

# Editorial: Big data, free will & moral responsibility

January 17, 2014

“Will big data make free will irrelevant?” the headline asked. Of course, I was intrigued. We’ll leave it to the philosophers and theologians to debate whether genetics, God’s sovereignty, fate, life experiences or random brain activity piqued my interest.



Editor Marv Knox Actually, we won’t leave it to the philosophers and theologians. Let’s tackle it ourselves—in just a moment.

The headline appeared above a fascinating article in [bigthink.com](http://bigthink.com), a website that bills itself as “blogs, articles and videos from the world’s top thinkers and leaders.” The site is oriented toward science and features many more atheists and agnostics than evangelical Christians. I read bigthink.com because it (a) takes important issues seriously and (b) pushes me beyond my comfort zone to consider ideas from people whose worldviews differ significantly from my own.

The [article](#) captured my concentration because consideration of free will is one of the most important endeavors in human history. Free will is a central theme in the stories of Creation and the Fall in the [first chapters](#) of the first book of the Bible, Genesis. Within the Judeo-Christian heritage, the privileges and perils of free will have dominated serious discussions for millennia. For the past 500 years, the debate over God’s sovereignty vs.

human will has drawn a line that divided Protestant Christians.

So, free will is a big deal.

### **A serious question**

Although the headline might sound flippant, “Will big data make free will irrelevant?” poses a serious question for the postmodern, digital world. [“Big data”](#) is a term for huge “data sets so large and complex that it becomes difficult to process using on-hand database management tools or traditional data processing applications.” Advances in computer technology, however, are creating machines and algorithms capable of processing, ordering and translating such information.

Here’s an over-simplified illustration, which considers a much smaller information set but makes the point: When you shop through a sophisticated online store, such as Amazon, it keeps track of every item you check, every selection you place in your shopping cart, every thing you buy. Based on all that information, it suggests other items you might like to buy. Its accuracy can be haunting.

### **Department of Precrime?**

The article on big data and free will speculates about the ethical implications of using the big data collected on individuals to prevent crime. It cites Kenneth Cukier, data editor of *The Economist*, regarding what should be done if big data indicates someone is quite likely to commit a crime. “If I could tell with a 98 percent statistical accuracy that you are likely to shoplift in the next 12 months, public safety requires that I interact,” he insisted.

The preferred response would not be punishment for a crime not committed, but rather “a social worker arriving to offer services. ‘We’d like to help you,’” Cukier explained.

Of course, mining such data raises red flags about government and/or corporate invasion of privacy: Should law enforcement target someone as a “highly likely” criminal before a crime is committed? A similar dilemma involves analysis of individuals’ genetic structure: Would it be used positively to prevent illnesses or negatively to deny insurance coverage?

We’re free moral agents

Those debates aside, the original question remains intriguing: “Will big data make free will irrelevant?” Suppose we could know enough about our genetics, choices, activities, education, acquaintances and other variables to predict “with a 98 percent statistical accuracy” our actions. Does that mean we have lost free will?

No. The Bible—from the Genesis accounts of humanity’s beginnings through the teachings of Jesus and the writings of the Apostle Paul—indicates we were created as free moral agents. If we were not free, we could not reciprocate God’s love and, biblically speaking, our purpose would be pointless. We were made for freedom. Exercising freedom expresses God’s loving and permissive will—not simply as individuals but, collectively, as humanity.

Genetic coding and other big data may help account for our choices. They even make many poor and sinful choices understandable. But those choices remain ours.

We must remain free and responsible, or else we deny our creation in God’s image.