

Logical responses to the unknowability of reality



Part 1

**The unknowability of free
will supports a leap of faith**

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Abstract

We all act as though we have libertarian free will, the sort of free will with genuine agency, yet no one has proposed a mechanism by which this agency is achieved and many claim that such free will is an illusion. There are arguments for and against the actual existence of free will, and it could be that its existence is ultimately unknowable. Separately, many don't believe in the supernatural, having dismissed it through reasoning. Choosing to believe is simply not an option. It would go against intellectual integrity. One might risk ridicule.

This book shows that anyone who excludes the possibility of the supernatural, can actually use sound logic together with the unknowability of free will as a foundation for its exploration. Simply put, the unknowability of free will supports a leap of faith.

The book does not show that the supernatural definitely exists, only that a belief in it is reasonable. It does not specify how the supernatural is, though it does allow for God as described in the Christian gospels, and indeed the author has chosen to follow (or in the absence of free will has found himself following) the path described in the gospels.

Collaboration

Those whom I have asked to review this work have suggested some very useful ideas, and it is my hope that some readers will be able to contribute other ideas, references to other complementary studies and of course some challenges. I've chosen to keep the book slim, so it remains easily readable in one sitting. For that reason, and so that contributions remain welcome long after publication, the additional material is held online in the form of a blog at <https://impossibilityofknowing.blogspot.com>. Please send your comments to me by email or add them to the blog, whichever seems more suitable.

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I would not have published this work without the following people:

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A leap of faith is a logical response to the unknowability of reality

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Introduction

The reason I'm writing this book is that I took a leap of faith in 2011 through logical reasoning, and I want to share that reasoning. It may chime with you. It may not, but I wanted to get it "out there" to see if it's useful to anyone, or to at least get the ideas kicked around a little more.

Before 2011 I was an atheist, wedded to what I now know to be a physicalist view of the world. Then, on hearing a radio programme on the subject of Free Will (*BBC - In Our Time*), I applied all the reasoning at my disposal and over the course of about twenty minutes committed to following the teachings of Jesus.

I haven't found the argument I followed presented anywhere else, so at first I simply wanted to share it as it may be useful to others. Of course, the reason I can't find it could be that it is a flawed argument! If this is indeed the case then I'd like to know as early as possible as I'm basing my life choices on it.

I do not have a background in philosophy and have never studied it under a tutor. I am however a mathematics graduate and thus am happy to engage with logic. One result in maths which is particularly intriguing is Gödel's Incompleteness Theorem. It says that in any consistent mathematical system there are propositions about which the truth is unknowable. Although reality is not necessarily a mathematical system, I chose to borrow from Gödel, and assume that there are propositions in reality about which the truth is unknowable. I could have researched free will more deeply and, as many have, taken a view on it that it either exists or it doesn't, but instead I have chosen to work with the view that the existence of free will is ultimately unknowable.

I'll lay out some foundational work in some very short chapters before getting to "The choice". I encourage you to read these first, even if the logic is not as robust as you might like. The chapters following "The choice" explore why there may be limits of robustness in any argument in this field.

The style of this work is a mix of thesis and testimony. It is mainly a recollection of a twenty-minute slice of my life to which I have added some context. I made some deep assumptions during those twenty minutes which I've had to expand on. I've added some thoughts which have occurred to me since, where I feel these help the case, but I've tried to keep these to a minimum, so the work is short and more easily digestible.

(Following my studies into free will I came to understand that there are so many other aspects of reality that seem to be unknowable. Rather than trying to determine what might be knowable, I have instead chosen to focus on what choices may be considered wise or advantageous in spite of having no certainty about what underlies our reality. After all, it seems we are destined to make choices so we might as well make wise ones even if there is no certainty about what underlies them.)

In this work I focus solely on choices we can make if the existence of Free Will is indeed unknowable. I have in mind to write other works on choices we can make given the unknowability of other areas of life.)

Wisdom in the face of unknowability - the Fork in the Road

The existence or otherwise of free will is contested and might be unknowable.

I want first to show that we can still make wise decisions in the face of unknowability.

The riddle I'm going to describe has been in existence for a number of years and probably dates from antiquity. It was made even more popular by being on a Doctor episode that I was fortunate enough to have watched, and it is this that came to mind as I was confronted with the free will point of view in March 2011. [Wikipedia "Knights and Knaves"]

A traveller and a guide come to a fork in the road. At the entrance to each path is a guard. The guards are indistinguishable. The guide tells the traveller that one of the guards always tells the truth and the other guard always lies, that one path leads to death and that the other to freedom. Further, the traveller is allowed to ask only one question. That question can be to either one of the guards but not to both, and the question can be answered with only "yes" or "no".

The traveller, with the exemplary logic of someone like Doctor Who, discovers the question, poses it and walks confidently to freedom.

I propose that the instinctive approach to solving this is first to try to find which guard is the truth-teller. The strategy of learning information layer by layer seems attractive, and the truthfulness of the guards seems to be a foundational layer.

In this case we know it's a riddle, and being familiar with riddles, we are prepared to come to the problem in a different way, and delight in finding that we don't need to know which guard is telling the truth.

If you haven't worked it out yet, the question the traveller asks is

"Would the other guard answer 'yes' if I asked him whether the fork on the left leads to freedom?" and the traveller can ask this of either guard. If the guard responds "yes" then the traveller takes the right fork, and takes the left fork if the guard *responds "no"*.

Notice that the traveller still has no idea which guard was the truth-teller.

I'll put this in a table, as I'll use a table as a tool later.

| Choice Scenario | Asks Guard A "which path should I take?", and follows that advice | Asks Guard A "Would the other guard answer 'yes' if I asked him whether the fork on the left leads to freedom?" and take right if "yes" |
|-------------------------|---|---|
| Guard A tells the truth | Lives | Lives |
| Guard B tells the truth | Dies | Lives |

There may be other choices Doctor Who can make, but this shows clearly how the second choice is sufficient in any of the possible scenarios.

Free will requires the supernatural

Free will - a working definition

I am using the term "free will" in the most intuitive sense.

If I have the sort of free will that I am considering here it means:

Each of us is a self, an "I", which is a combination of a consciousness and a body. The intuitive idea of selfhood.

Each self has agency. Its actions are not a result solely of the influence of prior states.

Each self can justifiably be held morally responsible for the choices it makes and the actions it takes.

The choices each self makes affect objects in the material world.

Free will – inconceivable?

I accept that each self is greatly affected by its environment and by the genes it has inherited, and perhaps it has only the slightest agency. Perhaps it only gets one genuine free choice per lifetime.

Even if there is the slightest agency, I claim that this requires the supernatural.

We, however, sense that we have agency at all moments during our lives, even if it is to change the course of events by only a tiny amount each time.

We hold ourselves morally accountable for all our actions. For example, we might accuse ourselves of being lazy when we don't do what we had planned to do. Of course, this self-accusation might be a consequence of evolution. Perhaps those who berate themselves succeed more than those who don't.

So we sense that we have agency, but do we really? That is the question I am going to leave unanswered and in fact unaddressed in this book. The existence of free will, of agency, is highly contested, and I am going to assume that it could be unknowable.

The claim is simply: If I have any agency, then the supernatural must be involved and I define what I mean by supernatural in a later chapter

Professor Galen Strawson summarises his position as follows: [Strawson 2018] / [Strawson 1994]

1. We do what we do [in any given circumstance] because of the way we are.
2. To be responsible for what we do, we have to be responsible for how we are.
3. But we cannot be responsible for how we are.
4. So we can't be responsible for what we do (refer to "a working definition" of free will above)

His full argument is stronger than that, and though it may not be watertight, it is sufficiently convincing for me based on the logic I am comfortable with. But if the theory of evolution by natural selection holds true, then the logic I use comes from a mind which has been shaped to solve problems in nature. Although I cannot prove it, such a flaw seems to be inconceivable to me using a mind operating such logic.

Another argument against free will is that no conceivable mechanism has been proposed for agency of a self.

Free will requires both that there is a flaw in Strawson's argument and that there is a mechanism for free will.

I am not a trained philosopher, but the above convinces me that free will, in the intuitive sense described at the beginning of this section, is inconceivable. By this I mean that I can't imagine any description of how free will might arise, or even how we might detect it in action.

One claim of mine is thus that free will is inconceivable.

It may not theoretically be inconceivable, in that someone one day may conceive of a mechanism for it, but currently there is not, to the best of my knowledge, a description of free will which guides one to a conceptualisation.

However inconceivable doesn't mean impossible.

Existence does not require conceivability

What is "inconceivable"?

I don't mean simply that we don't have the qualia. We can't imagine what sensation a pigeon mind generates when interpreting ultraviolet light, but it's not inconceivable. We can be confident that a sensation similar to redness, greenness or blueness is being generated. We conceive the sensation as something like redness, greenness or blueness.

I say that a phenomenon that is conceivable is one which can be directly experienced, which can be imagined being experienced, where a simile exists or where a reasonable explanation exists. An inconceivable phenomenon is one which can't be conceived.

Let us look at other areas in reality where inconceivable doesn't mean impossible.

Cosmology

The fact that we are here. The fact that there is anything at all rather than nothing.

Where did it all come from?

We can conceive of the Big Bang itself, but consider what put together that infinitely dense singularity prior to the bang. I claim that we cannot conceive of such a source.

Our minds are constrained to conceive only in terms of time flowing and of things having a cause. Even with Einstein's Theories of Relativity, we still expect time to flow albeit perhaps flexibly. And we expect things to have a cause. Even a pair of fundamental particles randomly coming into existence requires space with appropriate properties rather than nothingness.

So to have something exist, our intuition tells us that something caused it to exist. Physicalists (and others including me) are happy to allow that the Big Bang caused the galaxies and planets and everything on those planets. But I ask again for the cause of the Big Bang? Perhaps a never-ending series of big bangs and big crunches, or universes budding from earlier universes. In either of those cases, or any other case we can posit, our minds want to know what came before. We cannot conceive of a universe simply existing. Our minds demand a prior cause. Even if we posit a deity, our minds want to know how the deity came into existence. We might indeed *accept* that God created the world, but we cannot *conceive* of this process nor of God. We might *accept* that the universe has simply been here forever, but I cannot *conceptualise* this and I wonder whether others can. This is what I mean by inconceivable - there is no description that adequately guides us to a conceptualisation of creation.

However, I note that I and, it would seem, a great many others do exist. I am therefore happy to both accept that I cannot conceive of a mechanism for our existence, and to accept that the cosmos exists.

Consciousness

We can conceive of no mechanism for creating consciousness, yet we seem to be conscious.

Many people are happy to attribute the supernatural as the ultimate cause of our existence, and for the supernatural to have a hand in our consciousness. Physicalists are often happy to employ unsubstantiated beliefs such as emergent properties. Idealism claims that consciousness is primary. If so, it needs no explanation, but it is still inconceivable.

So, consciousness itself we can conceptualise, but the process by which it comes about is not conceivable. So again, we have existence without conceivability.

Quantum physics

Niels Bohr and Richard Feynman were quite clear that it's not possible to conceive of the mechanics of quantum physics, yet both were quite certain that quantum physics is an excellent model of the

way reality works.

For example, an electron has either positive half-spin or negative half-spin. This is something physicists have no problem working with, yet no one can conceive of what half-spin means. So half-spin can exist but can also be inconceivable.

I can't simply claim that the supernatural is required for any phenomenon for which there is no conceivable explanation, otherwise that would be sufficient to claim that the observed spin of an electron requires the supernatural.

Free will - no evidence for it

There is a particular feature of the phenomenon of free will which distinguishes it from electron spin, from cosmological existence and from consciousness. There is much evidence that the latter phenomena exist. There is no objective evidence at all that free will exists. The only reason we consider its existence is because we have a feeling that we choose freely. But that might simply be a trick of evolution to create a sense of shame and guilt at errors and of satisfaction at successes so that there is more pressure to aim for success and to avoid error and thus to survive and pass on genes. Every choice a person makes seems to have a cause, whether or not that cause is identifiable. It might be an immediate danger. It might be a childhood trauma, or a positive lesson learned years ago. It might be the result of particular chemicals in the brain at the time, or of an atomic decay causing a neuron to fire unexpectedly. As far as we can tell, the world would continue to work just as well if there were no free will.

Free will - a world with it is indistinguishable from a world without

If we examine any choice that a person makes, we can see causes for it.

A man makes a cup of tea. The causes - he was thirsty, and he wanted a break and making tea is a habit he learned from his parents.

A woman in a laboratory is asked to lift her arm at a time of her choosing. She does so after 32 seconds. The causes - she was asked to, and her experiences are that not conforming often leads to unwanted difficulty. Her brain waits until the mental tension is sufficient to prompt her to lift her arm.

The boy finds himself in front of a nice piano. He knows several tunes. He picks one, seemingly of his own volition, and starts playing. The possible causes of his choice - there was a picture on the wall with some connection; he heard a word that reminded him of some lyrics; he practised that one most recently.

The situation would benefit from a volunteer leaving the trench and taking a message. The commanding officer explains the danger and makes it plain that there is no coercion. The soldier volunteers and places himself in mortal danger. One possible cause among many - he comes from a family where duty was celebrated.

In each of these cases we can see a role for free will, but equally there are sufficient prior causes for all of the choices to be made without any recourse to free will.

I suggest that in all cases where a person makes a choice, there can be found prior causes which are sufficient for that choice to be deduced without there being any agency required from the person. (Those authors who have made the case for the non-existence of free will will already have stated this and I don't wish to repeat their work.) However, even if I were to research thousands of choices, and found the above to be true, this does not mean that there won't be a choice at some point that did require agency. But since I want to decide how to live my life, I want to take a pragmatic view on this.

So, I will say that, as far as I can tell, a world with free will is indistinguishable from a world without free will.

Free will - all made up

In summary, it is my view that there is no reasonable mechanism for free will that anyone has proposed, its existence is contrary to logic and there is no evidence nor need for it.

Free will - not from nature

My view is that if free will does exist at all then it would contravene nature as we know it, and in this sense it would require something outside of nature to allow for it. This is the sense in which it would require the supernatural. I provide no argument for this. As far as I can see, there is no case for the existence of free will.

Strawson even claims that we can't have free will even if the supernatural is involved.

Note that I am not claiming that this proves the supernatural. My claim is simply that the supernatural is *necessary* for free will to exist. In other words, if one is unwilling to accept the supernatural, then one must forego free will. It is also important to say that I am not claiming that the existence of the supernatural automatically guarantees free will. Only that the supernatural is necessary for free will.

A further clarification might be worth stating. Even if free will does not exist, that fact would not, of itself, rule out the existence of the supernatural. It would probably rule out the god described in the Christian gospels though, for if I have no agency then it seems unfair that I would be condemned for my lack of care for the poor. I had no choice but to follow that path in life.

You may find the argument presented in this chapter is not particularly sound, nor perhaps very well presented. My inability to convince you however does not mean that the claim is false. Whatever you may feel about this chapter, I urge you to continue. In a later chapter I have something to say on our very ability to construct a counter argument. I claim that a lack of free will removes one's ability to create a verifiable argument against free will.

A good friend

Meetings with a Christian

In 2011 I was living alone much of the time and leading a software project using a new programming language. I'd therefore set up regular meetings with one of my best friends to help retain my sanity and keep a healthy perspective. He was a Christian and I was not. I thought he was misguided on this point, but he was enjoying life, had many friends from church, had a sense of belonging and was confident his belief was correct. He was and is also a great scientist and we would enjoy exploring scientific views at our meetings.

Simply believe?

I'd inferred, probably erroneously, that the call from Christians is to simply *believe*. That's what a careless reading of the Gospels say to do, for example Mark 5:36. Although I liked my friend's life, and would have loved to have had his belief, I felt it fraudulent to simply declare "I believe" when I clearly didn't. I didn't know how to take that step. It seemed like I was being asked to believe without having any testable evidence.

I had other friends with pseudo-scientific claims also asking me to simply believe, where they had purposely avoided preparing reasonable evidence. Christianity, from my point of view at the time, seemed like one of those claims.

My ego had a reputation to uphold.

I'd invested many hours in science and logic. I considered myself able to distinguish good evidence from poor. I believed I had a reputation to maintain for my clarity of mind and my facility with logic. (Arrogance perhaps, but that's how it was.)

If I simply believed something so I could gain friends, and have a sense of belonging, I would lose that reputation and could rightly be called a fraud. I wouldn't be believing anyway. I would simply be *claiming* to believe.

There was also some baggage from childhood. I feared ridicule if I expressed a wish or opinion without a justification, so I really didn't want to take the step of claiming a belief without good reason.

In summary, I had a willingness to believe, but didn't feel *able* to simply believe.

The choice

It seems to me that there are two possible situations in the world. Either we have an amount of free will, or we have none. But we can't ever know. So how do we go forward?

I'll tell it from my point of view. The choice I made on 10th March 2011.

I listened to Professor Strawson give his rationale for there being no free will and I was convinced by it. But I hated the idea of having no agency in my life, of being no more than a biological robot. I'd had some difficult times in my life, and I'd done some tough personal development. I wanted the fruits of that. I wanted agency, and I panicked at the idea of not having any.

I saw a similarity with the riddle of the two guards. There are two possible scenarios, and I may never know which holds. How do I go forward in a way which is advantageous whatever the case?

I rather suspected that free will didn't exist, but I was also paradoxically faced with a choice! How should I respond to this new information? This riddle didn't seem fun anymore, but I felt compelled to solve it.

What choice could I make which would be advantageous in both the scenario "I have free will" and "I don't have free will"?

I used the tool that I used for the Fork in the Road riddle. A table. (As a mathematician, it is quite usual to do this sort of thing in my head. Like a guitarist imagining chord shapes on hearing a tune, it comes through familiarity.)

To complete the table, I needed the assumption that the existence of free will requires the supernatural. I admit that it was only a little later that I figured it was a reasonable assumption.

Table showing outcomes A to D deriving from choices made in the scenarios considered.

| Choice \ Scenario | Discount any spirituality or anything supernatural | Believe in the supernatural |
|---------------------------------|--|-----------------------------|
| There is no free will | A | C |
| There is an amount of free will | B | D |

My existing choice was the belief "Discount any spirituality or anything supernatural", which would give me outcomes A or B depending on how reality is.

The outcomes presented were:

A. I had no free will to make such a choice. I was destined to make the choice anyway. I had psychological fears of not being able to justify my choices, and others such as wasting my life away. I could be free, rationally, of moral responsibility for not having justifications and for any time wasting. I may not be free of the fear, as that would have been generated through evolution to aid my "success". Although I would be making the choice that corresponds with reality, I wouldn't *know for certain* that it corresponded with reality and I would live my life accepting that I am a biological robot.

B. I would be wrong. The argument that free will requires the supernatural is perhaps unfinished, but for me, there's enough in it for me to believe that I would be wrong to continue denying the supernatural. Not only would I be wrong, but I would be missing out on what reality has to offer. If there is the supernatural, I want to explore it!

What if I make the second choice - believe in the supernatural? Here the outcomes are:

C. I had no free will to make such a choice. Although my choice might not correspond with reality, I was destined to make the choice anyway. I had psychological fears of not being able to justify a belief in God. Now I have my justification. When challenged about my lack of logic, or the lack of evidence for a God like my good friend believes in, I can simply say that the lack of free will has led me to this belief.

D. If free will exists then this is the correct choice. I can explore this new view of reality and see what it has to offer. I can join my friend in his exploration.

Another way of putting it:

If I choose to believe in the supernatural then if there is free will I am right and I can enjoy a potentially fruitful exploration. If there isn't free will, then although I might be wrong, I was destined to believe and my fears of being labelled illogical and of not having a justification are both groundless. If there is no free will, I am, as another friend put it, paradoxically free to make any choice I want.

So, in summary, if I am actually free to make a choice, then there is an excellent case for believing in the supernatural.

To make such a choice, from my previously firm belief that all phenomena could be accounted for from the familiar physical world, took a big leap of faith, hence the "leap" in the title of this book. Faith that my logic in the table is correct. Faith in the argument that the supernatural is required for free will to exist.

Should there be other choices examined in this table? Should there be other scenarios? Other choices are possible, but the choice between believing in a supernatural or not believing seems stark. Even if we don't make the choice actively, have we not made a choice by default? Strangely perhaps, I find myself alternating between belief and unbelief even though I am quite satisfied with the arguments I have put forward here. Perhaps the human mind can simultaneously hold two contradictory beliefs. I don't think this negates the argument.

The logical choice is thus, I propose, to choose to believe in the supernatural. The logic however doesn't provide guidance as to what form that supernatural element takes. Without the destination of the "leap" being defined, how do we take the leap in practice? My answer was to exercise my free choice.

What happened next for me

My personal experience of making "the leap"

On 10th March 2011 I'd come up with the logic. I've always prided myself on being able to come up with good logic. This was different. I was going to make a potentially life changing choice based solely on logic I'd concocted in twenty minutes flat.

It was a bit of a challenge, but the alternative seemed to be to accept that I was no more than a robot. A complex biological one, but a robot nevertheless. No agency. No say whatsoever in how my life turns out. I figured there was nothing to lose.

So now I had the opportunity to believe in the supernatural, a spiritual realm, anything I wanted really.

I thought about the religions of the people I knew. The one that seemed the most challenging, the one which seemed to call for me to make a radical change in my life, but a change that appealed, was Christianity. So I chose. But what next? What does one do after making such a choice? The thing I could do right there and then was to pray. I'd never prayed with any conviction before, so this was new. I was in my own living room. I got on my knees in front of the sofa and basically said "OK, God, what now?" and immediately, in my head, words of advice came to me. It wasn't an audible voice, but neither was it something that seemed to have been brewing in my mind previously. It simply seemed like sound advice and an externally supplied answer to what I'd just asked.

Since then, I've continued to call myself a Christian, and have learned more about Jesus's teachings, and learned various interpretations of what it means to be a follower of Jesus. I've also forgotten many times that I am a follower, and I've doubted my choice too, but each time I can come back to this logic and consider the alternative logic too. I continue to be happy with my choice. I don't seem to have lost anything. I continue to be interested in science and logic and personal development. I still love comedy, including irreverent comedy. I haven't excluded any old friends. My old hobbies, such as music, remain. I have of course developed new relationships and new interests. Jesus calls us to serve those less fortunate than ourselves, and my experience is that this is not a burden. It's actually reminded me that I don't need to fear poverty like I used to. I also continue to receive very clear words of advice when I ask passionately in prayer. I could ascribe non-godly causes to the answers to prayer, but then I remember the logic:

Do I have a choice of what to ascribe my prayer answers to? If I do, then the simple existence of that choice, to me, is a miracle.

Given the circumstances of my change of heart, a mantra that I would love to keep in mind is: "Every opportunity to exercise choice is a gift from God. I choose to honour God in the way I use that choice."

Unsatisfactory arguments

None of the steps in my argument is watertight, yet I am tacitly inviting readers to fundamentally change their world view, through nothing other. I readily admit that I find the claim that *"free will requires the supernatural"* to be weak, but I believe I can show that none of the arguments around free will can possibly be watertight.

Before I do, I want to note that if no argument is watertight, we might be left with what seems a quite unsatisfactory position. We cannot know how reality is, what to believe, nor how to live our lives. Perhaps we expect too much from logic. In 1925 Kurt Gödel published his Incompleteness Theorem which states that in any mathematical system, there will be true statements that cannot be proved. In a similar vein, I am stating that there are aspects of reality which are true, but it's impossible to know for certain that they are true. This may be discomfoting, as many of us have been brought up believing that such knowledge is ultimately discoverable. Discomfort also arises because we want to base our life choices on solid foundations.

Let's look now at Strawson's argument. I can't fault the logic. Others may take issue with it, but let's suppose for now that it is logically sound. What I can take issue with is that he claims, albeit implicitly, to have constructed the argument without the use of free will.

One of the qualities of the best logical arguments is that of being falsifiable. According to our good friend Wikipedia -

a theory or hypothesis is falsifiable if it can be logically contradicted by an empirical test that can potentially be executed with existing (or soon to be existing) technologies.

If I am to have a chance of contradicting a hypothesis - any hypothesis - don't I have to choose a test? Yet according to Strawson's claim, I am not free to choose a test. Instead, any test that I undertake is the result of the elements of the universe, physical or otherwise, arranging themselves in a particular way. And my interpretation of both the hypothesis under question and of the result of the test is also simply the end result of the elements of the universe arranging themselves in a particular way. In summary, if Strawson is correct, I am not free to judge the validity of any hypothesis or claim or that of a refutation. I am simply destined to accept it, reject it, misunderstand it, or what many do - avoid engaging with it at all. Strawson's claim is like others, and if there is no free will then it can't be verified.

And even before we consider the falsifiability, if there is no free will, then Strawson was compelled or destined to make his claim, and I was compelled to hear it on 10th March 2011 and be persuaded by it. I am also compelled to write this critique of it. The claim, the persuasion and the critique are all unchosen consequences of the arrangement of the universe at the time they unfolded. Our ability even simply to appreciate a good logical argument, if Strawson is correct, is simply the end result of the random events that have come before. We may appreciate a good logical argument, but we are in no position to judge the validity of one.

A discussion on worldviews

Let's also look at the default worldview of a great many people - the view I held before 2011 where one believes that the universe obeys laws without exception, that miracles never happen and that all claims of miracles are bogus, and where one believes that we are all descended from a single primordial cell which replicated with random mutations and natural selection resulting in all the plant and animal species that are alive on the earth today.

It is to holders of this view that I have aimed this work. Let me address the two beliefs that this person may have. I address the first as it is the central theme of this work, and I address the second as not allowing for miracles is of course a barrier to belief in the world as described in the Christian gospels and thus to one of the possible "leaps of faith"

Why do humans believe (or at least behave as if they believe) they have free will?

If humans are the product of evolution by random mutation and selection of the fittest, and consciousness is a product of that process or evolved through the same process, then it might be that those who berate themselves for mistakes succeed more than those who don't. I can only berate myself if I feel I am to blame, and I can only blame myself if I feel I had a choice to do differently. So, if I feel I have a choice, I might learn more quickly. Once an animal achieves an ability to learn, perhaps that's when the belief in free will is developed. Of course, an alternative explanation is that we genuinely have free will.

Why do some humans believe miracles do not happen, and the supernatural is unreal?

Again, from the premise that humans are the product of evolution by natural selection, then our perception is a model of the world. It is a model based on guesses that have proved useful. It's not a veridical model of the world but a useful model, one that allows people to find an apple, to find a mate and to hide from tigers. [Hoffman has created some very accessible work on this. See references.] Any model which has been developed by guesswork and by validation of those guesses must be based on predictability. It's a model based on patterns. Patterns linking sensory input, actions and outcomes. Patterns built up over our lifetime and over generations. We perceive what we predict. Our whole understanding of reality is based on patterns and predictability. An example of a simple pattern is our eyes detecting a red, round thing hanging from a tree, our action being to pick it and eat it, and the result being a feeling of satiety. A deeper pattern that many of us have in our model of reality is that everything follows laws of nature. Things are either predictable, caused by something, or they are random, such as nuclear decay. It is a reasonable guess. Someone with that pattern in their model may believe that that pattern is a fundamental fact of reality. Such a person will not allow for miracles nor for the supernatural as they are, almost by definition, unpredictable. Since the only way

we have of validating our model is through empirical means, no model can be fully validated. It may be that the pattern "all is predictable or random" is in fact true, and that those who claim to have experienced miracles are liars or have been misled. It may be that there are exceptions - miracles - and that those who have not experienced a miracle have not sought one. In summary, the belief in the impossibility of the supernatural is a reasonable worldview, given the way perception has been developed, and in the absence of witnessing an undeniable miracle, but it may be wrong.

Don't confuse this argument with...

Pascal's Wager

Here is another famous attempt at a wise choice in the face of unknowability. It's not central to my thesis, but it's an interesting piece of history and seems to fit quite nicely here.

All mathematicians have heard of Blaise Pascal and probably hold him in high regard. He was one of the first people to explore the field of probability through mathematics, bringing us Pascal's triangle and other mathematical delights, and he also made several advances in physics, some with flamboyant demonstrations.

In his thirties he was a passionate Christian and put forward an argument based on the unknowability of God's existence. He proposed the following:

- Either God exists or he doesn't, and we cannot know which through reason alone.
- You have to make a choice either to follow a godly life or to live as though God doesn't exist.

Pascal proposed outcomes based on the situation and the choice.

- A: If God doesn't exist and you live as though he doesn't, you continue as now, and there is no additional cost and no additional benefit.
- B: If God doesn't exist and you live a godly life, this could be seen as costing you a small amount of your worldly wealth and forgoing some worldly pleasures
- C: If God exists and you don't live a godly life, you will miss out on eternal life
- D: If God exists and you do live a godly life, you will have eternal life in heaven

If Pascal's assumptions are correct, then there's an overwhelming advantage to living a godly life, even if we never know about the existence or otherwise of God.

The reason I have included Pascal's Wager is that it can be described in a table similar to the one I used for my argument.

Table showing outcomes A to D deriving from choices made in the scenarios considered.

| Scenario \ Choice | Continue living an ungodly life | Live a life God would approve of |
|--------------------|---------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| God does not exist | A | C |
| God exists | B | D |

As long as the probability of God existing is finite and non-zero, it makes sense to live a godly life.

To round off

Accepting life without free will

When I discuss these concepts with friends, I find to my surprise that several believe that there is no free will and are surprisingly content with this state of affairs. Of course, without free will, they didn't choose to be content. Without free will, they didn't choose to believe that there is no free will. Strawson didn't choose to put forward his theory, and I didn't choose to write this work. The New Testament authors who wrote about Jesus were simply compelled to do so, and Jesus had no choice but to teach what he taught. Without free will, the value of his teachings would seem to be severely diminished, as we cannot choose to follow them - we are either compelled to, or compelled not to.

Living as though we have free will

We tend to live our lives as though we have free will. Even if a person claims they believe there is no free will, it seems they can't help but act as though they have free will. Surely, it's more fun to live as though one does have free will, and in order to live with integrity, we need to consider carefully the argument put forward on these pages.

Final call

If you've ever wanted to know what it is that believers value, but you couldn't "simply believe", I hope you now see that it is actually possible to take the leap and "simply believe", and perhaps to do a valuable scientific experiment - make a prayer.

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