

Free Will

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Concepts of the nature of human choice fall within three categories: determinism, indeterminism, and self-determinism. A determinist looks to actions caused by another, an indeterminist to uncaused actions, and a self-determinist to self-caused actions.

Determinism

There are two basic kinds of determinism: naturalistic and theistic. Naturalistic determinism is most readily identified with behavioral psychologist B. F. Skinner. Skinner held that all human behavior is determined by genetic and behavioral factors. Humans simply act according to what has been programmed into them.

All who accept strong forms of Calvinistic theology hold to some degree of theistic determinism. Jonathan Edwards related all actions ultimately to God as First Cause. "Free choice" for Edwards is doing what one desires, and God is the Author of the heart's desires. God is sovereign, in control of all and so ultimately the cause of all. Fallen humanity is totally without freedom of the affections, so they can do whatever they want, but what they want will forever be in the control of their corrupt, world-directed heart. God's grace controls actions as God controls desires and their attendant thoughts and actions.

Response to Determinism. Nondeterminists respond that a self-caused action is not impossible, and all actions need not be attributed to the First Cause (God). Some actions can be caused by human beings to whom God gave free moral agency. Free choice is not, as Edwards contends, doing what one *desires* (with God giving the desires). Rather, it is doing what one *decides*, which is not always the same thing. One need not reject God's sovereign control to deny determinism. God can control by omniscience as well as by causal power.

Two forms of determinism may be distinguished, hard and soft. A *hard determinist* believes all acts are caused by God, that God is the only efficient Cause. A *soft determinist* holds that God as the Primary Cause is compatible with human free choice as the secondary Cause.

Indeterminism

According to the indeterminist, few if any human actions are caused. Events and action are contingent and spontaneous.

Arguments for indeterminism. The arguments for indeterminism follow the nature of free actions. Since they follow no determinate pattern, it is concluded that they are indeterminate. Some contemporary indeterminists appeal to Werner Heisenberg's principle of indeterminacy to support their position. According to this principle, events in the subatomic realm (like the specific course of a given particle) are completely unpredictable.

According to the argument from the unpredictability of free acts, an act must be predictable in order to be determinate. But free acts are not predictable. Hence, they are indeterminate.

Critique of Indeterminacy. All forms of indeterminism fall shipwreck on the principle of causality, which asserts that all events have a cause. But indeterminacy asserts that free

choices are uncaused events.

Indeterminism makes the world irrational and science impossible. It is contrary to reason to affirm that things happen willy nilly without a cause. Hence, indeterminacy reduces to irrationalism. Both operation and origin sciences are dependent on the principle of causality. Simply because a free act is not caused by another does not mean that it is uncaused. It could be self-caused.

Use of Heisenberg's principle is misapplied, since it does not deal with the *causality* of an event but with *unpredictability*.

Indeterminism robs humans of their moral responsibility, since they are not the cause of these actions. If they are not, why should they be blamed for evil actions? Indeterminism, at least on a cosmic scale, is unacceptable from a biblical perspective, since God is causally related to the world as both originator (Genesis 1) and sustainer of all things (Col. 1:15-16).

Self-Determinism

According to this view, a person's moral acts are not caused by another or uncaused, but are caused by oneself. It is important to know at the outset precisely what is meant by self-determinism or free choice. Negatively, it means that a moral action is not uncaused or caused by another. It is neither indeterminate nor determined by another. Positively, it is morally self-determined, an act freely chosen, without compulsion, in which one could have done otherwise. Several arguments support this position.

Arguments for Self-determinism. Either moral actions are uncaused, caused by another, or caused by oneself. However, no action can be uncaused, since this violates the fundamental rational principle that every event has a cause. Neither can a person's actions be caused by others, for in that case they would not be *personal* actions. Further, if one's acts are caused by another then how can he or she be held responsible for them? Both Augustine (in *On Free Will* and *On Grace and Free Will*) and Thomas Aquinas were self-determinists, as are moderate Calvinists and Arminians.

The denial that some actions can be free is self-defeating. A complete determinist insists that both determinists and nondeterminists are determined to believe what they believe. However, determinists believe self-determinists are wrong and ought to change their view. But "ought to change" implies freedom to change, which is contrary to determinism. If God is the cause of all human actions, then human beings are not morally responsible, and it makes no sense to praise human beings for doing good, nor to blame them for doing evil.

A dimension of this controversy has to do with how the "self" is viewed. By "self" the self-determinist believes there is an "I" (subject) that is more than the object. That is, my subjectivity transcends my objectivity. I cannot put all that I am under a microscope to analyze as an object. There is more to "me" than objectivity. This "I" that transcends being objectified is free. The scientist who attempts to study personal self always transcends the experiment. The scientist is always on the outside looking in. In fact, "I" am free to reject "me." It is not determined by objectivity, not subject to being locked into scientific analysis. As such, the "I" is free.

Objections to Self-determinism.

Free will rules out sovereignty. If human beings are free, are they outside God's sovereignty? Either God determines all, or else he is not sovereign. And if he determines all, then there are no self-determined acts.

It is sufficient to note that God sovereignly delegated free choice to some of his crea-

tures. There was no necessity for him to do so; he exercised his free will. So human freedom is a sovereignly given power to make moral choices. Only absolute freedom would be contrary to God's absolute sovereignty. But human freedom is a limited freedom. Humans are not free to become God themselves. A contingent being cannot become a Necessary Being. For a Necessary Being cannot come to be. It must always be what it is.

Free will is contrary to grace. It is objected that either free, good acts spring from God's grace, or else from our own initiative. But if the latter, they are not the result of God's grace (Eph. 2:8-9). However, this does not necessarily follow. Free will itself is a gracious gift. Further, special grace is not forced coercively onto the person. Rather, grace works persuasively. The hard determinist's position confuses the nature of faith. The ability of a person to receive God's gracious gift of salvation is not the same as working for it. To think so is to give credit for the gift to the receiver, rather than to the Giver.

A self-caused act is logically impossible. It is objected that self-determinism means to cause oneself, which is impossible. Someone cannot be prior to oneself, which is what a self-caused act entails. This objection misunderstands determinism, which does not mean that one *causes himself to exist*, but rather *causes something else to happen*. A self-determined act is one determined by oneself, not another.

Self-determinism is contrary to causality. If all acts need a cause, then so do acts of the will, which are not caused by the self but by something else. If everything needs a cause, so do the persons performing the actions.

There is no violation of the actual principle of causality in the exercise of free actions. The principle does not claim that every *thing* (being) needs a cause. Finite things need a cause. God is uncaused. The person performing free actions is caused by God. The *power* of freedom is caused by God, but the *exercise* of freedom is caused by the person. The self is the first-cause of personal actions. The principle of causality is not violated because every finite thing and every action has a cause.

Self-determinism is contrary to predestination. Others object that self-determinism is contrary to God's predestination. But self-determinists respond that God can predetermine in several ways. He can determine (1) contrary to free choice (forcing the person to do what he or she does not choose to do); (2) based on free choices already made (waiting to see what the person will do); and (3) knowing omnisciently what the person will do "in accordance with his foreknowledge" (1 Peter 1:2). "Those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son" (Rom. 8:29). Either positions 2 or 3 are consistent with self-determinism. Both insist that God can determine the future by free choice, since he omnisciently knows *for sure* how they will *freely* act. So, it is *determined* from the standpoint of God's infallible knowledge but *free* from the vantage point of human choice.

Connected with the argument from strong determinism is that, while Adam had free choice (Rom. 5:12), fallen human beings are in bondage to sin and not free to respond to God. But this view is contrary to both God's consistent call on people to repent (Luke 13:3; Acts 2:38) and believe (e.g., John 3:16; 3:36; Acts 16:31), as well as to direct statements that even unbelievers have the ability to respond to God's grace (Matt. 23:37; John 7:17; Rom. 7:18; 1 Cor. 9:17; Philem. 14; 1 Peter 5:2).

This argument continues that if humans have the ability to respond, then salvation is not of grace (Eph. 2:8-9) but by human effort. However, this is a confusion about the nature of faith. The ability of a person to receive God's gracious *gift* of salvation is not the same as *working* for it. To think so is to give credit for the gift to the receiver rather than to the Giver who graciously gave it.

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