

Individualism, Mozart, The Excluded Other



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"Finding the Challenges" is an original column appearing every other Wednesday at Everything-Voluntary.com, by Verbal Vol. Verbal is a software engineer, college professor, corporate information officer, life long student, farmer, libertarian, literarian, student of computer science and self-ordering phenomena. Archived columns can be found [here](#). FTC-only RSS feed available [here](#).

This introduction will be longer than most, partly because there is a lot of background to cover, and further because it is a central debate to the individualist voluntarist. The question is whether all events are determined, but if not what role does free will, *ergo* individualism, *ergo* voluntarism, play? And due to the convergence of the argument of determinism versus free will into my personal thought sphere, all three sections below will concern the question.

But I need to say a bit about why I am at this pass, and I need to address some definition problems, before launching into the related topics — Rothbard on Individualism, Mozart as an individual, and the logic fallacy problem with framed debates.

About 10 days ago, on the way to and from the Socrates Cafe Louisville meeting, I opened the latest podcast from Dan Carlin, Common Sense #293. This particular show was a dual podcast in which Dan and Sam Harris combined for a discussion about various current issues, mostly US foreign policy. It was a very stimulating encounter. Among other things, I learned that Sam had been involved with Bill Maher and Ben Affleck in a dust-up about Islam. I found Sam to be intelligent and well spoken, and I found out that whatever peripheral info I had about the above dust-up was spotty as could be (I gave up on the Bill Maher HBO show in 2004 when I decided that the occasional good joke was not worth the huge amount of hot air).

In any event, I decided to check out other episodes of Sam Harris' podcast, Waking Up. As a matter of chance (note that this chance followed a related decision by me), the podcast I listened to first was one in which Sam and Jerry Coyne spent half the show supporting atheism and the other half supporting determinism. They certainly made a good team for the use of confirmation bias on both counts. Not only that, they seemed to miss entirely the immense gaps between atheism and reductionist determinism. I wouldn't mind

arguing that they are opposites philosophically.

Then another coincidence. One of the members of the Socrates Cafe, Louisville, a physicist, suggested that we should look into Determinism (nature) versus Free Will (nurture, among other phenomena). She asked some very compelling questions. I chose (note the verb) to go to this meeting wearing my voluntarist (free will individualist) hat.

I'd say the room of 20 or so philosophists was evenly split, and the discussion proceeded as though the more poorly debating half would cease to exist by the end of the evening. We squared ourselves into groups at opposite extremes (see the logic fallacy section below). The determinists insisted that folks such as Sam and Jerry were not determinists but reductionists. While it was a wonderful discussion, we mostly sparred about the process of debate but not the substance of the issue. It turns out that two hours was not enough time to get past the prelims or the linguistic barriers.

I will conclude this introduction with a few definitions as I see them relative to the question:

- determinism — the idea that all things are facts and that all facts can be explained eventually with the rules of nature.
- deterministic reductionism — the extrapolation of a pseudo-natural rule that holds that determinism precludes choice.
- choice — an individual's act based on the free gathering of information, always incomplete to a degree in an imperfect world.
- risk — the likelihood of unforeseen consequences based on imperfect information.
- free will — not will free of natural rules, but will with the risk of naturally occurring consequences.

Rothbard Quote #3 — Individualism

Individualists have always been accused by their enemies of being "atomistic"—of postulating that each individual lives in a kind of vacuum, thinking and choosing without relation to anyone else in society. This, however, is an authoritarian straw man; few, if any, individualists have ever been "atomists." On the contrary, it is evident that individuals always learn from each other, cooperate and interact with each other; and that this, too, is required for man's survival. But the point is that each individual makes the final choice of which influences to adopt and which to reject, or of which to adopt first and which afterwards. The libertarian welcomes the process of voluntary

exchange and cooperation between freely acting individuals; what he abhors is the use of violence to cripple such voluntary cooperation and force someone to choose and act in ways different from what his own mind dictates.

I didn't have to search far in Rothbard's *For a New Liberty* to find a passage that makes clear that the individual is the building block of human society (not the state). The difference is that individuals build for freedom while states build for rigidity. States build with the false premise that individuality is regression and that collectivism is progress.

Mozart

I offer as Exhibit #1 for the defense of Individualism, and Choice, the works of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. Although I suppose that supporters of determinism would say that Wolfie stood on the shoulders of giants and inherited the state of music as it accumulated into his era. But I defy anyone to listen to the Overture from Don Giovanni, but then insist that it was achievable with any Mozart-like automaton.

Every human is not only the sum total of her parts, but she is a greater presence of an individual with an affect which is the outcome of an incredibly complex blend of inputs, including all genetic, environmental, and experiential influences. She is a unique blend from all dimensions, not a copy, not to be copied.

We can now do cloning, I'm told, but there doesn't appear to be much of a market for it. It seems like Mozart would be somebody we want more of (if we could solve the problem of in which mass grave he was buried, and which remains are his). But what kind of a Mozart would we get? We would get a Mozart without Mozart's nurture. Maybe we would just get a Salieri. So could we expect greater music? What would be wrong with listening to the music that Mozart has already left for us? Why would we be greedy for more. The body of work — a completely unique body of work, by the way — is already absolutely original and endlessly discoverable.

Here's a thought experiment — please find a comfortable spot, listen to the Don Giovanni Overture with mindfulness (you may want to listen to the full opera), then tell me that Mozarts are a dime a dozen, or further that there was no free will in composing it. Then you can go on to Duke Ellington, Johnny Cash, Talking Heads, and tell me again.

Logic Fallacy #31 — The Excluded Other

Starting from the premise that one thing exists to the exclusion of another is a false premise, and all conclusions that arise from this error are logic fallacies. This is also the

great American pastime for partisans, politicians, pillagers, pundits, patriots, and propagandists.

Many scientists (not I!) claim that all is just the collision of atoms, the mixing of chemicals, the levers and pulleys of a structure. It can all be unpacked and explained case by case, they say. This is the idea that Voltaire dealt with in *Candide*; the protagonist, Candide, was being force fed the Leibniz construct that this is the best of all possible worlds since things were obviously as they should be (the “is/ought” fallacy). Voltaire convinced me half a century ago, we are the purveyors of our own fates. Even if we get struck fatally by lightning, it is not a triumph of some other force over our own. We can be in the wrong place at the wrong time, but nobody else put us there.

The stricter determinists, or reductionists if you will, make a claim for what they believe is such an elegant argument that it explains itself. This is because of the fence they put around the argument. Within that fence there are no contradictions to the argument, and they regard everything outside the fence as mystery, not evidence, and they insist that the mysterious is the same as non-existent.

Those of us without perfect information can only guess about the probabilities beyond our ken. That is known as risk. We must make conscious, even, voluntary decisions about which risks we will run.

Now I have exhausted myself wrestling with the huge idea of will. I see that none of the ideas above do much beyond scratching the surface. There are a thousand more things to say. I hope that I can learn more every day and report it to you as columns go by. But let's keep it voluntary, OK?

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