

Big Questions Novice Topic Analysis

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Hey there! Welcome to the Topic Analysis of the 2016-2017 Big Questions resolution:

Resolved: Science leaves no room for free will.

In this topic analysis, we will go through an introduction to some key terms in the topic, go over some of the large themes regarding this topic in the real world, and then look to Affirmative and Negative positions that can be argued. Remember, this topic analysis is simply a springboard for you to dive into this topic and get a simple understanding of it – you should use this as a way to brainstorm even more unique ideas you can defend either affirming or negating!

Let's get into it!

Definitions

Before getting into arguments, let's define a couple of important terms to figure out what this topic is about.

1. "Science" – systematic knowledge of the physical or material world gained through observation and experimentation.[1]

Basically – science is based on look at the real world, and trying to figure out how we know what we know based on facts.

2. "Free will"— the doctrine that the conduct of human beings expresses personal choice and is not simply determined by physical or divine forces[2]

Basically – free will is about how human beings are able to make their own decisions about their lives. For example, if I want to eat ice cream today, I as a human should have the free will in order to make that decision and eat whatever I want to eat.

3. "No room" – This may sound a little tricky, but this is simply saying that if we accept science is true, then that means we cannot accept free will. It's a term in the topic indicating that you have to pick between either science or free will, but not both.

Introduction

The debate over free will and science has been going on for many years. The reason this debate continues is because both sides have very compelling arguments.

Let's ask some basic questions to figure out what the debate is about.

If I decided to eat ice cream today, is it because I chose to?

1. Yes, you have the free will to do whatever you want.
2. No, you ate the ice cream but you didn't actually choose to do it.

Which one do you think is correct? Both have valid reasons why they may or may not be true, but if you picked B, then you would be on the side of a type of science called **determinism**.

All this really means is that you think whatever happens in the world is based on something that happened before. Think of it like dominos – in order for one to fall, the one before it has to fall. This is a view in science that says

humans don't actually make decisions. The rest of the world simply has events which cause humans to do something as simple as eat ice cream.

Here's another way to think about it – If ice cream had never been invented, would you have the ability to eat it? No! If no one ever made ice cream, you could never eat it! (Unless you invent ice cream which would be pretty cool!)

But this also shows how events have to happen in order for other things to happen – so I don't actually have the free will to eat ice cream, I was either going to eat it or not it based on the PAST events that happened like ice cream being created in the first place.

That's the basic debate going on right now. Are humans truly free? Does science actually allow us to figure out if other things control humans besides their own will? These are the main questions you will have to answer when constructing your cases.

Now, let's take a look into some affirmative and negative positions. Remember – in Big Questions, you get 5 minutes to give an introduction speech – which means you can add a lot of detail to your speeches and really get into the depths of an argument!

Affirmative Arguments

There's a couple different ways you can approach the affirmative side of this topic.

When you are affirming, it is important to remember that you are the one arguing for science not allowing any room for free will, meaning you are defending science MORE than you are defending free will.

You should place the burden on the negative for explaining why free will exists. You should make your job super easy! All you have to prove is that science shows how free will is not very real, BUT the negative must show that free will exists even with science.

Let's look at some arguments. (There are articles below that you should read to grab a better understanding of the argument, and here you'll find a short summary of how it can be presented)

The Human Brain

- The human brain tricks itself – it makes us think we have free will but that's just an illusion
- People like to use free will to make them seem like they have some control over their life, which is why they get so passionate about it
- When we actually look at scientific studies, we can see the brain actually makes it seem like we have control when we really don't

Studies

- For example – “In one of the studies undertaken by Adam Bear and Paul Bloom, of Yale University, the test subjects were shown five white circles on a computer monitor. They were told to choose one of the circles before one of them lit up red. The participants were then asked to describe whether they'd picked the correct circle, another one, or if they hadn't had time to actually pick one. Statistically, people should have picked the right circle about one out of every five times. But they reported getting it right much more than 20 per cent of the time, going over 30 per cent if the circle turned red very quickly. The scientists suggest that the findings show that the test subjects' minds were swapping around the order of events, so that it appeared that they had chosen the right circle – even if they hadn't actually had time to do so.” [3]
- The impact to this is that we have studies showing the brain makes us feel as if we have an actual choice – which is why science shows free will does not exist, thus fulfilling the affirmative burden.

Nothing escapes the laws of physics

- Albert Einstein once said, “I do not at all believe in human freedom in the philosophical sense. Everybody acts not only under external compulsion but also in accordance with inner necessity.”
- “Balls bouncing around a pool table have no free will. The basic chemicals that make up our bodies and minds have no free will. Neurons fire when they should fire, according to their electrochemical properties. They don’t randomly fire: They fire when they’re stimulated to fire by other neurons or by environmental inputs. Stimulation results from a constant biochemical cycle. These natural cycles determine our states of mind and our choices.”
- “Through a long and complicated series of cause and effect, our choices are made. As such, all our ‘choices’ are ultimately the result of impersonal and mechanical forces. There is no “free will force” that causes neurons to fire some times and not at others.”[\[4\]](#)
- This means there is always a cause for you doing even the smallest thing, proving that there is no such thing as free will.
- This also relates to the domino example – everything happens because of another event happening – which means no matter how much we want to think we are making our own choices – SOME event happened in the past, which makes us, do what we do now.

We should be pragmatic

- Based on our studies, it seems like people believe in free will simply because they want something to believe in
- While this is fine, there is a larger impact towards trusting the physical and empirical world of science, that trades off with believing in free will
- To solve actual issues in the real world, we have to look towards what the facts are and then be able to go from there – science leaves no room for free will because it proves free will does not physically exist, past events determine future events, and believing in free will stops us from believing in the hard, testable facts that we have around us.

Negative Arguments

When you are negative, you should try to make your goal as simple and intuitive as possible: yes science is real, yes free will is real, and yes they both can exist.

Being negative on this topic means you simply have to prove that free will and science can be compatible at the same time. The affirmative will try to say that all the new studies we have in science prove that we don’t have free will, so you have to be able to show how those studies are either not true, or don’t truly grasp the entire concept of what free will is.

Also, you can be very persuasive on this side! You can ask rhetorical questions (questions that need no answer) to your judge or the audience about how obvious it is that we all can think for ourselves but also appreciate the value in science!

Let’s look at some arguments.

Free will goes beyond science

- We have always had free will – it has just evolved
- Although science may be able to explain many things about how the human brain works, they cannot explain the choices humans make that go beyond science like beliefs in faith

- We make choices WITHIN an already scientific world – this just means science is around is but so is our ability to choose what to think in that world
- “Free will cannot violate the laws of physics or even neuroscience, but it invokes causes that go beyond them.”[5]

Science can't get rid of free will

- All of the affirmative's studies don't get to the heart of the question when it comes to making personal decisions
- “The assumption behind all this empirical evidence against free will is that conscious decision takes place at an instant which can be compared with the neural activity corresponding to it.”
- “Another fundamental aspect which is widely overlooked in these studies is that they provide no proof whatsoever that brain activity could happen without conscious decision taking place. This is a critical point particularly because neural activity precedes the conscious awareness of the decision corresponding to it.”
- Many of their experiments prepare people for it – “A methodological flaw that strikes me as odd is that these experiments always involve a test subject fully aware of the choice they are going to make. Is it surprising that our brain would prepare for this decision?” [6]

We should try to believe in free will always

- Even if all the science isn't on our side, it is actively good to always think humans have free will
- If we didn't think we had the ability to make our own choices, humans would go around doing horrible things!
- They would then say “It's not my fault, I can't make my own choices.” This would be worse off for society and the scientific community in general
- This means its okay to acknowledge science exists but also value the beneficial aspects of free will and how it provides structure to a society

Those are some basic level arguments on how to approach this topic. You should go into the articles below, read them to get a grasp on this debate, and then think of your own arguments!

Bibliography

A great introduction video to this debate – (Crash Course Free will vs. Determinism)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vCGtkDzELAI>

Affirmative

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Negative

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