





Psychology Today



“Women want some chase, some drama, some intrigue.”

Jen Kim

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One Among Many

The self in social context
by [Joachim I. Krueger, Ph.D.](#)



Joachim Krueger is a social psychologist at Brown University who believes that rational thinking and socially responsible behavior are attainable goals.
[See full bio](#)

Beyond freedom (but not responsibility)

You can be responsible without being free.
Published on March 9, 2009



This blog is supposed to be about self-perception and related social psychological topics. Since I started writing, though, I found myself drawn to issues of freedom vs. determinism. The attentive reader may have noticed that I am leaning toward the determinist camp, although I agree that there are some kinds of freedom worth having (e.g., not to be told by a university suit which courses to teach). After I disputed some free-willing ideas championed by my colleague Roy Baumeister (see my post "[Free will! Can I have one?](#)"),

I finished reading a book he co-edited ("Are we free? Psychology and free will"). I go on record saying that this book is superb. The editors assembled a team of eminent contributors representing all perspectives on the sticky problem of problems. Reading this book will give you a comprehensive overview of the scholarly landscape of compatibilism, incompatibilism, strict and weak determinism, libertarianism and what have you. By the time you get to the end of the book, you are free (in the weak sense) to make up your own mind.

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One recurring argument bugged me, though, and that's why I am writing today. Several authors with sympathies for the free-will position claimed that we need free will, for if we didn't have it, we would lose the concept of personal responsibility. If we lost the concept of personal responsibility, we would lose all justification to hold people accountable for their actions. Once we stop rewarding and especially if we stop punishing miscreants, everyone will begin to rape, pillage, and burn (ironically, one gets the sense that they would "freely" choose that piratical life-style).

What's wrong with this picture?

First, the sequence of deductions is illogical in the most basic, syllogistic sense. Suppose it is true that "If people are free, they are responsible for their actions." It is then also true that "If people are not responsible for their actions, they are not free" (*modus tollens*). It does not follow, however, that "If people are responsible for their actions, they are free" (this is the logical fallacy of *affirming the consequent*, or what one could flippantly call *modus nonsense*).





The logical error is compounded by magical reasoning. As a rule, you cannot let your belief in the truth of an idea depend on how much you desire its consequences. If living for 200 years were your greatest desire, that desire alone would not make it so. Our desire to [punish](#) evil-doers and our [fear](#) of what might happen if we couldn't punish them, does not set the will free.

Third, the primary deduction is empirically baseless. We reward and punish others all the time without necessarily imputing intentions, volition, or free will to them (consider animal training!). These rewards and punishments may be weaker than those given when free will is assumed, but that does not mean that they are too weak. Indeed, they may be just right. Arguably, our reactions, and the reactions of the penal system, to those whom we regard as premeditators, may be too strong. Vicious punishment may do more to satisfy the punisher's need for vengeance than to shape the target's behavior for the better.

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And by the way, who is to say that humans would automatically stop rewarding and punishing one another if the idea of free will were refuted to everyone's (even Baumeister and Searle's) satisfaction? I suppose we would just go on behaving as we have behaved before, in good deterministic fashion. You see, a determinist can have his cake (laws of nature) and eat it too (say "bad dog!" or "good dog!" depending on what the little fellow did).

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