



The Challenge of Determinism

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For an act to be a moral act in the true sense of the term, it must be performed voluntarily. This assumes that human beings are capable of acting freely. But is this necessarily the case?

As far back as ancient times, some philosophers came to question whether it is even possible to perform an act with complete freedom of the will. These philosophers, known as Determinists, argued that human beings are compelled by various factors—referred to as antecedent causes—to act in certain predetermined ways, and that, therefore, true freedom of the will is an illusion. The determinist argument is usually summarized in the following way:

P1: An action is free only if a person could have chosen to do other than he did.

P2: But all actions are determined by preceding events (antecedent causes).

C: Therefore, no action is free.

Determinist theory takes on different forms depending upon the specific antecedent causes that they believe affect human freedom:

Theological Determinism. The theory of theological determinism is derived from the attributes assigned to God by the three major theistic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam). Among the attributes of God that all theists agree upon is that God is omniscient—that is, that he knows everything that has happened in the past, everything that is happening in the present and, more importantly for our purposes, everything that will happen in the future. This perfect knowledge that God has about all future events is known as divine foreknowledge. But, if God knows perfectly everything that a person is going to do even before he does it, then that individual must choose what God knows he is going to choose. Thus divine foreknowledge is incompatible with human freedom. Either you have to hold that God isn't perfect—which no true believer could accept—or you have to hold that human freedom really doesn't exist.

But the situation becomes even more complicated when we take into consideration that God also must know who will be saved and will be rewarded with eternal life in heaven, and who will be damned and will be condemned to hell for all eternity. What's more, he must have known this information long before a person was even born—since the beginning of time, in fact. This knowledge that God has about who will be saved and who will be damned is known as predestination. The problem with predestination is that it means that nothing you or I do in life has any bearing on our future salvation or damnation. God, therefore, punishes certain individuals for something over which they have absolutely no control. This makes God into a rather capricious, unjust, and unmerciful being—certainly

not the merciful and loving creator that most theists worship.

Naturalistic Determinism. This position sees human beings as part of the natural order of the universe. In such a universe all events are caused by preceding events, which in turn are caused by still an earlier events, and so on. But such a causal chain would mean that there is no real spontaneity or freedom in the universe at all. Since human beings are also part of this sequence of causality, our actions must also be determined by prior causes and likewise cannot be free.

One of the most famous examples of the use of this theory was by Clarence Darrow in his defense of Nathan Leopold, Jr. and Richard Loeb for the murder of fourteen-year-old Bobby Franks in 1924. The two brilliant students at the University of Chicago wanted to show their contempt for contemporary morality by committing “the perfect crime.” Captured by the police shortly after the body of Franks was found, the murderers soon confessed to the murder. In order to spare his clients the death penalty, Darrow argued the two were not free when they murdered Franks, but rather were victims of natural forces that compelled them to act as they did. As Darrow himself put it:

Everyone knows that the heavenly bodies move in certain paths in relation to each other with seeming consistency and regularity which we call [physical] law No one attributes freewill or motive to the material world. Is the conduct of man or the other animals any more subject to whim or choice than the action of the planets?... We know that man’s every act is induced by motives that led or urged him here or there; that the sequence of cause and effect runs through the whole universe, and is nowhere more compelling than with man.

Darrow’s argument ultimately proved successful and Leopold and Loeb were ultimately sentenced to life in prison rather than being executed.

Biological Determinism. Biological determinists argue that basic human biology and our specific genetic make-ups determine what kinds of people we will ultimately become and even what kinds of actions we will perform. Biological determinists, for example, argue that things like sexual orientation are predetermined by our biological make-up. It makes no sense then to argue that gay men or women have some kind of choice in the matter or that they can “convert” if they make up their minds to.

Psychological Determinism. Many psychoanalysts maintain that deep-rooted psychic forces explain most of human behavior. Sigmund Freud, the father of psychoanalytic theory, in particular believed that human beings are determined by unconscious drives (e.g., the Oedipal complex) that society forces them to repress. He completely rejects the idea that simply because we feel that we are free that we actually are:

As is known, many persons argue against the assumption of an absolute psychic determinism by referring to an intense feeling of conviction that there is a free will. The feeling of conviction exists, but it is not incompatible with the belief in determinism. Like all normal feelings, it must be justified by something. But, so far as I can observe, it does not manifest itself in weighty and important decisions; on these occasions, one has much more the feeling of psychic compulsion and gladly falls back on it....

On the other hand, it is in trivial and indifferent decisions that one feels sure

that he could just as easily have acted differently, that he acted of his own free will, and without any motives. From our analyses we therefore need not contest the right of the feeling of conviction that there is a free will (161-162).

Thus for Freud all of our significant decisions are determined by unconscious motives. Only the most trivial decisions—and what they are he does not explain—are free of such psychic conditioning.

There are those philosophers, however, who would argue that Freud is not so hard a determinist as he might appear in this passage. The purpose of psychoanalysis, after all, is precisely to make patients aware of the unconscious forces operating on them so that they can gain some kind of control over their lives. If one could not change one's behavior, at least minimally, there would be absolutely no point to psychoanalysis.

Behavioral Determinism. In the 20th century, behavioral psychologists began to argue that human behavior was determined not by unconscious drives, but rather by environmental factors. The most famous of these behaviorists was B.F. Skinner, who in his works *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* and *Walden II*, argued that human beings are “conditioned” to act in specific ways by their environment, and that freedom, therefore, is an illusion. The only way to change a person's behavior according to Skinner is to change his environment. Skinner recommended the use of positive and negative reinforcement to alter human behavior, and believed that a perfect society could be created simply by figuring out how to condition people properly.

The Problems With Determinist Theory

In attempting to respond to the challenge of determinism, those who hold a belief in the existence of freedom of the will often begin by acknowledging that certain external factors (environment, genetic make-up) can affect human freedom. However, they dispute the fact that human beings have absolutely no freedom of decision-making. These theorists pose a number of objections to determinist theory:

Awareness of our personal freedom. As human agents our basic assumption is that the acts we perform are done freely, consciously, and deliberately. When you go to the mall to buy a pair of boots, for example, you don't think to yourself, “I have no choice in which pair of boots I buy.” You automatically assume that you yourself decide what to buy, not some unconscious drives or behavior conditioning. The very act of weighing the pros and cons before we act demonstrates that, at least in our own minds, we assume that we are free. As Corliss Lamont puts it:

There is an unmistakable intuition of virtually every human being that he is free to make the choices he does and that the deliberations leading to those choices are also free flowing. The normal man feels too, after he has made a decision, that he could have decided differently. That is why regret or remorse for a past choice can be so disturbing (3).

Assumption of Moral Responsibility. In our society we frequently bestow praise on those who perform worthy or noble actions (e.g., the fireman who saves a child from a burning building) and assign blame to those who violate legal or moral norms (i.e., the

neighbor who mows his lawn at 7am on a Saturday). But if no one does anything freely, then they are not responsible for their actions and neither deserving of praise nor blame.

Punishment of the Guilty. We believe that people who break the law should receive punishment for their crimes. But, if people are not free when they commit criminal activities, then they should not be punished for their actions. Drug dealers and rapists would undoubtedly appreciate this line of argumentation.

Controlling Desires. Psychological determinists argue that human beings are the victims of desires that they cannot control. And yet there are numerous instances of individuals who have overcome their deep-rooted desires and addictions through the force of their wills. They are capable, in other words, of overcoming their conditioning, which implies some degree of freedom.

The Indeterminist Alternative

The ultimate problem with determinism is that it ultimately renders morality impossible since, as we have already seen, freedom of the will is an essential characteristic of moral action. If you eliminate freedom, therefore, you eliminate morality (as most of us understand it, anyway). For this very reason most moral thinkers accept the existence of at least limited freedom of the will.

Certainly no one would argue that human behavior is not affected by various factors—aberrant mental states, the environment, our genetic makeup, etc. The question is whether these factors determine our behavior. Indeterminists—those who accept the existence of freedom of the will—believe that this is not the case. They argue that there is a fundamental difference between human beings and all other things in the natural world. Unlike all other entities, human beings are conscious of the operation of the natural and psychological laws that affect them. We can step back and reflect on these laws as more or less objective observers, and make our choices in light of these reflections. We are capable, in other words, of choosing to give in to our conditioning or not.

Take two people, for example, Willard and Mordecai. Willard grew up in a warm and loving household, with parents who took very good care of him, and who provided him with ample opportunities for personal and intellectual growth. Mordecai, on the other hand, grew up in a poor, abusive household in a neighborhood rampant with drugs and violent crime. All of us would agree that, given his background, Mordecai would have a much more difficult time than Willard in becoming a productive and responsible member of the society. But both these individuals ultimately have to choose how they are going to behave. Certainly it would take much more effort for Mordecai to resist the temptations to give in to drug use and criminal activity than it would for Willard. We would have to argue, however, that although it may be much harder for Mordecai to remain on the “straight and narrow” path, it is certainly not impossible. For an indeterminist the ability to break free of our conditioning is the “proof” that human beings are in fact free.

The determinist would argue that this belief in human freedom is simply an illusion—a pipe dream that we create in order to avoid the unpleasant fact that our actions are as determined as those of any other natural object in the universe. In the end, we have no way of knowing with utter certitude whether we are indeed free or not. The arguments of the determinist and the indeterminist are equally inconclusive. The moral enterprise, however, demands that we at least assume we are free, until it can be proven otherwise.

Sources and Further Reading

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