

Socratic Dialogue: Does Man Have Free Will?

By David P. Diaz, Ed.D.

Background

This essay has been written using the “Socratic Method,” which is a discourse or argumentative dialogue that features a question-response technique. Though Socrates never explained this method, *per se*, it is said to represent the “spirit” of his debate style, which questions another’s point of view. This Socratic dialogue represents a cross section of multiple real-life conversations that I’ve had on the topic of free will. These conversations have taken place in online forums, via email, and in personal conversations.



The Death of Socrates, by Jacques-Louis David (1787)

In this debate, Socrates defends the notion of “*libertarian free will*” [Note: all terms will be explained in the essay.] while his debate opponent, Bixby, believes in “*materialism*” and “*determinism*” as the foundation of his worldview. Bixby believes in “*event causation*” and attempts to resolve the conflicts of

determinism through the ameliorating efforts of “*compatibilism*.” Compatibilism endeavors to make determinism compatible with the notion of free choice. Since there are different forms of compatibilism (including differing opinions within each form), I have tried to allow Bixby some freedom to adjust his views “on the fly” to address his internal concerns that humans have some level of freedom of choice. Therefore, Bixby’s views represent a synthesis of compatibilist views, rather than the view of any one compatibilist. So, Bixby is seen to shift his viewpoint during the dialogue while attempting to preserve materialistic determinism. Though he wants to believe in free will, Bixby’s underlying presuppositions about reality require him to defend his core beliefs (i.e., materialism, determinism), especially their impact on moral responsibility, against a libertarian (volitional) notion of free will.

Dialogue:

Socrates: So, my dear friend Bixby, today we are discussing the question: “**Does man have free will?**” I cannot think of a better and more important topic to discuss on such a fine day and especially since my counterpart in this discussion is such a dear friend. I do hope that our discussion is both profitable and will result in some degree of clarity on this topic.

Bixby: I can think of no other person with whom I would want to debate this topic.

Socrates: My view is that man possesses “libertarian free will” because the notion of it is self-evident and corresponds to common sense. I hope to make clear what I mean by this notion of free will as our discussion progresses. But before we begin in earnest, I would like to be clear on *your* views so that I do not misunderstand you. First and foremost is the term “**free will**.” How would you define free will?

“ *Bixby: Free will is the ability to choose a course of action based on a person’s greatest desire. In the absence of external constraints, our actions are caused by our desires.* ”

Bixby: Well, free will is the ability to choose a course of action based on a person’s greatest desire. In the absence of external constraints, our actions are caused by our desires.

Socrates: But let’s consider this notion of freedom to choose a course of action based on desires. Many animals express some sort of “goal-directed behavior;” do we suppose them to be free in the same sense as humans?

Bixby: No, you are correct. What I should say is that free will, for the purpose of our discussion, is limited to humans, who are a unique subspecies of animals. After all, no other animals have a capacity to reflect on their own actions, as do humans.

Socrates: So then, your definition of free will applies solely to humans and refers to their ability to choose a course of action based on desires.

Bixby: Yes.

Socrates: And do you believe that this form of free will, as you’ve described it, is the reality for humans? That is, do you believe that humans have free will?

Bixby: I believe that a person can and does choose on the basis of her desires. However, one need not believe in free will because the notion of free choice is **compatible** with **determinism** and with **event causation**.

Socrates: I see. So, what do you mean by “**determinism**?”

Bixby: First of all, I believe in **materialism**, which is the basic belief that *all that exists is matter* (this concept encompasses not only material entities that are spatially extended but also fields and forces). Since the universe responds to laws of cause and effect and since those laws are attributable to matter, all actions are thus **determined by material causes**. (This is a position that naturally flows from materialism.)

Socrates: And how is determinism related to “**event causality**?”

Bixby: Every effect has a cause, including human actions, and each cause has a materialistic source. That is, every effect is derived from matter, energy, and/or fields that are existent in the universe. **Event causality** is where one event causes another event, and so on (e.g., Event 1: rolling bowling ball; Event 2: ball hitting pins; Event 3: pins scattering in a certain way, etc.). The important aspect of this view is that humans choose to do this or that, but only because their will is *determined* by material causes. Thus, humans do choose an action, but their will is also causally determined. People will always choose what they want and what they want is determined.

Socrates: I see. So any choice on our part is really not self-caused, but our desire to perform any particular act was determined by something other.

Bixby: That is correct. **Compatibilism** requires that previous events and causal laws determine all effects, including human actions. Further, if a person is not causally determined to perform a certain action, then performing that action must be a matter of chance. It is only because actions are caused that they can be considered free, otherwise the person’s actions would be compelled. So, in that sense, free will *requires* determinism.

Socrates: So, if thoughts and actions are determined by events, then by definition they couldn’t be either self-caused or volitional, am I correct?

Bixby: You understand correctly.

Socrates: Does that mean *in your day-to-day life, you don’t believe that you can make volitional choices?*

“*I would venture to guess that you act in your normal life as if you can choose between, say, Salami & pickles on rye, on one hand, and ham & cheese on wheat, on the other.*”

Bixby: I don’t believe that we have the ability to make *self-caused* choices because *events*, not “self,” dictate actions. A long chain of events, which extend

into the past indefinitely, determines every action.

Socrates: But, I would venture to guess that you act in your normal life as if you can choose between, say, Salami & pickles on rye, on one hand, and ham & cheese on wheat, on the other. And, you probably wouldn't try to convince your wife that she is deluded in thinking she isn't really free to select one book to read rather than another. And, for that matter, you would most likely sidestep altogether the thought that she ought to appreciate the impact-drill you bought her for her birthday (because your will was determined in making this choice). How then do you explain that humans have this common sense, self-evident notion that we can choose?

Bixby: Well, first of all, my wife wouldn't appreciate this type of discussion, which is why I leave such topics to my conversations with you, along with the rest of our attempts to solve the great mysteries of the universe. Which is to say, we should keep this matter about the impact-drill just between us...

Socrates: Ah, well said. So, go on...

Bixby: But the important questions about free will are not related to free will *per se*, but are related to whether or not we have moral responsibility. It is insufficient to talk about free will apart from of the realm of moral choices.

Socrates: Ah; so how would you describe **moral responsibility**?

Bixby: Morality represents a *moral obligation or duty for which a person is held accountable*. Such a person becomes a valid target for moral praise or blame, as well as for reward or punishment. There are certain things that one *ought* to do because they are right and just.

Socrates: Okay, so should we then add this point about moral responsibility to your definition of free will?

Bixby: Yes, I should probably at this point **adjust my definition of free will**. I should now say that free will is "the unique ability of persons to exercise control over their conduct in the manner necessary for moral responsibility (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, *Compatibilism*)."

“*I believe that, if people are to be held accountable for their moral decisions, they need to be able to cause their own moral actions.*”

Socrates: Well then, I think your new definition agrees with my own concept of libertarian free will. However, there are some key differences in how each of us understands this definition. I believe that free will is not determined by events, but is self-caused (i.e., agent causation). In

fact, I believe that, if people are to be held accountable for their moral decisions, they need to be able to cause their own moral actions. Libertarian free will is self-caused freedom. I believe that, for every moral decision, a person can choose one action or another, or even choose not to choose. But you, Bixby, believe that one is only free to choose what one desires, which happens also to be determined. So, you apparently don't believe in libertarian free will.

Bixby: True enough.

Socrates: I would like to return to your idea of free will that claims it to merely reflect one's desires. You said that, "In the absence of external constraints, our actions are caused by our desires." I am assuming, then, in the case where a person must defend herself as she is being attacked, that neither of the options—fight or flight—is likely to be a desirable action at that moment.

Bixby: Correct. Free will is the ability of an agent to act as she wants unencumbered. In your example, the agent was encumbered (compelled) by external factors to act contrary to her will.

Socrates: But what about the case of a person suffering from a form of psychosis that causes full-fledged hallucinations. While hallucinating, she might "act as she wants unencumbered," but she could hardly be said to be acting of her own free will. The same could be said of a person addicted to drugs.

Bixby: I agree, that it is problematic.

Socrates: What about your idea that morality means that one “ought” to act according to moral standards. How does this square with the notion of determinism? After all, if one is *determined* to think or act a certain way, then one cannot say that someone *ought* to do anything (“ought” implies “can”).

If determinism is true, one could not do anything truly (authentically) right (or wrong) because one couldn’t act otherwise. And, if actions are determined, then by definition they couldn’t be volitional.

“*If one is determined to think or act a certain way, then one cannot say that someone ought to do anything.*”

Bixby: I must concede the point.

Socrates: And what of event causation? If a moral action is caused by an *event*, could it be considered a *personal* action?

Bixby: It could not because an event is ultimately *impersonal*. It is the result of a materialistic causal chain of events, attributable to laws of chemistry and physics.

“*If it is not a personal action, how can one be held accountable or responsible for it? For a person acts of her own free will only if she is its ultimate source.*”

Socrates: Then, if it is not a personal action, how can one be held accountable or responsible for it? For a person acts of her own free will *only if she is its ultimate source*. This could not be the case if the action is caused by a series of events, which trace back to factors prior to the

existence of the person who acted.

Bixby: I see where you are heading with this.

Socrates: Isn’t an impersonal, determined action a contradiction of any notion that holds people accountable for moral actions?

Bixby: Well, I can answer that, but to do so I would need to posit a slightly

different viewpoint.

Socrates: By all means...

Bixby: **Hierarchical compatibilism** offers a different solution to the problem you point out. This form of compatibilism distinguishes between first-order and second-order desires. Freely willed actions are those that issue from desires that suitably mesh with hierarchically ordered elements of a person's psychology. The key idea is that a person who acts of her own free will does so from desires that are nested within more encompassing elements of her self. When a person acts of her own desires, those motives are hers; she owns them. She acts of her own free will if, and only if, her action issues from the will she wants. So, some actions are truly free. I agree with Harry G. Frankfurt when he says, "It seems conceivable that it should be causally determined that a person is free to want what he wants to want. If this is conceivable, then it might be causally determined that a person enjoys a free will (Watson, 2011, p. 336)."

Socrates: But what of the example of an addict, of whom it could be said, could have acted freely, but for whom it was, practically speaking, impossible. In other words, because of her addiction she had no such alternative and therefore was not able to choose in a valid sense. Doesn't the effect of addiction *cause* the addict's second-order willingness? So that, by desiring to take her drug of choice, she is merely having her will *manipulated* and is really not free to choose?

Bixby: Well, when you put it that way, no. It would appear that, though she had more than one option before her, there was only one she could choose. In that sense, it is easier to simply claim that she was determined to act one way in every sense of the word. But, *only those actions that are truly owned* by a person can be considered free, others, like in your example, are not free actions.

Socrates: So, it appears that the free will of compatibilism is inferior to libertarian free will because the compatibilist's will is only "sometimes free."

Bixby: I understand the dilemma only too well.

Socrates: You have said that compatibilism affirms some actions can be considered free in an event-causal universe. But what distinguishes between event causation and free will in a determined (materialistic) universe? That is, how does free will arise from a determined universe?

“Where does event causation stop and human nature (free will) begin if everything derives from materialistic causes?”

Bixby: What you are saying is, “Where does event causation stop and human nature (free will) begin if everything derives from materialistic causes?”

Socrates: Yes. Can you see the conflict between your belief in determinism (compatibilism’s “sometimes free” will) and the belief in libertarian free will? And, do you also see how compatibilism does not answer the ultimate question of the appearance of free will in a determined universe? At best, compatibilism seems to really say that there is sometimes “freedom of action,” but not freedom of will.

Bixby: Yes, I can see that.

Socrates: And if compatibilism means believing in “event causation” then volition does not make sense because “volition” would be merely the product of blind physical processes. But how can an *impersonal event* be responsible for *personal moral choices*? It appears that compatibilism’s definition of free will does not really acknowledge that personal agency is consistently required for moral accountability.

Bixby: Maybe so, but compatibilism is a *pragmatic* way of looking at the problem of free will and determinism, for it attempts to resolve the apparent contradiction between the two.

Socrates: But, if truth is merely what works (i.e., pragmatic), isn’t it true that one could never say that determinism (or compatibilism) is necessarily true, only that it works?

Bixby: Indeed.

Socrates: But is everything that works, or that is successful in achieving some end, also true?

Bixby: Well, I suppose I can think of a counter example; like lying on the witness stand to preserve my own freedom. I would not be telling the truth, but would be lying to achieve a pragmatic end (to stay out of jail). If successful, my ploy would have worked, while my position would have been false.

Socrates: So, perhaps determinism isn't true. If determinism *were* true, would this not make a mockery of our legal system?

Bixby: In what way would determinism make mockery of our legal system?

Socrates: Well, as you've already stated, when witnesses take the stand, they are told to tell the truth under threat of perjury. I would think that, at least according to our justice system, a witness is judged to be perfectly capable of either telling the truth or lying.

Bixby: Yes, that is the assumption.

Socrates: But on what basis could they be judged truthful (or untruthful) if they are determined to believe and say what they do? Wouldn't a lie be the same as the truth?

Bixby: It would seem so.

Socrates: And what of the objectivity of science? Wouldn't the absence of free will undermine the scientific disciplines?

Bixby: How so?

“*I've never seen the following assumption written into any research article; 'I do not have free will and therefore all my conclusions are determined.'”*

Socrates: It appears that science is based on the notion of free will. The freedom to choose one method of examining data over another, one statistic over another, one observation method over another, etc. Scientists don't think twice about whether they have free will when they are

writing up the results of their research. I've never seen the following assumption written into any research article; "I do not have free will and therefore all my conclusions are determined." For indeed, any such claim would undermine objectivity. As a matter of fact, the clear if unspoken assumption among scientists is that we have free will. How can this be explained?

Bixby: My only answer would be to assert, as I did earlier, a slightly weaker form of determinism. Perhaps mind is somehow separate from matter and we do have some level of libertarian freedom. Perhaps physical processes are required to generate mind, but then something else comes into play. Something that is responsible for either freedom of choice, or mind, or both.

Socrates: Your assertion, "physical processes are required to generate mind" entails an unstated assumption: that matter causes mind. It may be true, but you can't smuggle in an assumption that proves your conclusion (i.e., that matter causes mind) without begging the question. That said, isn't claiming that "something else comes into play" a "Materialism in the Gap" statement? You've already admitted that compatibilism only provides a "problematic" answer for how materialistic determinism results in free will. So, what must "come into play" to explain our common sense notion of freedom of choice?

Bixby: Yes, well, I do see your point, but, obviously, moral decisions are common to all humans and therefore there must be some manner of allowing for moral and ethical decisions to be made. Otherwise, how are we to explain such examples of exemplary restraint and apparent good deeds if the determinist has no ability to make free moral decisions?

Socrates: Well, one could simply assert that God is the source of good, that he has bestowed upon man the sovereignly given power to make moral choices freely, and that moral responsibility is our attempt to follow his moral standard. The notion of libertarian free will is certainly a less complex answer than proposing that impersonal matter caused mind and that event causation produced free will.

“The notion of libertarian free will is certainly a less complex answer than proposing that impersonal matter caused mind and that event causation produced free will.”

Bixby: Well, I am not ready to concede that just yet.

Socrates: But let me remind you that, if we are determined, we must relinquish all claims to truth, rationality and morality. If our beliefs are caused by events, then they cannot be true in a logical sense. For how could any proposition be claimed true (or false) if we were determined to assert or believe it? Nor could any beliefs be rational because they would be the product of blind, irrational forces. Morality would become a mere suggestion because we would have no ability to choose otherwise.

Bixby: Yes, it does seem difficult to believe in exclusive truth, rationality and morality if, indeed, we are determined.

Socrates: Have you thought about how we could imprison anyone for violating moral codes or laws if they were determined in their actions?

Bixby: That is, indeed, a thorny issue. If our actions are determined, crime and punishment are ultimately arbitrary.

Socrates: I assert then, that libertarian free will (i.e., agent caused action) represents what most of us already believe intuitively; that humans are free to act and can initiate *new causal chains* for which we are always truly responsible. We are not slaves to fate, causality, or science, but are free to choose our destinies. So, do you still not believe in libertarian free will?

Bixby: I for one desperately want to believe in free will and to think that I am free in that regard. And to a great extent I live my life as if I do have free will. But, my naturalistic and deterministic worldview prevents my believing in your version of free will.

Socrates: It is natural that you want to believe in free will because, as I have said, it is self-evident and represents a common sense view of our existence. Further, it appears that a determinist must remain ambivalent to truth, rationality, and morality. And finally, it appears that compatibilism can only save free will at the expense of determinism. If you can't consistently attribute moral actions to the agent (i.e., "self"), then you cannot ultimately say what actions are truly free and accountable to moral standards. Ultimately, all forms of compatibilism are incompatible with libertarian free will. Perhaps you should reconsider your naturalistic/materialistic worldview.

Bixby: Perhaps I should.

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Special Thanks

Thanks to Dr. Endara for reading and commenting on this essay.

About the Author

David P. Diaz, Ed.D. is the publisher and owner of Things I Believe Project. An educator and author, Dr. Diaz has a lifelong love of learning. His pen name (aka “Don Quixote”) comes from his love of chasing windmills (i.e., truth and other ideals) and his penchant for tongue-in-cheek humor: “Don Quixote was developing his arguments in such an orderly and lucid way that for the time being none of those listening could believe he was a madman.”