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Quantum Compatibilism

The subject of debate for centuries, the perceived incompatibility of determinism and free will, has plagued philosophers and curious minds since it was first conceived. Perhaps one of the most important questions about the nature of our reality, physical and metaphysical, the free will debate poses deep inquiries into the ultimate truth, whatever that may be. Throughout history, many brilliant perspectives have been shared on the topic by philosophers such as Plato, Laplace, Hume, Rachels, Kane, and more contemporary figures like Hellen Beebee, who remain incredibly relevant. The dilemma that each of them attempts to navigate is the seemingly impossible coexistence of a predetermined existence governed by natural laws of causation and the ability for conscious beings to have agency in their own lifespans, also known as free will. In a world where everything is determined, where does free will fit in? Similarly, in a world where all is random and set into action by free agents, where do the natural laws we know to be true fit in? The stance that I boldly choose to take is one of compatibilism, the ability for both free will and determinism to exist and work with each other to create the reality we live in. My position relies heavily on concepts taken directly from what we currently know about quantum mechanics, specifically the laws regarding fields of possibility and the often-overlooked power of observation. For my argument, I provide the following premises in the form of an argument by analogy.

An atom is composed of a nucleus of protons and neutrons, surrounded by electrons, but according to the Heisenberg uncertainty principle, we cannot know both the space and location of the electrons until we observe them, thus giving them a new definition each time they are observed. Electrons exist as a field of possibilities; they can be anywhere within the field at any given time, but to be the defined element, the atom must have a certain number of electrons. This is where I believe determinism and free will are allowed to coexist. The deterministic nature of requiring a certain number of electrons for the atom to remain the element that it is shows that natural laws can hold command over seemingly random fields of possibility, and the field of possibility itself is representative of free will.

The requirement of a conscious observer to determine where in the field of possibilities the electron lies is directly related to our ability as free agents to determine what is and what could be. Take this and extrapolate it out to a more concrete example. Say you are walking down a hallway with many doors. The hallway was already there, and it only has a set number of doors that you can possibly walk through; doors cannot be added or taken from the hallway. When the agent walks towards a door, they are presented with a field of possibility that can only be collapsed via the power of observation. The agent can mentally observe the field of possibilities in a metaphysical sense; through the power of thought, they can imagine what could lay through the door versus what could be through another door, but they are unable to know for sure until they observe what is through a certain door.

Picture now the hallway as the natural flow of time, written by determinism as the infinite possibilities that an agent can observe throughout their lifetime, and since time flows in one direction once a door is entered, the rest of the possibilities are out of reach and only exist as the ability to have done otherwise. The free agent is necessary for there to be any reason for the universe to have been created; if there were no conscious observer of possibilities, then the universe would forever exist in a state of perpetual possibility.

As conscious beings, it is our responsibility to observe possibilities to create the reality that we share. It is through the collective observation of different possibilities that we define our reality. We create our reality as we make choices in what we observe, collapsing the state of quantum superposition into a defined and observable reality that, once solidified, cannot be undone, thus adding it to the history of consciousness described by the Theosophical Society’s Akashic record system.

            In conclusion, a deep understanding of quantum mechanics reveals how observation collapses states of indeterminism. As free agents, we create our reality within the confines of these possibilities. This conceptual framework allows for both the existence of free will and determinism, with free will being defined as our ability to choose what we observe and determinism as the limited possibilities that we must choose from, allowing for compatibilism to be true. What determines our possibilities is very well explained by James Rachels; all aspects of sociology, psychology, and everything out of our direct control that shapes the environment we live in determine the possibilities that we must choose from. Free will exists in the small gap that determinism leaves open. It lies in our ability to choose what we are conscious of, what we give our time and energy to, and ultimately, how we create our own individual reality that, when combined with the conscious observations of other beings, creates the shared reality that we all exist within. This leads us also to the conclusion that moral responsibility does exist, as we each are individually responsible for shaping our own reality and how the interconnectivity of all conscious beings is responsible for the creation of our shared reality. This is our world, our reality, and we will make it as good or as bad as we choose, and I hope we make the right decisions.