency, or using Balaguer's terminology, the unconscious brain activity does not show that humans are not NEL-free (NEL is short for non-epiphenomenalism libertarian free).

The fact that there's a 7 - 10 s time gap between the brain activity in PC and BA10 regions and the conscious decision counts as strong evidence that that brain activity is *not* part of the decision. This is a bit ironic because, intuitively, the 7 - 10 s gap is the thing that makes Haynes's results so striking. When you first hear about these studies, you're likely to think that if neuroscientists can predict how you'll choose 7 - 10 s before you make a conscious decision, then you couldn't possibly be NEL-free. But upon further reflection, the 7 - 10 s time gap turns out to be part of what *undoes* the Haynes argument. This is because we have extremely strong reasons to think that human beings are way faster than this when it comes to making

¹³For example, see Haynes, 2011: pp. 9-11, 16. Haynes summarizes three such problems in the early experiments of Libet and others: "Obviously, however, they do not address real world decisions that have high motivational importance, they are not based on long-term reward expectations, and they do not involve complex reasoning." (Haynes, 2011: p. 16)

¹⁴Haynes summarizes his experiment as follows: "We found that, indeed, two brain regions partially predicted whether the subject was about to choose the left or right response prior to the conscious decision... Notably, the predictive accuracy in FPC/BA10 and in PC, though statistically significant, only reached a maximum of 10% above the level of chance..." (Haynes, 2011: p. 14)

decisions. There is experimental evidence (see e.g., [Trevena & Miller, 2010](#)) that suggests that we can make decisions in *less than half a second*. Moreover, we all *know* that this is true. We have all had lots of experience making snap decisions in way less than 7 s. Therefore, since we know that decisions take less than 7 s, it's not plausible that the brain activity that Haynes observed—a full 7 - 10 s before the conscious choice—was an early neural signature of the conscious decision itself. It's much more plausible to suppose that this brain activity was doing something else. And my explanation provides a compelling story about what it was doing—it was related to the storage of a long-term plan that was made unconsciously and unwittingly by the subject. My interpretation of the data explains why using the brain activity in PC and BA10 regions is only 10% more reliable than blind guessing. ([Balaguer, 2019](#): p. 13)

Returning to the three empirical studies referenced in the last section, we can tentatively draw some interesting conclusions. First and not surprising, our brain unconsciously thinks about a decision before that thought process reaches our conscious minds, but those unconscious deliberations are not the final decision. If they were, then we would be able to predict our actions with closer to 100% accuracy based on those unconscious deliberations, but the studies find only a 60% - 80% accuracy rate beforehand. 60% is only 10% greater than random chance since there were only two choices in these experiments. Note that even when the unconscious brain activity occurred only a fraction of a second before the conscious decision, it was still only 80% accurate in predicting our actual decision or behavior. This is consistent with the Schultze-Kraft experiment which showed that we could change course a mere 200 milliseconds before our actual action. At that point, the final conscious decision has been made and is reflected in our brain.

Dr. John-Dylan Haynes, whose 2011 study was evaluated by Balaguer, was initially quite skeptical about the existence of human free will. However, as one of the lead researchers in the more recent 2015 Schultz Kraft experiments, he changed his tune. These were his words in the press release where he explained the significance and impact of this newer study on the issue of free will:

A person's decisions are not at the mercy of unconscious and early brain-waves. They are able to actively intervene in the decision-making process and interrupt a movement. Previously people have used the preparatory brain signals to argue against free will. Our study now shows that the freedom is much less limited than previously thought. ([Haynes, 2016](#))

In 2016, Andrea Lavazza reviewed the research in this area and similarly concluded that the analyses of the early neuroscientific studies were flawed insofar as they were interpreted as implying that humans do not possess free will:

Along with other evidence provided by experimental psychology, the branch of studies inaugurated by Libet has contributed to seeing free will as an illusion: this view seemed to be reliably supported by science, and in

particular neuroscience. Recent studies, however, seem to question this paradigm... “free will”... no longer seems to be an illusion, not even for neuroscientific research.” (Lavazza, 2016: p. 14)

More recently, Schurger, et al., analyzed experiments looking into the early brain activity before a decision is made which is known as the readiness potential (RP). They concluded that “one cannot infer that we lack conscious free will based on the temporal profile of the RP.” (Schurger, 2021: p. 567)

So we see that the neuroscientific studies not only fail to refute the presence of free will/predisposed agency, but they arguably lend some support to the argument that free will/predisposed agency exists as our early unconscious brain activity is not an accurate predictor of our decisions and actions. On the contrary, our actions seem to be a product of a conscious decision made after that earlier brain activity. In other words, that earlier brain activity seems to be one of the many things that our conscious mind considers. It is only one input.¹⁵ It is not determinative. The fact that we can change our minds in a split second before we act is certainly consistent with the possession of libertarian free will/predisposed agency.

4. A Response to Reductionists and Supporters of Partial Free Will

A reductionist might respond to this paper and ask why we need new terminology since anyone who believes in predisposed agency also believes in libertarian free will. The understanding of the facts is the same for each, so this is a mere linguistic disagreement and not an actual philosophical issue.

My response should be evident, for if the new term were merely agency, then there would be no need to come up with new terminology. But we cannot forget about the important augmentation to the concept when we add the modifier “predisposed,” which points out that although our will has the agency or freedom to choose otherwise than it has chosen, it is more probable that we engage in certain actions rather than other ones due to our genetics and environment, which includes all our past experiences, our tendencies and habits, our character, and the situations in which we find ourselves.

But the reductionist might alternatively argue that the concept of partial or

¹⁵This seems to be supported by Haynes, who sets forth a possible interpretation of his neuroscientific study as follows: “Importantly, a different interpretation could be that the inaccuracy simply reflects the fact that the early neural processes might only be partially predictive of the outcome of the decision... In that case, the signals have the form of a biasing signal that influences decisions to a degree, but additional influences at later time points might still play a role in shaping the decision.” (Haynes, 2011: p. 17)

¹⁶For example, Eddie Nahmias argues as follows: “It is true that we are often influenced unknowingly by subtle features of our environment and by emotional and cognitive biases. Until we understand them, we are not free to try to counteract them. This is one reason I think we have less free will than many people tend to believe.” (Nahmias, 2015: p. 78) Similarly, Balaguer states that as follows: “There can be different degrees of causal determination... At one end of the spectrum, which option is chosen is wholly undetermined... At the other end of the spectrum, which option is chosen is causally determined by prior events together with causal laws. And in between, there is a continuum of possible cases... in connection with those in between cases, we can say that which option is chosen is partially determined—or equivalently, partially undetermined. (Balaguer, 2009: p. 5)

limited free will, already in the philosophical literature,¹⁶ captures just what the term predisposed agency means in that both concepts support not only the idea that our will has freedom to do otherwise, but that there are limits on that freedom due to our genetics and environment. In other words, according to this objection, I am not adding anything of substance when I introduce this new terminology of predisposed agency.

However, in a prior paper I argued that there is a danger in going with the terminology partial or limited free will, or anything similar to this. (For my more thorough discussion on this, see [Firestone, 2017: pp. 85-91](#)) This is because if we adopt the language of partial or limited free will then we are likely to conclude that we have only partial or limited responsibility for our choices and actions. In fact, Nahmias calls his view the “limited-free-will view” and draws such a link between this view and one of limited responsibility when he states that “It can thus explain why all of us may be less free and responsible than many tend to assume.” ([Nahmias, 2018, p. 13](#)) This is a conclusion which I do not wish to draw as I think this unduly downplays the force and scope of our agency. On the contrary, I believe that the better way to view our agency is that it confers on us full responsibility for what we choose to do and not do.¹⁷

Nagel explains that we normally believe that one is responsible if their actions are not out of their control. In the following quote, Nagel’s use of the expression “moral judgment” is synonymous with my notion of “responsibility.”

So a clear absence of control, produced by involuntary movement, physical force, or ignorance of the circumstances, excuses what is done from moral judgment... And external influences in this broader range are not usually thought to excuse what is done from moral judgment, positive or negative. ([Nagel, 1976: p. 368](#))

So we can see that actions resulting from involuntary movement, physical force, or ignorance of the circumstances relieve one of responsibility because these actions or the consequences of these actions are unforeseeable and are out of one’s control, but these are exceptions to the normal rule that we are responsible for our actions.

We should notice that I agree with Sartre that responsibility flows directly from our possession of agency or libertarian free will.¹⁸ When we perform intentional actions (goal-oriented actions which we are consciously choosing), we are responsible. Who else would be? Our father or mother? But when we are adults, they cannot and did not force or compel us to do the actions that we have done.

¹⁷Sartre’s extensive view of personal responsibility is that we are not only responsible for what we do, but also for what we do not do. He states that “... what is not possible is not to choose. I can always choose, but I ought to know that if I do not choose, I am still choosing.” ([Sartre, 1946: p. 304](#)) This idea is also in agreement with American law, which at times holds a person responsible for their omissions or failures to act.

¹⁸Sartre’s linkage of agency and responsibility is evident when he states the following: “We are alone, with no excuses. That is the idea I shall try to convey when I say that man is condemned to be free. Condemned, because he did not create himself, yet in other respects is free; because once thrown into the world, he is responsible for everything he does.” ([Sartre, 1946: p. 296](#))

We decided to do it. Note that although they did not compel us to act as we do as adults, they certainly bear a considerable responsibility for who we are as they are responsible for our very existence, our genetic makeup, many of our values, etc. Nevertheless, we choose what we do. Whenever we intentionally do something, and because through the exercise of our own agency we could have acted otherwise than our parents wished us to act, we are the ones who are ultimately responsible for what we do.

Moreover, it would seem strange to say that our genetics or upbringing is responsible for our decisions and actions as adults. People are responsible, not genetics and upbringing. Sartre explains why one cannot relieve themselves of responsibility due to their genetics:

But when the existentialist writes about a coward, he says that this coward is responsible for his cowardice. He's not like that because he has a cowardly heart or lung or brain; he's not like that on account of his physiological heart make-up; but he's like that because he has made himself a coward by his acts. There's no such thing as a cowardly constitution; there are nervous constitutions; there is poor blood, as the common people say, or strong constitutions. But the man whose blood is poor is not a coward on that account, for what makes cowardice is the act of renouncing or yielding. A constitution is not an act; the coward is defined on the basis of the acts he performs. (Sartre, 1946: p. 301)

Similarly, you cannot assign responsibility to your moral character, since you could always choose to act differently than you did in the past. Your character is malleable. In the past you may have been a habitual liar, but if you have agency or free will then you can start telling the truth from now on, and thus change your character, although admittedly this can be difficult and challenging. So if people have agency or free will, then they are responsible for their intentional actions. This just seems to be a fact that is a consequence of the possession of free will/agency.

But one might accuse me of the same error that I am concerned about with the term free will in that my view that we are fully responsible for our intentional actions seems to ignore all the external factors out of our control, but which shape and influence us. Am I guilty? I don't think so because there is a way to accommodate my view on responsibility while also recognizing the fact that our actions are predisposed in the sense that we are more probable to perform certain actions rather than other actions due to many factors, some of which are largely out of our control. The solution is to introduce into this analysis the concepts of praise and blame and to treat them separately from and differently than responsibility. I think it is best to take the perspective that we are fully responsible for our intentional actions, but do not always deserve full blame and praise due to the numerous genetic and environmental factors which greatly shape and influence us. In other words, it is one thing to be held accountable for your actions and the foreseeable consequences of your decisions, and it is

another thing to deserve full blame and praise for those decisions and actions when you have been strongly influenced, affected, shaped, and even pressured or manipulated by external factors, circumstances, and people, many of which are substantially or fully beyond your control.

Note that this is consistent with how the American criminal legal system works. We ask the jury to determine if the person committed the crime, and if so, then they are found guilty or responsible, not partially responsible or partially guilty. However, the criminal law does not ignore all the surrounding factors and circumstances pertaining to the criminal and the crime, for when it comes to the sentencing portion of the trial, the convicted person's genetics and environment are considered. We can say that the criminal has full responsibility but does not always deserve full blame.

Unlike the reductionists, I think labels often matter because labels convey ideas, and different labels convey different ideas that can and often do lead to different consequences. The term predisposed agency better conveys the human capacity to choose, make decisions, and take actions, than does the term free will. Moreover, it seems to be a better label than partial or limited free will as limited free will seems to imply that humans have only limited responsibility.

5. Concluding Remark

I have suggested that there are two compelling reasons to change our lexicon from free will to predisposed agency. First, there are presently two competing definitions for free will which are not compatible with each other—one definition offered by the libertarian and the other by the compatibilist. This is confusing, to say the least. Second, predisposed agency is a more comprehensive term that not only embraces the ideas of libertarian free will, but also recognizes both our everyday experiences and recent empirical studies which indicate that in most situations we are much more likely to perform certain actions rather than other ones due to our genetics, our experiences, our character, our past decisions, our habits, and the situations we have found ourselves in and find ourselves in presently.¹⁹

¹⁹It might be helpful to distinguish three different situations:

1) Usually we are more disposed toward a specific choice or action than an alternative choice or action. It is more probable that we perform action A over action B. This fits the word "predisposed" in predisposed agency. We should note that despite strong predispositions toward one option, our agency allows us to go with the other option.

2) In life, usually we have many choices of what to do, but at times we may encounter a situation where there are only two choices or options that we must choose from, and those choices are viewed by us as equally appealing or incomparable. Here we are roughly equally predisposed toward each option. In such a case, the best explanation for the choice we make and action we take is our agency, and not determinism. This fits the word "agency" in predisposed agency, and the predisposed part is reflected in the roughly 50% chance associated with each of the two choices.

3) At times, we may have many choices, but we have reasons for narrowing those choices down to two, and each of those choices is equally appealing or the two choices are incomparable. In such a case, we are predisposed to choose one of the remaining two choices, and we would expect that we will use our agency to decide between the final two. Here we have both parts of predisposed agency—our predisposition to pick one of the two choices or options as opposed to other possibilities, and our agency when we choose one of the final two options.

It is clear that our predispositions are based on both our genetics and the many environmental influences we encounter in our lives. As strong as our predispositions often are, our genetics and experiences do not mandate a destiny for us. However, they are not easily ignored. This is well summarized by the authors of *Predisposed: Liberals, Conservatives, and the Biology of Political Differences*:

You were born with a unique genetic package. This package was immediately modified by prenatal and early postnatal forces, and further modified by a wide range of environmental influences during development and beyond. These sources of influence combined into dispositional tendencies that affect your behavioral and attitudinal responses to whatever situations the world presents to you. These tendencies are inertial; they structure your attitudes and behaviors but do not predetermine them. (Hibbing, Smith, & Alford, 2014: p. 263)

These predispositions surface in all areas of our life, including in the political arena, and play a role in our political orientation and whether we identify as liberal or conservative, or something in between. The strength of these predispositions is significant but is ignored by the label free will. On the other hand, we do not want to dismiss the idea of our freedom which the term free will captures so well. For this, the word “agency” provides the other necessary component of our new proposed label of “predisposed agency.” Indeed, strong predispositions seem to coexist with our ability to override them through our agency. As such, we are creatures of predisposed agency in politics and elsewhere.

All the relationships we describe are only tendencies, not hard and fast rules. Predispositions are not destiny, but defaults—defaults that can be and frequently are overridden. There’s a reason the title of this book is *Predisposed* and not *Fated*. But the fact that there is any predisposition at all is important as it tilts subsequent attitudes and behavior in one direction or the other. A person with a particular set of physiological and cognitive traits will not automatically be a liberal or a conservative, but is more likely to be one or the other. (Hibbing, Smith, & Alford, 2014: p. 13)

In summation, predisposed agency is a more comprehensive and wholistic term than free will. It is a better characterization of the types of beings that we are—ones who I have argued have agency or libertarian free will and are thus responsible for their actions, but also beings that are subject to a myriad of factors or influences which are often partially or even largely beyond our control—and therefore should, at times, lessen the blame that we deserve. The term predisposed agency recognizes that the will is not so free, as we are much more likely to perform some actions rather than others. I therefore submit that we move to the new terminology of predisposed agency and leave behind the misleading and incomplete label of free will.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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