

A Strictly Scientific Worldview is Incompatible with Moral Responsibility

Many scientists hold to a worldview that is strictly scientific, one in which “free will” is taken to being an illusion or an old superstition. These same scientists will also maintain that we have moral and ethical responsibility for the actions we take. These are incompatible stances.

Their argument for resolving the incompatibility usually has something to do with “feedback loops”. A feedback loop is merely a mechanical system that responds to a stimulus and part of that response goes back in as stimulus for the next response. But if the system is purely mechanistic, the initial stimulus still completely determines the final state. A computer simulation will demonstrate this. A machine still has no choice.

Without free will there are only two options for contemplating the future. Either the universe is like a movie, in which the end is already set in film, or the movie has multiple ending cuts which are chosen by random (causeless or spontaneous) forces. There is no in-between here. In order to have moral responsibility, the observer must be able to influence how the movie plays out.

Let me start my formal argument with the necessary conditions for “free action” to exist:

1. Multiple future states must exist as real and alternate possibilities inherent in the *current* state of the universe.
2. A free acting agent must have the ability to originate an influence that forces the realization of any one of these alternate possibilities.
3. Determinism precludes alternate future states and thus precludes free action. Determinism must necessarily be excluded for free action to exist.

Quantum physics provides one explanation for the first condition. But no scientific theory yet explains the second condition.

These conditions for free action are still not sufficient to establish responsibility for the actions taken. Responsibility also depends on being “free of what we are”. To elucidate, lets begin with a scientific worldview assumption:

1. We are only our physical bodies and our bodies and brain completely determine what we do.
2. To be responsible for what we do, we must therefore be responsible for what we are.
3. We cannot be responsible for what we are because, as the first point asserts, we act only in accordance to what we are. Simply, we cannot be self-forming.

4. Therefore, we cannot be responsible for what we do.

For me, moral responsibility depends on two presumptions that are not yet compatible with a current scientific worldview:

1. The ability to effect one of many alternate possibilities into realized physical states.
2. Ability to act in such manner as transcends what we are as physical bodies.

Any philosophy that adheres *only* to the current scientific worldview *and* maintains the reality of moral responsibility is internally inconsistent.