

Self-determination theory shows that free will matters

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Legacy Article for *Motivation Science* Special Issue 2021

Abstract

This legacy article authored by Richard Ryan and team (Ryan, Deci, Vansteenkiste & Soenens, in press) describes Self-determination theory's (SDT) decades-long focus on how people can act as causal forces in their own lives. SDT research shows vast support for the benefits of feeling self-determined in one's actions, as opposed to feeling controlled or coerced. Still, a major threat to SDT's concept of personal causation comes from the doctrine of determinism, which says that such feelings are merely self-serving delusions. Drawing from philosopher Christian List's (2019) analysis of free will, we argue that it is the deterministic position that is wrong; people have considerable executive control over their behavior and lives. The problem is that they may not realize it, because of constrictive environments. SDT shows that when people *do* recognize their freedom, they receive important and powerful benefits for achieving goals, personal growth, and self-actualization. Still, much of the work done in SDT locates the motivated person not at the causal end of the model, but rather views motivation as an effect of supportive social contexts and environments. To their credit, Ryan and Deci (2017) recognize this need to further focus on the self-organizational processes and resilience of the active individual. We agree, and look forward to new work that further explores and illuminates the field's "Copernican turn" towards personhood.

SDT Shows that Free Will Matters

Richard Ryan and team (Ryan, Deci, Vansteenkiste & Soenens, in press) have done a valiant job of condensing Self-determination theory (SDT) into a short article, although they had to omit far too much for the novice reader to get a complete view. We also resonated with their “Copernican turn” to *personhood* as the unifying theme for the article, because ultimately, that is what SDT is about. It was also valuable to discover what new findings these authors think are most noteworthy.

SDT research clearly shows that feeling self-determined in one’s behavior, rather than feeling controlled or coerced, makes a large difference for mental health. Nevertheless, at least one threat remains to SDT’s account of veridical personal causation. Hard-line determinism says that feelings of personal causation are mere delusions, self-serving biases, or misattributions, belonging in the same category as beliefs in crystal healing, tarot card readings, and telekinesis. If this were true, then SDT would be irrelevant in the world of science, although maybe not in the world of people.

But this seems highly unlikely, given SDT’s stature and impressive research base. Instead, it seems possible that *free will is real* (philosopher Christian List’s 2019 book). List argued that free will merely requires the ability to generate alternatives, to select one alternative, and then to enact it as a goal. If this is true, then free will is objectively available to anyone, whether they know it or not. SDT goes further, adding the *feeling* of freedom into the account, and showing that this variable makes a large difference in how *well* people enact their goals and intentions. SDT shows that if people feel free, they are – at least in the very important sense that their behavior is more likely to obtain the goals of that behavior, more likely to bring satisfaction

to both self and others, and more likely to spark creativity and personal growth. What else would you want free will to do for you?

Still, SDT could take the quest to understand personhood even further. SDT started out as a social psychological theory, with its discovery of the undermining effect. Following the mold, even today SDT models almost always start with social situational factors at the causal end of the model, with experiential factors located downstream, as outcomes of those exogenous factors. Where is the self-determination, if the self is always only an effect? What about resilience, in which individuals thrive *despite* their terrible circumstances? Or what about momentous decisions, that change the world?

To their credit, Ryan and Deci (2017) called for more research into these origination mysteries of the phenomenal self, saying “Perhaps most incomplete is research on just these issues of personal change and responsibility that we have emphasized in this epilogue—the capacities, experiences, mechanisms, and conditions by and through which individuals become more self-aware and activated to create change in the direction of human betterment” (p. 650). We agree, and look forward to an even more-promising future for SDT.

References

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<https://doi.org/10.1521/978.14625/28806>

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