

## **FREEWILL VS. DETERMINISM: HUMAN AGENCY AND MORAL RESPONSIBILITY**

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Free will vs. determinism, one of the oldest issues in philosophy with a long intellectual tradition, continues to be an intriguing debate for philosophers in contemporary times. Much of the explanation of free will has remained focused on philosophical concepts such as determinism and the related notions of causality and necessity. Determinism denies the possibility of freewill and espouses the worldview that every event occurs necessarily from the antecedent events that gives rise to events. The idea of free will has all along been closely connected with the question of moral responsibility. But, in order to be morally responsible, one has to rule out chance and indeterminism. On the other hand, freewill is the world view that refutes the idea that the will is completely determined. It claims that moral judgment is meaningless unless the will is free in its choice of actions. The doctrine of freewill rejects the claim that determinism applies to the actions of man. Thus, the standard argument against free will presents determinism and indeterminism as the two horns of a dilemma presumably rejecting all the logical possibilities of reconciling free will with either chance and randomness or determinism.

Historically, the free will-determinism controversy has attracted the attention of a number of eminent philosophers. With a view to holding man responsible for his actions, the Pythagoreans, Socrates, and Plato tried to reconcile human freedom with material determinism and laws of nature. Aristotle, one of the first indeterminists in the history of philosophy, argued that we are free insofar as we are responsible for our actions, and we are responsible only for our voluntary actions. For Augustine, freedom refers to being able to do what one chooses to do. An act caused by external forces cannot be termed as my free action. It is free only if it is caused by my choice. Freedom is the active affirmation of one's complete determination for Spinoza. What one chooses to do could not have been otherwise. Hume rules out freedom and explains

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necessity in terms of regularity. The assumption that things cause other things insofar as we see them happen with regularity before and near other things gives us the notion of “cause” which is nothing other than a kind of event we regularly experience preceding another kind of event. When we do something that is preceded by its choice, we call it free or voluntary actions. Other things that are not preceded by choices are called involuntary actions.

The extant literature on free will determinism controversy betrays two distinct and contrasting versions. For hard determinism all actions are causally determined and hence determinism is incompatible with freedom. Soft determinism agrees with the philosophical claim that all events have a cause but distinguishes between the state of being physically forced to do something and choosing to do something. It says that we are determined without ruling out human freedom arguing that when the individual is the cause of his or her actions, he or she is said to act freely. For example, one is not free to resist the gravitational pull; but one is free to choose to eat an apple because wishes and desires are causes internal to the agent. Self-determinism also has two aspects: passive self-determinism and active self-determinism. Passive self-determinism is the view upheld by St. Augustine, Spinoza and Hume, asserting that freedom means being able to do what one wants to do, without external coercion or interference. Active self-determinism allows us to critique ourselves and transcend ourselves to be self-aware and free to make original decisions. This is Aristotle’s standpoint. Our personality or character is determined by external events like genetics, culture, upbringing, etc. but as long as one is able to act consistent with the choices one makes, one is deemed to be free. Self-determinism or soft determinism takes a stand that acknowledges that all events, including human actions, have causes. However, it offers allowance for free actions when the actions are caused by one's choices rather than external forces.

Determinism and freedom are two conflicting and disputable views about the physical world harboring human existence. The deterministic view of the world invokes the law of causation for the explanation of all occurrences’ in nature, including human action’s reference to the cause of any, implicitly refers to the idea of necessity<sup>1</sup>. In this sense the determinism emerges as a view that at any given period of time, and

given the antecedent state of affairs of the universe only one consequent state of affairs of the universe is possible. In other words all state of affairs of the world are determined and therefore necessitated by the antecedent state of the world. Determinism further implies that given the knowledge of antecedent state of affairs the consequent state of affairs is predictable and explainable. Necessity involves the view that given certain event, certain other event definitely happens, such that no other event may take its place.

In a general sense, causal determinism states that antecedent events, conditions and the laws of nature necessitate every event. It is closely linked with our understanding of the physical sciences and their explanatory potential as well as with our views about human free action. On both these counts, there is no agreement over whether determinism is true or even whether it can be known to be true or false. It is, nonetheless, a sufficiently broad term to include considerations about our deliberations, choices, and actions as necessary links in the causal chain that brings something about. Our deliberations, choices, and actions may, indeed, be determined like everything else; causal determinism still leaves the scope for the occurrence or existence of other things as depending upon our deliberating, choosing and acting in a certain way. Thus, an unbroken chain of prior occurrences stretching back to the origin of the universe is proposed by causal determinism. . This may neither entail specific mention of relation between events nor the origin of that universe. Causal determinists emphasize the impossibility of the uncaused or the self-caused. It has often been taken to convey the sense that everything that happens or exists is caused by antecedent conditions.

Given certain conditions as causally necessary for the mental acts of choices and decisions, no self-conscious agent can choose to act in any way other than what he actually chooses to do. If one's choices are deemed as causally necessary outcomes of certain factors beyond one's control, the entire conscious life of an individual is the consequence of these causes and he can himself do nothing about it. In this regard, Ted Honderich, the principal spokesman for hard determinism and strict causality, asserts:

States of the brain are in the first place effects of other physical states, including other states of the brain. Many states of the brain, secondly, make up correlates. . .

States of the brain thirdly are the causes, both of other states of the brain . . . and of certain movements of one's body. The latter are actions. It follows from these three premises, about states of the brain as effects, as correlates, and as causes, that on every occasion when we decide or choose, we can only decide or choose as in fact we do. So with our actions the ones we actually do are the only ones that we can do. It follows too that we are not responsible for our decisions, choices or actions, and, what is most fundamental, that we do not possess selves of a certain character<sup>2</sup>.

This further implies that all human actions are caused, necessitated and predictable like natural events. It is clear from above formulation that determinism as a world view does not seem to allow any exceptions. Determinism based this philosophy on causation, necessity and finally onto prediction. Van Inwagen formulates the conception of determinism by underscoring the point that there is only one physically possible future if determinism is true:

Determinism . . . is the thesis that there is at any instant exactly one physically possible future. There must, of course, be at least one physically possible future, if there is more than one, if at some instant there are two or more ways in which the world could go on, then Indeterminism is true<sup>3</sup>.

With this formulation of the conception of determinism, any possibility of appearance of breach in the causal nexus is ruled out. This view of the unbreachable causal nexus of nature is the ground of scientific explanation as well as intelligibility<sup>4</sup> of all natural phenomena. We may, indeed, still hypothesize that in case we make a choice, many futures will be open to us even if one possible future has a physical connection to the actual state of the world.

Determinism as a philosophical thesis is a world view with the claim that intelligibility and causality go together since it is a world view, Therefore it involves the idea that human world is also intelligible only through causality. The process and mechanisms<sup>5</sup> involved in human action are explainable and therefore, intelligible only under the causal structure of the physical world, any alternative ways of understanding human world leads us into groundless Metaphysics, involving freedom, freewill, choice, chance, indeterminism<sup>6</sup> and randomness.

It is obvious from the initial consideration that thesis of determinism is not only clear, but also verifiable doctrine in so far as human understanding of physical world is involved, both at common sense and scientific level, we find determinism at work. William James states:

Old-fashioned determinism was what we may call hard determinism. It did not shrink from such words as fatality, bondage of the will, necessitation, and the like. Nowadays, we have a soft determinism which abhors harsh words, and, repudiating fatality, necessity, and even predetermination, says that its real name is freedom; for freedom is only necessity understood, and bondage to the highest is identical with true freedom<sup>7</sup>.

However, this deterministic world view places human reality within the casual nexus of nature, such that man appears to be a part of nature. It is obvious from the deterministic point of view that our understanding of ourselves as conscious being, with the conception of ourselves as autonomous agents, has no place in the whole system of nature where all events or processes are inevitably determined by, and predictable by antecedent physical conditions. The philosophers from antiquity till today have struggled hard to refute determinisms by arguing against the view that man is part of nature.

This raises the perennial, Philosophical issue that either determinism is true and we are part of nature, or there is something about human reality that places us above and beyond natural physical processes and makes us moral beings<sup>8</sup>. Determinism is, roughly speaking, the idea that every event is necessitated by antecedent events and conditions together with the laws of nature. Determinism is deeply connected with our understanding of the physical sciences and their explanatory ambitions, on the one hand, and with our views about human free action on the other. In both of these general areas there is no agreement over whether determinism is true (or even whether it can be known to be true or false), and what the import for human agency would be in either case.

Human agency or man's capacity to make choices is often contrasted to natural forces which causes are involving only unthinking deterministic processes. There is a fine distinction between agency and free will. The proponents of free will thesis uphold the philosophical view that our choices are substantially free and are not the products of causal chains. The notion of human agency implies that

human beings really make decisions and act upon them in this world. When human decision making leads to consequences, we find ourselves under obligation to apply moral judgments and make people responsible for their actions and decisions. In circumstances that lack human decision making, such a course of action will be termed as nonsensical.

Human agency is deterministic yet self-transformative. Experience changes agency as and when it is exercised. Although human agency is not fixed, yet it can be changed in the framework of determinism. It is, therefore, possible that human agency undergoes change as and how it reacts to external events. Those who argue for human agency emphasize the presence of randomness and unpredictability in the universe. Notwithstanding the idea of the causal nexus of natural events and predictability of the physical world, they see from this randomness intelligent creatures deriving the ability to choose and to escape the deterministic fate of a pre-destined future. Hence, for them, mechanical determinism alone cannot account for the unpredictability of human nature.

One of the main philosophical problems that seem to be dependent on a defense of free will is moral responsibility. More generally, the question relates to what conditions must be met in order to assign moral responsibility – to assign not only punishment, but also praise. The much debated problem of the possibility of morality hinges on the very concept of human choice and action. The question of the possibility of free choice in a deterministic world is the crux of problem faced by determinism and libertarianism<sup>9</sup>. Therefore, a discussion about free will, determinism, moral responsibility, and agency seems worthwhile.

Our current practices of reward and blame seem to hinge on the fact that we assume human beings as agents capable of control over their actions and deeds. Since the Stoics, it has been said that moral responsibility requires that an agent must have the ability to choose between alternate choices or actions in order to be held responsible for their actions. This principle, called the Principle of Alternate Possibilities, states that a person is morally responsible for what he has done only if he could have done otherwise. Peter van Inwagen writes:

It seems to be generally agreed that the concept of free will should be understood in terms of the power or ability of agents to act otherwise than they in fact do. To

deny that men have free will is to assert that what a man does do and what he can do coincide. And almost all philosophers agree that a necessary condition for holding an agent responsible for an act believes that agent could have refrained from performing that act.<sup>10</sup>

Peter van Inwagen seems to hold the view that moral responsibility is founded on the idea that responsibility requires that there exist an alternate possibility. In other words, moral responsibility cannot exist without there being an alternative choice.

Most of us believe in responsibility for at least some of our actions. But, this does not seem to be permissible if determinism is true and we are not in a position to initiate or control our actions. If our status is that of only a transitional link in the temporally extended chain of determinism, we cannot be morally accountable and responsible for our actions. On the other hand, if free-will is true, possibilities and choices become available as the requirement for moral responsibility. But, belief in the truth of deterministic thesis presents a problem because determinism demands that actions are necessitated by previous actions, physical laws, etc. Since the agent's action is the only action and he could not have done otherwise, no options appear to be available for the sake of genuine open possibilities against necessitation of determinism. Moral responsibility is, thus ruled out because determinism does not allow alternate possibilities for a choice or decision. Eliminating the possibility of alternative states of affairs result in the dilemma whether we are moral agents or not.

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