

The Popular Culture Conflation of Free Will and Indeterminism and The
Incoherence of Free Will as Revealed Through the Film *I Lost My Body*

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In our increasingly technologically advanced world, there is a corresponding shift in the way that all of our human disciplines adjust to match the times. Artists begin to work digitally, video games displace board games, and medicine employs all manner of computing machines in order to increase the accuracy and safety of procedures. One discipline that often appears to be immune to these cultural winds of progress, but that is definitely not, is philosophy. While it seems as though a discipline that seems to involve mostly complex thought, logical rumination, and not much in the way of tools or systems may be resistant to technological disruption, this is not the case.

As the physical sciences have progressed, and their powers of explanation grow, the human mind and its contents have not gone on unchanged. Throughout the field of psychology, there has been an increasing reliance on neuroscientific advancements, which seem to continually reduce the mind and reduce it again, until the modern materialistic consensus seems to be that the mind is just an epiphenomenal construct of neuronal firing, that it has no independent causal power, and that like all other physical objects, it simply operates according to the laws of physics, with no room for any sort of free will or legitimate mental intervention. As these complex scientific findings concerning free will reach the public eye, they are often simplified and conflated with other philosophical concepts, such as determinism.

Nomological determinism is a movement defined as the idea that the physical laws of the universe are both all-encompassing and that they operate in a deterministic (rather than probabilistic) manner (Hoefer, 2016). When combined, those two premises suggest that the

universe operates in a deterministic fashion, with the entirety of the conditions of the universe at any moment being wholly caused by the conditions of the moment before, and so on and so forth, all the way back to the original conditions, whatever those might have been.

While many modern scientists and philosophers see determinism as a legitimate threat to our ideas of free will, the reality of these two concepts is more complicated. For example, there is still room for dissent even among those who hold an incompatibilist view, i.e. the view that determinism is incompatible with the concept of free will. There are those who believe that incompatibilism is theoretically true and also that determinism is actually the case in our reality (hard determinists), those who hold the belief that free will would indeed be incompatible with determinism, but that our world is not truly deterministic (libertarians), and those who hold the belief that free will is impossible regardless of the world being deterministic or indeterministic (hard incompatibilists) (Vihvelin, 2018). The majority of the population generally takes a libertarian approach, unable to see how we could have legitimate causal power in a deterministic world, but intuitively unable to believe that this is actually the case. Challenges to the deterministic nature of reality often come in the form of art, film, and literature. However, because of confusion in the general public about the complex relationship between determinism and free will, these arguments are often ineffective at making strong cases on either subject.

One such film is *I Lost My Body* (2019), an animated film directed by Jérémy Clapin and produced by Mark du Pontavice. The film follows two simultaneous plots, that of an animated severed hand escaping a laboratory and seeking out its owner, and that of an adolescent Moroccan boy living in France following the death of both of his parents. Throughout the film, we are given the message, first through the main character (Naoufel's) father and later from Naoufel himself, that fate (i.e. determinism) can only be evaded through unpredictable human action. Late in the movie, Naoufel illustrates this concept best when he says that "we think we can [evade fate], but we can't. It's an illusion. Unless we do...Something completely unpredictable and irrational. It's the only way to conjure the spell for good." In the form of a philosophical argument, Naoufel is maintaining an incompatibilist view, but also attacking the first premise of nomological determinism by stating that physical laws may operate in a deterministic manner, but that they are not all-encompassing and that the human mind is able to

free itself from these laws through acts of unpredictability. This view is a libertarian view, i.e. one that embraces the idea of free will and denies determinism.

While the idea that human will and human choices are somehow able to circumvent the laws of nature is a tempting one, I believe it to be a faulty argument and not legitimately indicative of free will and an indeterministic universe. While we believe our thoughts and choices to be our own, their existence and execution does not actually present any evidence against determinism, i.e. this is not actually an incompatibilist point of view. There is no necessary reason why our thoughts and decisions could not conceivably be part of a deterministic universe. Our reasoning and deliberation could be entirely based on our past experiences, genetic predispositions, and current context, and they would still feel the same to us. After all, when we look back on decisions we have made in the past, wishing we had chosen something else, we often wish that we had had access to more or different information, or that we were not the type of person that we are. When we make these wishes, we are effectively wishing that our mental conditions at the time had been different than they actually were, not that we had made a different choice under the same mental conditions, and if we think critically, it is hard to conceive of how we might have made any different choice under the exact same mental conditions. Here is where Naoufel makes an appeal to some form of irrationality, which would be able to deny the decision that should necessarily follow from a certain state of mental conditions.

When Naoufel mentions the idea of irrational acts, he seems to suggest that the introduction of indeterminism would create a more legitimate sense of free will, as it departs from the idea that everything we do is fundamentally pre-determined. However, I also take issue with this idea, as I fail to see how introducing indeterminism could, in any way, augment our free will. Suppose there is a certain set of conditions in the universe at a given moment, and that this set of conditions entail that we make a certain decision. If we state that we could, in fact, make a different decision than the one entailed by a deterministic unfolding of events, but only through random chance, this does not seem to provide us any more control over our actions and could undermine them further. As David Hume (2000) argued in his compatibilist account of free will, determinism is actually necessary for free will in that there must be a consistent relationship between causes and effects, and it does not seem like the introduction of random chance

anywhere in a causal chain could serve to give us any more of the right kind of control over the choices that we make.

Overall, I think that perhaps a key flaw in many of the arguments made in works of fiction concerning our free will is that these works tend to conflate the idea of determinism with that of free will. Often, evidence is given concerning free will that is intended as an argument about determinism, and vice versa, and no meaningful philosophical arguments can be made because of this conflation. However, if we ignore the confoundment of free will and determinism, we are nevertheless able to distill the actual intended argument of the work of fiction, which is an argument that humans are ultimately able to exercise their free will through their ability “to do otherwise.” This argument is made clear as the main character finishes the film by jumping off the ledge of a rooftop and onto a crane, an action he referenced earlier in the film as something irrational that would go against every interest and motive that he could possibly have, but that he was ultimately still capable of doing.

This idea of free will, as defined as the ability to do otherwise, has been approached from many different angles (both compatibilist and otherwise), but largely, in current research and thought, the ultimate concept of free will is incoherent (O’Connor & Franklin, 2020).

From a compatibilist perspective, the freedom to do otherwise is able to coexist with the idea that our decisions are wholly determined by the past. In short, they make the argument that to say that a free agent would do otherwise is to say that they would do otherwise given... (blank), where the blank represents some slightly different set of conditions that would motivate the agent to consider another course of action. They hold that to say that the agent would do otherwise in the absence of any different set of conditions or motivation for doing so would be to actually relinquish their control to chance and, therefore, would not strengthen an argument concerning free will (O’Connor, 2000). However, the argument that the film is making seems to call for exactly this type of irrationality, unsatisfied with a strict dependence of an agent on the conditions of the world as being sufficient grounds for claiming that the agent could legitimately do otherwise.

Many incompatibilists also agree with this point of view and suggest a stricter definition of the ability to do otherwise that requires that an agent be able to choose to act differently even if the actual state of all conditions at that time were the same (O’Connor and Franklin, 2020). In

other words, there must be a plurality of possible actions available to the agent given a specific set of past conditions. However, given this criterion, it is difficult to see how it could be met. Under this theory, any deliberations or reasons that occur in the mind of the agent can be seen as physical conditions, and therefore, different deliberations or possible reasons that would motivate a different decision would constitute different conditions, and therefore, not prove the agent's ability to do otherwise. The only alternative, and the one being presented in theory by the film, is that different choices not caused by these deliberations could be a form of free will. However, by definition, these choices would then be uncaused, making them random and uncontrolled, and given the entire concept of free will is encompassed in relevance to an agent's control over their own decisions, these types of choices, even if possible, would not make a case for free will, as further argued by Pereboom (2004).

To conclude, it seems as though the concept of free will as it is presented in the film *I Lost My Body*, while likely articulating the intuitions of the general population, is an incoherent one. It seems to fail on the grounds that the type of evidence provided by the film cannot be used to make a strong case for the existence of free will. The ideas presented in the film may be central to debates concerning determinism in our universe. However, they seem to be more effective in stimulating thought on these topics than in providing any actual argument, and regardless of which side of the determinism debate one ends upon, the actual concept of free will remains unresolved.

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