

## Revision of the Four-Step Argument

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Written in Response to criticisms offered by Craig A. Ford, Jr. of “Re-framing the Free-Will Debate: An Epistemological Perspective” as published in *Glossolia*, Fall 2010:

Briefly I want to rehearse the structure of the “second argument” from the original paper and note how it defers from the first. The argument is presented as follows in my original paper:

1. If materialistic determinism is true, then every state of affairs occurs by necessity.
2. Mental events, including our beliefs, are states of affairs.
3. ∴ From 1 and 2, if materialistic determinism is true, our mental events occur by necessity  
(and likewise, our beliefs are held by necessity).
4. We can hold both true and untrue beliefs.
5. ∴ From 3 and 4, if materialistic determinism is true, all our beliefs (whether true or not)  
are held by necessity.
6. If all our beliefs (both true and not true) are held by necessity, we cannot discern whether  
our beliefs are justified or not.
7. If we cannot discern whether our beliefs are justified or not, we must be agnostic about  
the justification of our beliefs.
8. Therefore, if materialistic determinism is true, we must be agnostic about the  
justification of our beliefs.<sup>1</sup>

The first thing to notice here is that we are dealing with the justification of individual beliefs, a significant difference from the first formulation of the argument, which follows more closely Alvin Plantinga’s notion of “warrant” instead of justification. The

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<sup>1</sup> Alexander Marshall, “Reframing the Free Will Debate: An Epistemological Perspective,” *Glossolia* 3.1, December 2010, 95.

essential move here is step 6: “If all our beliefs (both true and not true) are held by necessity, we cannot discern whether our beliefs are justified or not.” The question we are asking here is basically this: how would we provide reasons to support our beliefs if those reasons are also determined? In essence, the claim I am attempting to make might be said this way: a belief that I hold because of determinism cannot be considered justified. Note that when we move to step seven, I am not making the claim that such beliefs are not true, I am merely making the claim that since we cannot provide sufficient supporting reasons for our claim to justification for these beliefs, we must be agnostic about their justification. If we are agnostic about their justification, then we are not justified in believing them, and since this applies to all our beliefs if determinism is true, then skepticism results.

Now, what Craig has rightly pointed out is that what I have to demonstrate is that determinism can be linked to justification in the way I have described. What reason do I have for thinking that determinism undermines my justification in this way. This is largely the point of the four-step argument that I have borrowed from Derk Pereboom. In light of several of Craig’s comments, I would like to submit a modified version of this argument that I think more clearly expresses the moves I am attempting to make. To reconstruct our first case, then:

Princess Peach was created by neuroscientists who can manipulate her brain using technology similar to radio waves, but otherwise she is as much like a normal human being (or Nintendo character, as the case may be) as possible given this background. These neuroscientists manipulate her to believe (falsely) that Bowser is the winner of the Mushroom Cup (it is in fact Toad who won). They do this by pressing a series of buttons just before she begins to reason

about the situation, thereby causing her reasoning process to result in the belief that Bowser has won the cup. From her perspective this reasoning process seems completely rational and she has no conscious defeaters for her belief that Bowser has won the cup. She believes she is justified in this belief.

After all of this, Princess Peach is told by a source she considers reliable about the manipulation of her beliefs by the neuroscientists and that her belief that Bowser won the race is actually false. She considers these new beliefs to be justified.

The intuition that I am working with here is that once Peach knows of the manipulation by the neuroscientists to lead her to a false belief, her supposed justification for her original belief that Bowser won the race has been undermined. She would, we would think, no longer believe that Bowser won the race or believe that she was justified in thinking that Bowser won the race. This is a clear case of malicious manipulation that once revealed clearly undermines the justification for the belief Peach was manipulated into holding.

Following Derk Pereboom's lead, the next step is to ask if a time-gap between when the manipulation occurs and when we form the manipulated belief alters our conclusion. The case would be stated this way:

Princess Peach was created by neuroscientists to be exactly like a normal human being (or Nintendo character, as the case may be) as possible with the exception that her brain was programmed at the beginning of her life to form particular beliefs about the outcome of races such that she typically expects slower racers such as Bowser to win. In the current situation, her reasoning processes result

in the false belief that Bowser has won the cup. From her perspective this reasoning process seems completely rational and she has no conscious defeaters for her belief that Bowser has won the cup. She believes she is justified in this belief.

After all of this, Princess Peach is told by a source she considers reliable about the manipulation of her beliefs by the neuroscientists and that her belief that Bowser won the race is actually false. She considers these new beliefs to be justified.

Once again, we have a situation in which there is an obvious case of manipulation that, once revealed, undermines the originally perceived justification in the false belief that Bowser had won the race. I do not see any reason to suggest that the gap in time changes the outcome here– I think intuitively we would still say that upon learning of this manipulation, Peach would jettison her previous beliefs and would be justified in doing so. The third step, according to Pereboom, is to drop the neuroscientists from the picture and take a step toward real life– positing that it is social factors or a psychological state of mind that resulted in Peach’s formation of this false belief:

Princess Peach is as much like a normal human being (or Nintendo character, as the case may be) as possible except that her social environment sometimes alters her psychological state of mind such that she forms certain beliefs about the outcomes of races. In this particular situation, she forms the false belief that Bowser has won the cup. From her perspective this reasoning process seems completely rational and she has no conscious defeaters for her belief that Bowser has won the cup. She believes she is justified in this belief.

After all of this, Princess Peach is told by a source she considers reliable about the impact of her social environment on her beliefs and that her belief that Bowser won the race is actually false. She considers these new beliefs to be justified.

Is there any reason in this scenario to suggest that, after having her social situation explained to her, Princess Peach will not again jettison her previous beliefs because she sees that their justification has been undermined? It seems that even though there is not a direct manipulation by another agent, her justification is still suspect because it is the product of outside forces that have been demonstrated to provide her with false beliefs. The fourth scenario is to posit that materialistic determinism is the force that has fixed her beliefs and ask if there are any relevant differences in the outcome of our analysis here:

Princess Peach is a normal human being (or Nintendo character, as the case may be) who lives in a world governed by materialistic determinism. In the current situation these determined processes result in her having the mental state that gives rise to the false belief that Bowser has won the cup. From her perspective this reasoning process seems completely rational and she has no conscious defeaters for her belief that Bowser has won the cup. She believes she is justified in this belief.

After all of this, Princess Peach is told by a source she considers reliable that her belief is the result of a determined physical process and that her belief that Bowser won the race is actually false. She considers these new beliefs to be justified.

Once again it seems that final revelation to Peach about her beliefs undermines her initial justification and should result in her jettisoning her beliefs. The objection that might be raised here is that her justification has been undermined not because of the determined process but because of the falsity of her belief. The argument that I am attempting to make is that this is impossible to ascertain if determinism is true. One final scenario serves to address this:

Princess Peach is a normal human being (or Nintendo character, as the case may be) who lives in a world governed by materialistic determinism. In the current situation these determined processes result in her having the mental state that gives rise to the belief that Bowser has won the cup, which may be either true or false. From her perspective this reasoning process seems completely rational and she has no conscious defeaters for her belief that Bowser has won the cup. She believes she is justified in this belief.

After all of this, Princess Peach is told by a source she considers reliable that her belief is the result of a determined physical process and that her belief that Bowser won the race may in fact be false, but could also be true. She considers these new beliefs to be justified.

What would Peach conclude about the justification of her original belief if she now knows that it is the product of a determined process that might or might give her a true belief? Does this situation result in her justification being undermined? My proposal is that such a situation requires her to be agnostic about the justification of her belief that Bowser has won the race. To illustrate this using an analogous case, let us consider Descartes famous "evil genius" scenario. If I learn that my beliefs are being manipulated by the evil genius, or rather, if I become justified in thinking that

they are, does this undermine the justification I have in my beliefs? There is always the possibility that the evil genius is giving me true beliefs, but how could I know this? So unless I also happen to be justified in believing that evil genius is being benevolent at least in my case and giving me true beliefs, it would seem the proper stance to take is to be agnostic about the justification of the beliefs given me by the evil genius.

Inherent in this is an assumption that I should perhaps make clear, which is that justification is concerned with truthfulness. In other words, I am justified in believing a proposition when I have good reasons for thinking the proposition is true. This does not mean that a proposition I am not justified in believing is not practically useful. Perhaps I have no justification for the belief that my kitchen has no food in it- I simply have not even looked in my kitchen for food, so I have no basis whatsoever for forming this belief. However, by forming this belief I decide to go grocery shopping and the next day a blizzard cripples my city. This belief turned out to be quite useful, despite my having no basis for believing that it was true. So when I make the claim that we must be agnostic about the justification of our beliefs given that we also believe that the evil genius has manipulated our belief structures or that they are the products of determinism the claim here is not that we have no beliefs or that our beliefs are not at all useful, but rather that we have no reason for thinking that these beliefs are true.