

Researchers probe whether, why, free will exists

May 12, 2010

ORLANDO, Fla.—Are people really responsible for all the things they do? Do they have what theologians call God-given “free will” to choose between right and wrong?

Those questions are at the heart of a four-year research project under way at Florida State University that aims to determine whether, and how, free will exists.

Funded by a \$4.4 million grant from the [John Templeton Foundation](#), the project will gather together scientists, philosophers and theologians around the question of what factors—free will, genetics, environment, God or something else—lead us to do all the things we do.

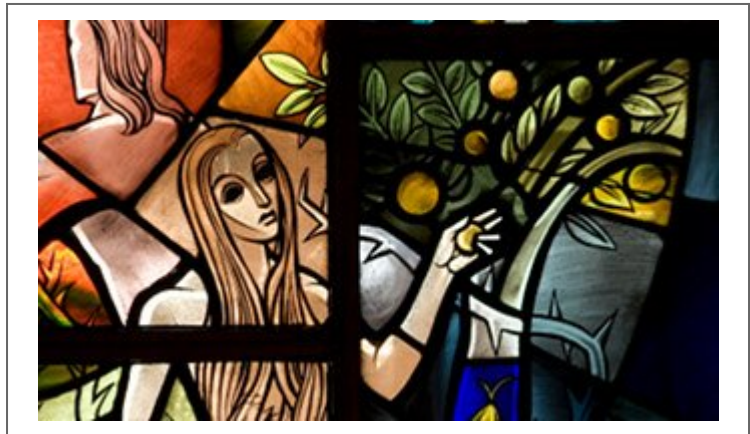
“Gathering evidence for it one way or another, it’s quite possible,” said [Alfred Mele](#), a professor of philosophy at Florida State who will lead the project. “Scientists have been looking for evidence for and against free will since the early ’80s.”

The debate however, is much older. For instance: Do humans, through their own freely chosen actions and decisions, determine whether they will go to heaven or hell? Does an omniscient God already know how things will turn out in the end? Does God give humans the free choice to turn away?

In the early 1980s, neuroscientist [Benjamin Libet](#) conducted an experiment that found subjects’ brains registered the decision to flex their wrists roughly 300 milliseconds before the subjects themselves became aware of their decision to do it. Libet concluded “conscious free will never is involved in producing a decision, and you can see how there’s a quick road

from there to ‘there actually is no free will,’” Mele said.

The research led some to believe that brain processes traceable to genetic and environmental factors, and not free will, determine our decisions. Others think that while people might not be immediately aware of the decisions our brains make, they still possess the free will to veto these decisions.



But Mele, the author of two books and more than 170 articles on the concept of free will, doesn’t discount the more common definition of free will—one used by the courts in determining guilt and premeditation.

“There really is nothing more to it than sanely, rationally assessing reasons and then deciding on the basis of those reasons, as long as nobody is pushing you around or forcing you,” he said. “In that view of free will, it’s pretty obvious there is free will.”

The “Big Questions in Free Will” research project will devote \$3.4 million for projects around the world to explore the concept of free will from scientific, philosophical and theological perspectives.

Scientists will look for evidence proving or disproving whether free will exists. Philosophers and theologians, meanwhile, will seek a better definition of the concept, helping scientists to know precisely what evidence they are looking for, Mele said.

Perhaps it is difficult to reconcile concepts such as fate and destiny with free will, but it is possible for an omniscient God to coexist with the idea of free will, said Kevin Timpe, an associate professor of philosophy at Northwest Nazarene University in Nampa, Idaho.

“There is a difference between knowing what someone is going to do and causing them to do it,” said Timpe, author of [*Free Will: Sourcehood and Its Alternatives*](#). “I know what my wife is going to order when I take her to certain restaurants just because I know her very well. But I also think my wife is freely choosing to order.”

What if researchers discover free will does not exist? Two studies portend a troubled future, Mele said. One found its subjects cheated more when they believed they were not responsible for their own decisions; another found subjects’ behavior growing more aggressive when their belief in free will was suspended.

Norman Geisler, the author of 70 books including several on free will, said the idea that free will does not exist is incompatible with the Bible and the doctrine of original sin, which refers to the sin inherited from Adam and Eve’s transgressions in the Garden of Eden. If Adam’s decision was not made freely, then that presumably makes God responsible for evil in the world.

“The Bible constantly affirms that man is free, that he can choose his destiny, that he’s morally responsible,” said Geisler, whose books include [*Chosen But Free*](#). “To say that we are pre-determined is to blame God for our choices. Secondly if all our actions are pre-determined, then why doesn’t God save everyone? Because if he can save everyone apart from their free will and he if really loves everyone, then he would.”