

Free Will and Determinism

Learning objectives:

To understand: -

- The link between free will and moral responsibility
- The ethical theories of hard determinism, libertarianism and soft determinism or compatibilism
- The influences of genetics, psychology and social environment on our moral choices
- Religious ideas of free will and predestination
- The strengths and weaknesses of determinism and free will
- The link between free will, determinism and moral responsibility

Making decisions

- If you decide you want to eat a piece of chocolate, is it because you like chocolate, or because you were *always* going to like eating chocolate?
- In other words, whenever you make a choice, is it a free choice or one determined by influences beyond your control?
- Whether or not people have freedom of choice is an important aspect of ethics, since if people do not possess free will the debate over how to make the *right* choice no longer exists.

Free will

- Those who think that each person is free to decide their future are proponents of free will.
- However, it should be remembered that each individual is only as free as their situation allows them to be. In other words, the choices a person has set before them are limited by circumstances.
- E.g. a rich man may choose to buy a helicopter, but a poor man cannot make that choice. Similarly, human beings are constrained by their physical and mental limitations.

What is determinism?

- Most people agree that people are morally responsible only for the actions they carry out freely and deliberately – actions that are freely chosen.
- Determinism states that laws of nature which govern everything which happens and that all our actions are the result of these scientific laws and every choice we make was determined by the situation immediately before it, and that situation was determined before that and so on as far back as you want to go.
- Freedom of choice is just an illusion and so personal responsibility is a meaningless concept, as are blame and punishment. This makes it difficult to make any sense of the idea that people are to be held morally and legally responsible only for actions carried out freely and deliberately.

- However, we do feel a sense of responsibility for what we have done even if we did not choose that action; e.g. a driver who kills a child who ran out in front of his car would blame himself for the death, even if it was not his fault and he could not have prevented it.
- Philosophers have traditionally responded to this problem in different ways:
 1. **Hard determinists** accept determinism and reject freedom and moral responsibility
 2. **Libertarians** reject determinism and accept freedom and moral responsibility
 3. **Soft determinists or compatibilists** reject the two previous views that free will and determinism are incompatible and argue that freedom is not only compatible with determinism, but actually requires it.

Determinism

- Determinism states that everything in the universe has a prior cause, including all human actions and choices. This means that all our decisions, viewpoints and opinions can be best understood when translated into the neutral language of natural science.
- This view has a long history and may be seen in *fatalism* of Greek tragedy, in which people are the helpless victims of circumstances, necessity and the Fates.

Predestination

- Determinism can also be seen in some versions of Christian predestination: the total irrelevance of our actions in this life as God has already decided whether we are saved or not saved.
- The doctrine of predestination was formulated by such theologians as Augustine of Hippo and John Calvin, and is based on the idea that God determines whatever happens in history and that man has only a very limited understanding of God's purposes and plans. This idea is not based on words or particular passages in the Bible but on ideas about revelation, and has to sit side by side with teachings about individual freedom and responsibility.
- According to Augustine, people need the help of God's grace to do good, and this is a free gift from God, regardless of individual merit. Consequently, God alone determines who will receive the grace that assures salvation.
- The idea that while some were predestined to salvation, others were predestined to damnation was rejected.
- Many Christians such as Pelagius rejected determinist ideas but determinism was formulated more precisely by John Calvin during the Sixteenth Century and is still followed by the Presbyterian churches.
- This belief states that as man is a complete sinner who is incapable of coming to God, and has a sinful free will that is only capable of rejecting God, then predestination must occur or nobody could be saved. God is in total control and people cannot do anything to achieve salvation.

- This idea suggests that people have no free will as far as their ethical decisions are concerned. God chooses who will be saved just because he can not because they have something good about them. Those who are not saved will go to hell. Logically then, if we have no control over our actions, we have no responsibility for them.

Quantum Mechanics

- The recent study of subatomic particles has shown that the scientific backing of determinism may not be secure.
- The observation of subatomic particles has revealed a random element in the behaviour of the particles. Given the random nature of these particles the logical chain of cause and effect collapses.
- However, determinists point out that if this view is accepted, opponents of determinism have exchanged the pre-set nature of determinism for a life which is at the mercy of random events.

Hard Determinism

- Hard determinists are called 'hard' because their position is very strict: according to hard determinism all our actions had prior causes – we are neither free nor responsible. Hard determinism is incompatible with free will and moral responsibility, and as all our actions are caused by prior causes we are not free to act in any other way. A person is like a machine, and if a machine is faulty it just needs fixing. The same applies to a person. A person cannot be blamed for their violence; violence either needs 'fixing' or, if this fails, the person needs imprisoning to stop their violence impinging on others.
- John Hospers was a modern hard determinist who advocated this approach; he says that there is always something which compels us both externally and internally to perform an action that we would think was the result of our own free will. He uses several psychoanalytical examples to make his point and concludes : "It is all a matter of luck." This is seen most clearly in the film Clockwork Orange (1971).
- Clarence Darrow in 1924, when he defended two young men, Nathan Leopold and Richard Loeb, on a charge of murdering a young boy, Bobby Franks. The perfect crime the two men planned went wrong and in the subsequent court case Darrow, their defence lawyer, pleaded for the death penalty to be commuted to life imprisonment as the two young murders were the product of their upbringing, their ancestry and their wealthy environment.
- Darrow was successful in his plea and the case makes us question whether criminals are morally responsible for what they do.
- More modern versions point to our genetic heritage, social conditioning or subconscious influences as prior causes. The most extreme version of hard determinism is behaviourism.

- Psychological behaviourism was first discussed by John B. Watson, who suggested that behaviour can be predicted and controlled, as people live and act in a determined universe so that all human behaviour, including ethical decisions, is controlled by prior causes which are, in principle knowable. Behaviour is influenced according to Watson, by heredity and environment – nature and nurture. By manipulating the environment people's behaviour can be altered.
- This idea is called 'conditioning' and was influenced by the work of Ivan Pavlov, who conditioned dogs to salivate when they heard the sound of a bell. This is familiar as in schools we are conditioned to act in a certain way when we hear the bell ring for a lesson change.
- Operant conditioning (use our environment to get what we want) is linked to the work of B. F. Skinner, who investigated behaviour modification through reward and punishment. It is highly probable that human behaviour is not free but most likely determined.
- Steven Pinker looked at the ideas of Darwin, developed recently by Richard Dawkins. He believed that emotions such as guilt, anger, sympathy and love all have a biological basis. He developed the theory that our moral reasoning is a result of natural selection but he claims that this does not mean the end of moral responsibility.
- All theories of determinism are influenced by Isaac Newton's physics, according to which the universe is governed by immutable laws of nature such as motion and gravity. The world is seen as a mechanism dominated by the law of predictable cause and effect. Followers of Newton, such as Laplace, placed such confidence in the all pervasive power of causality that they thought that the minutest prediction could be made if only we knew the various causal factors involved. This included the actions of people – there is room for neither chance nor choice.
- So freedom of choice is just an illusion- we may appear to have moral choices, but we only think we choose freely because we do not know the causes that lie behind our choices. This is illustrated by John Locke, who describes a sleeping man in a locked room; on awakening he decides to stay where he is, not realising that the door to the room is locked. The man thinks that he has made a free decision, but in reality he has no choice. So it is with our moral choices – we think we make free decisions simply because we do not know the causes.
- This view was also taken by Paul-Henri Thiry (Baron) d'Holbach, who said that humans and human society and actions can all be understood in terms of cause and effects – freedom is again an illusion.
- Ted Honderich also drew the conclusion that, since everything is physically determined, there is no choice and so no personal responsibility; there is not even any 'self' within us that is the origin of our actions. According to Honderich, there is no room for blame and no point in punishment for the sake of punishment.

- Hard determinism –
- All human actions have a prior cause
- We do not make free moral choices
- We are not morally responsible for our actions.

Evaluating hard determinism

- Hard determinism means we cannot blame or praise people for their actions
- If hard determinism were true then people would not be morally responsible, and so would not deserve blame for even the most cold-blooded and calmly performed evil actions.
- All choices we make are just illusions – they are determined.
- Hard determinism, therefore, rejects the idea of punishment as retribution, but it does not reject any other views about the justification of punishment e.g. deterrence, self-defence or moral education.
- Classical physics is indeed deterministic, but modern quantum physics is not deterministic and so it makes no sense to worry about determinism in the twenty first century. Modern physics maintains that the most basic laws of nature are not deterministic but probabilistic.
- If determinism is true then all horrible things that happen in the world had to happen – this is a very pessimistic view of the world.