

An argument for free will: the implications of ridley's discussion in "genome"



“ Freedom equals the parts of our natures not determined by our genes.”

(Ridley, 302)

Free will is not an illusion. It can be defined in many ways; perhaps the most cohesive of its many definitions would be “ an individual’s ability to choose or decide on the basis of immediate perception, and without pressing inhibitions”. If not inhibited, man does have free will, as mental disability or disease remains the only true restriction of man’s free will. In instances such as those, genetics certainly come into play, but otherwise, one’s genes do not completely define their actions.

The question of free will is not only disputed within the scientific community but also remains well-debated by students of philosophy. In *Genome*, author Matt Ridley blends the two factions of genetic determinism and freedom, stating that the idea that behavior is entirely mastered by an individual’s environment is just as deterministic as that of genetic determinism.

Philosophers often argue that an individual is created by their surroundings, which include the environment in which they reside and exist in and the other human beings with which they interact. They also contend that free will is a human reality that is closely tied to the philosophical concepts of free action and moral responsibility. These philosophers’ idea of environmental influence on an individual’s personality has proven to be valid. However, the idea that people can be genetically predisposed to particular personality traits has the potential to hold equal validity. “ It did not occur to him that he was applying a double standard: demanding rigorous proof for genetic explanations of behavior while easily accepting

social ones.” (Ridley, 303) Several studies have shown that an affinity for violence or impulsivity might be linked to specific genes.

One such study, led by Dean Hamer, promotes the correlation of the gene D4DR with what is described as novelty-seeking behavior, which could be said too often coincide with the impulsive nature of a specific individual. On chromosome 11, the gene forms a dopamine receptor, and the D4DR is activated in certain parts of the brain, though not in others. Dopamine is, in essence, a stimulating chemical, meaning that lack of it will make an individual lethargic or immobile while excess can cause schizophrenia, for example. “ We instinctively assume that bodily biochemistry is because whereas behavior is affected.” (153) . Some may believe that wholeheartedly, but Hamer’s results proved that only four percent of such behavior occurs due to the gene D4DR. Thirty-six percent of the behavior is heritable, and the other sixty percent is considered to be caused by an individual’s environment. Therefore, a combination of genetic predisposition and environmental factors can be considered responsible for a person’s adventurous qualities, but they might also simply choose to take risks based on the fact that it excites them or gives them pleasure. Another variable that can contribute to one’s personality and mental chemistry is diet, particularly cholesterol intake. Lower cholesterol levels lead to lower serotonin levels, which can possibly indicate depression or violent desires.

Ridley makes the point that “ human behavior is, therefore, unpredictable in the short term, but broadly predictable in the long term”. (Ridley, 312) This

is true and also acknowledges the fact that humans do have free will. Of

course, humans follow a pattern, everything in nature follows a pattern, from <https://assignbuster.com/an-argument-for-free-will-the-implications-of-ridleys-discussion-in-genome/>

the petals of flowers to the shell of a snail and to the migration of geese.

Patterns are found everywhere in nature. This doesn't mean any less that we have free will. I am able to make choices every day. While if observed over a long period of time, my choices might be predictable, it doesn't take away from the fact that it is my choice.

For example, I can choose to buy potato chips every day with lunch.

Observed over a long period of time, I am predictable. Still, if I buy them every day, it is my choice, and it does not take away my free will. I can choose not to buy the chips. I am not forced by society or by my genes to buy potato chips. If one day, I decide to buy a cookie instead of chips, it is my choice. It might seem like my choice is limited by my environment, which would be, at that present moment, a school lunch kiosk. There are only a certain number of snack options available. However, this limitation is an illusion imposed by routine, as I do not have to buy a snack from school at all. I do not have to eat a snack either, but if I want to, I can also pack something from home. I have a massive array of choices, and I must choose to do something, even if that something is to do nothing. If I think ahead, I could even buy strawberries the night before and pack them to bring to school." We call these differences personality, a word that means more than just character. It means the innate and individual element in character."

(161) The decision of what to eat I depends solely on how I eat, whether or not it's healthy, cheap, or just easily available.

A point that is often made which relates to the issue of whether or not we have free will uses Hume's Fork as support. Hume's fork states that " either our actions are determined, in which case we are not responsible for them, <https://assignbuster.com/an-argument-for-free-will-the-implications-of-ridleys-discussion-in-genome/>

or they are the result of random events, in which case we are not responsible for them.” Who are our choices determined by if not ourselves? It should be clear that if our choices are determined by us, then we are responsible for them. Therefore, the first point Hume makes is ill-supported and unclear.

Our actions are not predetermined. We are humans, we think consciously and we are responsible for the consequences of each of our actions. In fact, we are faced with infinite choices daily, which all lead down different paths, which lead to more choices, in an everlasting cycle. We choose to take actions, which result in consequences, which might lead to other choices later on.

Additionally, the idea that an individual’s actions are caused by random events is laughable. Of course, an individual’s environment is up to chance and is definitely a result of random events. A person cannot help the circumstances into which they were born. However, how an individual reacts to this environment is entirely up to them. What some consider being fate is the outcome of everyone exercising their free will and the impact of those choices on everyone else’s choices. “ Simple introspection tells me there is nothing that I can’t help myself doing. There is equally nothing that says that I must do one thing and not something else.” (Ridley, 302)

Every person is born into a different environment which shapes them and offers them an infinite variety of options. “ Yet even after these discoveries, an environment is still massively important – probably in total more important than genes in nearly all behaviors.” (Ridley, 306) This environment is influenced by the choices of prior humans, certainly, and by the

circumstances in which humanity exists. The choices that humanity has made prior to now has had consequences that affect humanity now.

However, how an individual in his right mind responds to his environment is entirely his choice.

A person can have genetic limitations set in place, such as certain diseases. These too can be considered part of the environment that they are born into. Choice still exists though one's environment might affect the types of choices that are available for a given individual. If I have a genetic disease, I am limited by my environment. However, I still have a cognitive mind that allows choice. " The devastating loss of memory and of personality that accompanies old age in so many people — and that occurs in a few people when quite young - has been attributed to all sorts of factors, environmental, pathological and accidental." (261) Some things we can control, but other things we can't.

The choice is, therefore, not determined by one's genetics or by the environment, but by the individual. The circumstances of existence are determined by genetics and environment, but not what man does with his circumstances. After all, " everybody has a unique and different endogenous nature. A self." (Ridley, 313) What man does with himself is his choice.