

# Is Man Free?

One of the most important and yet controversial philosophical questions that we must face is the issue of free will. Again, it should be emphasized that morality, law, religion, as well as metaphysics all have a stake in our answer.

Imagine an experience many of you may have had. Suppose you were invited to go out for a pizza with a group of your fellow students. At the same time you knew that this chapter had been assigned in your philosophy class. What would you do? You weighed the alternatives. Would there be another time before the next class to read this chapter? What would the consequences be of coming to class without reading the chapter? On the other hand, who else was going to go out for pizza? Someone you wanted to meet or get to know better? When would there be another opportunity like this for a break from your studies? You had a choice. You deliberated, and you decided to study. As you now read this chapter, it is with the distinct feeling that your decision was free and you were responsible for the actions which you are now performing. This is an example of one of the arguments advanced by some in favor of *free will*.

Physical determinism, on the other hand, in its most extreme form rejects free will. It has been around throughout the history of thought, but the issue as currently discussed has been generated by developments in the natural sciences since the sixteenth century. A central presupposition of emerging science was universal causation, the belief that every event has a cause and that there are no uncaused events. Furthermore, it was assumed that events occur in orderly patterns, which make possible the formulation of causal or natural laws. On the basis of these laws and a knowledge of the actual causes at work in a situation, it is possible to predict with great accuracy what will occur.

For example, on the basis of what we know about the action of water on soil, and because we know that such action is in fact taking place in a certain river valley, we can with great precision predict the course of erosion in that valley. Concerning events about which we cannot now make such predictions, there is *in principle* no reason why we could not. Our lack of knowledge about both the laws and the present cause are our only hindrances. As we learn more of the causes of earthquakes and develop methods to detect when these causes are at work, then we will be able to predict both the time and severity of earthquakes. These theories about universal causation and total predictability have been traditionally called *determinism*.

What makes these assumptions troublesome with regard to man's behavior is that man is also an object in the natural world. Thus, if universal causation and total predictability reign throughout the natural order, then it would follow that man's behavior is also causally determined and predictable. This seems, at least at first blush, to be in conflict with free will.

There are at least two ways that we can divide this subject. The simplest and most common is to discuss the question in terms of the various positions that are taken with regard to it: hard determinism, soft determinism, indeterminism, and libertarianism. A less usual but very helpful way of examining the issue is in terms of the apparent conflicting claims of freedom and determinism. Some philosophers have taken the positions to be *incompatible*, and affirmed one while rejecting the other. Some philosophers have argued that upon closer examination it is clear that freedom and determinism are *compatible*. Still others have claimed that they are neither incompatible nor compatible in the senses above, since they are answers to quite different questions and are not comparable at all. In this chapter we will use the more common method of dividing the topic, although we will refer to the issues of compatibility and incompatibility as we think that they help to make the positions clearer.

Before turning to our discussion of the various views, we must attempt to define *freedom*. As will become apparent in the debate, incompatibilists and compatibilists disagree on what constitutes freedom. Antony Flew defines these views nicely. According to Flew, incompatibilist freedom may be defined as the view that there are no contingently sufficient non-subsequent conditions for a person choosing to act in a particular way. Roughly this means that there are no conditions prior to an action that determine that action. On the other hand, compatibilistic freedom is the position that there *are* contingently sufficient non-subsequent conditions for a person's decision to act in one way and not another. More simply, compatibilist freedom maintains that there can be conditions prior to an action sufficient to determine that action, and yet that action can be free.

## **Determinism**

As mentioned above, determinism is the belief that *all* events are governed by laws. Admittedly, these laws are not like those passed by a legislature. Rather they are statements of conditions under which certain effects or events inevitably occur. Likewise there are conditions that determine the conditions of that effect, conditions that determine those conditions, and so on backwards *ad infinitum*.

Determinism may be divided further into "hard" determinism and "soft" determinism.

### ***Hard Determinism***

*Exposition.* Hard determinism accepts an incompatibilist view, that freedom and determinism cannot be reconciled. Everything that exists has antecedent conditions, known or unknown, which determine that that thing could not be other than it is. Everything, even every cause, is the effect of some cause or group of causes. This is equally true for every past event as well as every future effect. While it is unlikely that such a thesis is held by the man in the street, determinists claim that it is assumed at every point in the common man's daily life.

Since we as human beings are a part of the world, the principle of determinism applies to us as well. It applies to what we may call the physiological states and changes in our body such as height, weight, growth, pulse rate, and so forth, as well to our purposive and deliberative behavior.

Hard determinism, in particular, is often mistaken for fatalism. Fatalism is the view that what happens is inevitable, regardless of what we do or do not do. Whether we struggle or fail to move a finger, the same things will happen. Hard determinism, on the other hand, holds that things happen because of antecedent causes, our own behavior being one of these causes.

*Criticisms.* This form of determinism has been widely criticized, for it seems to run directly counter to a universal and strongly-held human belief that at least some human actions are free. Some have objected that hard determinism as an a priori principle of our reasoning cannot be proven, since we do not know all the laws that govern the physical universe, let alone human behavior. Defenders of hard determinism respond by saying that while we do not now know all the laws that produce effects, science has made great progress in this area and determinism is in line with our growing knowledge. Moreover, so it is claimed, there are no reasons for thinking that we could not someday, through the steady advance of science, come to know all, or almost all, of these laws.

There are, however, much more serious consequences to this view. Hard determinism seems to radically undercut the ground for morality. If it is a fact that effects are totally determined and could not have been otherwise, what can we make of the traditional moral concepts of “merit,” “praise,” and “blame”? It would seem, if determinism is true, that we would never be justified in punishing any criminal, no matter how terrible the crime. Nor would it ever be appropriate to praise a person for an action, no matter how heroic.

Hard determinists have two general lines of response to this criticism. First, they claim that the general conceptions of morality are consistent with hard determinism. They argue that all the view claims is that actions are determined by antecedent causes. Therefore, punishment or praise will count as an antecedent cause for some future behavior. That is, punishment or praise may determine, in part at least, some future behavior of the person receiving it or those observing it.

Those who object to determinism, however, point out that such a conception of morality opens a Pandora’s box, and misses the key notion in morality. The danger is that we could consider ourselves justified in punishing or praising people regardless of their actions, simply to produce certain effects that we deemed to be good. This is the heart of the problem. Traditional conceptions of morality have almost universally ascribed praise and blame on the basis of human responsibility. If the hard determinist account of action is true, it is difficult to see how anyone can be *responsible* for his actions. The only basis of either praise or blame is to be found in its consequences. This is a hard pill for most to swallow.

Second, the hard determinist may respond that the objection merely shows that our moral conceptions as traditionally conceived are in need of revision in light of our present knowledge about the world and human behavior. The idea of human responsibility must be rejected, so the hard determinist's line goes. As a matter of fact, the rejection of moral responsibility will produce a healthier rather than a weaker society. It will bring good rather than evil. The fact that we know that we are not responsible for our behavior will provide the basis for a more satisfying personal life (for example, we will not be introspective or critical of ourselves), as well as giving us the ground for a more rational and humane system of interpersonal relationships (we will not try to punish people for their crimes). Moreover, so the hard determinist tells us, this position frees us from worries about the future. While it is true that our actions may make some difference, the possibility of change is limited. We can now have the fortitude to accept what comes. Chance is excluded. All human action is ruled by heredity and environment.

The critic claims that not only is hard determinism unproven and contrary to our conception of moral responsibility, but that this form of determinism is inconsistent with the human activity of deliberation and our sense of freedom. Often, before we act, we deliberate. Deliberation is difficult to define or describe without using metaphors. It is weighing of evidence, considering this alternative and that, and attempting to anticipate consequences of possible courses of action. Whether we are conscious of them or not, whenever we deliberate we assume a number of presuppositions. The most crucial presupposition is that certain things are up to us. It is up to us what we are going to do. If we are in the power of another person or at the mercy of circumstances beyond our control, it makes no sense to deliberate. One can only wait and see what will happen.

If some things in our experience do genuinely depend on us, then we must have freedom to perform them. But just what we mean *by freedom* here is not clear. Do we mean merely that an alternative action is logically possible? That is, although you came to college, it was logically possible for you to take a job. If that is all we mean, then the claim to be free appears, at least to some philosophers, to be quite trivial. Or, does freedom require that alternative actions are causally or actually possible? Or conversely, that no action is causally determined or necessary? The hard determinist denies that any alternative action is causally possible. Every action is causally necessary. Thus, freedom in the former sense, which most people assume, is not a reality according to the hard determinist. It is an illusion, as Spinoza puts it.

The hard determinist says, so much the worse for the ideas of human freedom and deliberation. One imagines that he deliberates, but that is exactly what it is, an imagination. It is conceit that leads us to think that we are the masters of our behavior. Spinoza uses an interesting example. He asks us to suppose that a stone has been thrown into the air, and suddenly becomes conscious. The stone, Spinoza argues, would believe that it was the source of its own motion, because it was conscious of its behavior at that point but unaware of the real cause of its action. It is a fact that we are *sometimes* mistaken in our belief that an action is the result of deliberation. Therefore, it is at least possible that we are always wrong in believing that our actions are the consequence of our deliberation.

From our discussion it should be clear that hard determinism can be maintained, but only at the cost of revising some of our most cherished beliefs. We must change our views on moral responsibility, and we must be willing to grant that the ideas of deliberation, choice, and freedom are illusions. For many philosophers this is too high a price to pay, and thus they seek alternative positions, one of which is soft determinism.

### *Soft Determinism*

Many philosophers desire to retain both determinism and responsibility, and therefore turn to soft determinism.

*Exposition.* There are many versions of soft determinism, but they all have three claims in common: (1) determinism is true, and therefore events including human behavior, voluntary or otherwise, arise from antecedent conditions, making alternative kinds of behavior impossible; (2) voluntary behavior, however, is free to the degree that it is not performed under *external compulsion*; and (3) in the absence of external constraint the causes of voluntary actions may be traced to certain states, events, or conditions within the agent, namely his will or volitions, choices, decisions, and/or desires.

It is important to this view that two things be true. The first is that freedom be definable in terms of compatibilist freedom. That is, there may be antecedent conditions which determine an action, and yet that action is free. The second may be illustrated by the following three examples. In the initial case, suppose you are told to get out of the room. Someone comes in and picks you up and carries you out against your will. In such a case the action of leaving the room is not free, and you cannot even be called an agent of the action. In our next case someone comes in and tells you to get out of the room, and holds a gun to your head. You get out of the room. This is a case of external compulsion; you act and are thus the agent of the action. In the final case you are told to get out of the room. However, there is no external constraint used in this instance. You are told of all the advantages you will receive by leaving the room. Because of the character and desires you have developed, you leave the room. Your character and desires made it causally necessary that you should act as you did, but there is no external constraint, so you are said to be free.

Soft determinism is the view, then, that we are free and therefore sometimes responsible for our actions, provided there is no external constraint. We are merely acting in accord with our own choices, desires, and volition.

*Criticisms.* There are at least two objections to soft determinism. The first criticism is that soft determinism does not escape the problems of hard determinism if our desires, character, and volition are themselves determined. As a matter of fact, we can imagine a case where we clearly would not be responsible. Suppose that we acted in accord with our desires and inner state, but that these states were in fact induced by hooking us up to some machine.

The soft determinist would be little concerned with this objection, however. He does not deny that even our desires, character, and volition have causes. But it must be remembered that the requirement for a free act is that it be produced without external constraint. In the example above the soft determinist would respond that there was external coercion and that the action above was not free, and therefore not an argument against the soft determinist position. The desires and will can be constrained.

The second objection is not so easily dismissed, for it takes us to the heart of the debate between a soft determinist and a libertarian view of action. It has to do with what is meant by “could have done otherwise.” Having decided and acted upon that decision, could we have done otherwise? Some soft determinists deny that the question should even be asked, for it is without meaning. According to this view, to say that we could have performed another action means simply that we *would* have done otherwise *if* those inner states which determine our actions were different. To say we could have decided otherwise is only to say that had we concluded to decide differently, we would have decided differently. This is of course trivially true, but really does not get to the heart of the matter.

Philosophers opposed to this form of determinism have responded in at least three ways, all similar in thrust, but highlighting different aspects of the issue. First, the usual response is that an agent is not free unless he possesses contra-causal power. That is, an agent must be able to do otherwise. Second, philosophers such as C. D. Broad and Keith Lehrer have argued that the soft determinist understands “could we have done otherwise” as a hypothetical “could we have done otherwise” *if*. This may be a possible meaning for the phrase, but it is not the sense needed to justify our usual moral conceptions of blame and praise. For these concepts we must have the categorical sense “could we have done otherwise,” period. Third, Richard Taylor in his book, *Metaphysics*, says that alternative courses of action may be viewed in two ways. They may be taken as a disjunctive sentence, I can *either* study philosophy *or* go to sleep. Or, alternative courses of action may be stated as a conjunctive sentence, I can *both* study philosophy *and* go to sleep. The first sentence is true if only one of the two options is true (one alternative might not be a live option). In the second sentence both alternatives must be true. Contra-causal power must be possible. On this point we reach the deepest point of disagreement with soft determinists, who simply deny that claim. Soft determinists assert that all that is necessary is that we have reasons, we decide, and we carry out decisions without external compulsion.

## Simple Indeterminism and Libertarianism

Two views that are directly opposed to determinism are simple indeterminism and libertarianism.

### *Simple Indeterminism*

Simple indeterminism has few supporters, because of all the views to be presented it seems least likely to be true.

*Exposition.* Indeterminists deny a compatibilist interpretation of freedom. Determinism and freedom are incompatible, as in hard determinism, but there is also a denial of determinism. According to the indeterminist, the only meaningful (correct) understanding of freedom is the incompatibilist view. Further, he will argue that at least one and possibly many events are not caused, that is, they are independent of antecedent events. The simple indeterminist contends that the most likely candidates for these uncaused events are our own free actions. There is no scientific law, or law of any kind for that matter, under which our actions can be categorized. There is here a very clear sense in which a free act could have been otherwise. If it was in fact uncaused, then, even taking preceding and accompanying conditions into consideration, some other action was possible; one did not have to do what was done.

Some defenders of indeterminism would even extend this idea of an uncaused event beyond human actions to the physical or natural order. To support this contention these thinkers invoke Heisenberg's principle of uncertainty or indeterminacy, which was the basis for the quantum theory in physics.

*Criticisms.* Most philosophers find that upon reflection, this simple form of indeterminism has little plausibility. First, it is reasonable to conclude that an event in the natural order has a cause—even when we do not know what that cause is. Only very small children speak about the toy that simply broke without any reason. Most thinkers generally concede that we do not know *all* causal relationships, and an apparently uncaused event only seems so because of our ignorance.

Second, the position has little plausibility with regard to human actions. Suppose we assume that some actions, in particular those that are free, are not caused at all. The resultant picture of man will not be the determinist's puppet, to be sure, but what is substituted is less than satisfactory. The understanding of man that now emerges is that of an erratic, jerking phantom, making moves and actions without rhyme or reason. He moves at one time this way and at another time that way, but in both instances without any cause!

Human actions in such a state are manifestly free and uncaused, but it is questionable at best if we have anything to do with them. What makes this account so unacceptable is that, while it retains freedom, it does so at the cost of responsibility. It is difficult to see

how such behavior could be *our* behavior. How can actions that are out of our control justifiably be called our behavior? The end of this view of action would seem to be the rejection of all responsibility for actions of this kind. How could such action be our *responsible* behavior?

### ***Libertarianism***

Libertarianism seeks to overcome the difficulties of both determinism and indeterminism.

*Exposition.* Like some of the other positions which we have discussed, libertarianism holds that determinism and freedom are incompatible. That is, libertarianism holds an incompatibilist view of freedom. Libertarians believe that our free actions are neither caused by another (as in determinism) nor are they uncaused (as in indeterminism). Rather, they are self-caused. Hence, the view is sometimes called *self*-determinism because of the theory of personal agency.

A human being (person or self) is sometimes, although admittedly not always, a self-determining being. We are, in other words, sometimes the cause of our own behavior. The libertarian holds that for an action to be free it must be caused by the agent who performs it, and it must be done in such a way that no antecedent conditions are sufficient for the performance of that act. If an action is both free and rational, the action must be done for a reason, although the reason is not the action's cause. This means that we could always have done otherwise. At least two possibilities were live options.

This account of freedom is the only one which does justice to the deeply-ingrained intuition that we do have contra-causal power. Second, this view alone makes any sense of the activity of deliberation. All the positions examined to this point, so it is argued, really do not properly account for human deliberation. Third, libertarians find both determinism and indeterminism objectionable, so they conclude that the only remaining alternative, libertarianism, is true.

*Criticisms.* First, empiricists object to the metaphysical notion of a *self* or *person* in this view. Since the time of Hume, it has been popular to criticize the idea of the self as a substance which endures through time. For a thoroughgoing empiricist, the person or the self is a mere collection or bundle of things or events. The libertarian view runs directly counter to this popular conception of man. But, says the critic, outside of the claims of the libertarian theory of action (and the claims of certain religious beliefs), it is impossible to empirically prove that man is anything more than an assemblage of physical things and processes. For those of us with religious beliefs rooted in the Bible, such proof is not necessary. However, some philosophers would find this view unacceptable. A materialist would argue that death ends all, and that man is wholly reducible to matter. Libertarians respond by noting that even Hume presupposes the real existence of an "I" or entity behind his impressions which gives unity to them.

Second, some question the libertarian conception of causality. Libertarianism holds that an agent, who is not an event but a substance, is nevertheless capable of causing another

event. That is, a free agent can cause events to occur, namely, his own actions, without anything else causing him to so act.

Richard Taylor, who advocates a libertarian view, admits that the libertarian concept of causation is so different from the usual concept that we should not even give it the name “cause.” Taylor argues that we should not speak of agents *causing* their actions, but rather as *originating*, *initiating*, or simply *performing* them.

Thus, it would seem that the acceptability of the libertarian view of freedom is going to rest on three considerations. Do selves or persons of the type described exist? Is the libertarian conception of causality plausible? And, finally, does it make sense to speak of persons causing their actions but not causing their existence?

### ***The Two-Level Theory***

We now come to the last of our possible positions on freedom and determinism. This view maintains that beliefs in determinism and free will are in some sense independent.

*Exposition.* The two-level theorist contends that the compatibilist’s concern with laws that might govern human behavior is ill-founded. There are no laws that govern what we call free human behavior (deliberating, choosing, and action). However, unlike the libertarian, the two-level theorist does not consider the categorizing of decisions and actions of persons even a *conceptual possibility*. He claims that the scope of determinism is restricted by an analysis of the nature of action and choice.

A key contention of this position is that we are sadly confused if we seek *causes* of human actions and decisions. Events have causes. Even physical movements of our body have causes. Human actions, on the other hand, are not explained by an appeal to causes, but by giving *reasons*, or purposes. For example, the raising of an arm is a physical event. We can ask, “Why did the arm go up?” It will be adequate to respond that the muscles in the arm tensed, causing the arm to be raised. Quite a different question is, “Why did *you* raise your arm?” Here the request is for reasons, not causes. An adequate answer here might be, “To hail a cab.” What is important to see about these two cases is that the latter does not seek the specification of antecedent conditions. Reasons are essentially different from causes.

The upshot of this account is that two-level theorists claim that all traditional discussions of the free-will problem are misconceived, for they grant the determinist the possibility of causal explanation for human action. Once this is refuted, says the two-level theorist, we will no longer be bothered by the traditional problem of the relationship between determinism and free will.

*Criticisms.* The criticisms of the two-level theory are much like those of libertarianism. The two-level theory again involves the conception of a self or person as a substance enduring through time (see p. 203).

The two-level theory does raise another problem, however. What is the relationship of *reasons* to *causes*? It seems intuitively clear that the two are related. While it is true that the tensing of the muscles in your arm is part of the cause of your arm raising, it may be only the instrumental cause, not the efficient cause. It seems obvious that your desire to get a cab had some relationship to the tensing of the muscles in your arm (see chap. 12 and the discussion of how mental events can cause physical action).

## Conclusion

It should be clear from the discussion and evaluation of hard determinism, soft determinism, simple indeterminism, libertarianism, and the two-level theory that several answers have been given to the question of human freedom. Our discussion leads us to think that simple indeterminism has the least plausibility. Also, we find hard determinism difficult to accept, although there are some Christians, albeit small in number, who find it acceptable. Most Christians would take their stand among the remaining three views.

Some Christians are greatly influenced on this subject by the idea of theological determinism. Theological determinism is the view that God ordains every event and situation; man does not have the capacity to choose or influence his own ultimate destiny. This issue, hotly debated in Christian circles, has been purposely omitted in this chapter. It is based on varying interpretations of Scripture and is, therefore, a theological question more than a purely philosophical one. Nevertheless, one's views on such theological matters as the nature of God's omniscience and predestination will certainly affect what philosophical options one finds acceptable.

## Suggested Readings

Edwards, Jonathan. *Freedom of the Will*

Holbach, Baron. *System of Nature*, chs. 11, 12

James, William. "The Dilemma of Determinism" in *Essays in Pragmatism*

Luther, Martin. *The Bondage of the Will*

Taylor, Richard. *Metaphysics*

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<sup>1</sup>Geisler, N. L., Feinberg, P. D., & Feinberg, P. D. (1980). *Introduction to philosophy : A Christian perspective* (Page 193). Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House.