

Free Will and Determinism

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The basic question:

Is the world chaotic and unpredictable, or does it work according to physical laws that we can understand on the basis of experimental evidence? Do things happen by chance, or is everything determined by 'causes'?

Ignorance?

Everything may be determined by its causes, but we may not know what they are. Is freedom and chance therefore an illusion generated by our ignorance of all the facts? I may think that I am free to choose what to do, but if I could take into account everything that had ever happened, then I would see that my choice was determined.

In ethics, one distinction is clear:

- If we are free, we can be held responsible for what we do. We can be praised or blamed. We act on the basis of values that we hold, which influence what we want to happen in the future.
- If we are totally conditioned, we have no choice, and it makes no sense to speak of actions as morally right or wrong.

Is science deterministic?

- Scientific laws are formulated by a process of induction, based on experimental evidence and observed facts.
- They try to be the best available interpretation of the evidence (but may not be the only possible one).
- They cannot claim absolute, but only a degree of probability, proportional to the evidence upon which they are based.

Newtonian Physics saw the world as a mechanism, whose workings were understood in terms of the laws of nature.

Hume thought of a 'chance' event as a sign that we were unable to know all the forces operating upon it. As an 'empiricist,' he viewed everything as determined by physical laws. He said:

"'tis commonly allowed by philosophers that what the vulgar call chance is nothing but a secret and conceal'd cause."

(A Treatise of Human Nature)

Laplace held that, if one could know all the causes operating in the world, then, having known one single event, it would be possible to demonstrate everything that had taken place before it, and everything that would take place after it.

The scientific and empirical approach presents us with the moral problem of free will and determinism.

There are two different senses in which we can speak of determinism:

- the theoretical ability to account for every human choice
- the view that everything is part of a single chain of causation.

The first is relevant to questions of morality, for it suggests that the action of choosing or willing is already determined.

The second is mainly of interest to the philosopher of science.

Notice this distinction:

- Freedom is the ability of a creature to choose and then enable the thing chosen to happen.
- Free will is the ability to want something to happen, even if it cannot **actually** happen.

If there is no freedom, there is no morality. If there is no free will, there is no sense of moral responsibility.

(i.e. You may choose to do something, and subsequently do it – so you have a measure of freedom. But you may not have been free to choose any other course of action. If you're a psychopath, you're a psychopath!)

First you choose, then you're determined?

Choosing to turn right precludes everything that might have happened if you had chosen to turn left.

This allows individual freedom (the future is not entirely determined by the past); but the laws of nature determine everything that happens once you have made your choice.

But, is my choice predictable? If so, there is no free will, and what appears to be freedom is an illusion.

In general we can conclude that, if we accept that everything follows laws of nature, then, even if we cannot **prove** that everything is determined rather than a matter of chance or personal freedom, we have to **assume** that it is.

If the mind part of the physical world?

How do we account for the experience of freedom? One way to deal with such questions is to opt for a radical mind/body dualism.

Descartes (1596-1650) argued that:

- The body was extended in space and time, and was therefore controlled by the laws of nature.
- The mind was not extended in space, and was therefore free from the determination of physical laws.

Human beings could think and act in the world with apparent freedom, since their minds were not part of it - the mental realm was quite separate from the physical.

Kant (1724-1804) distinguished between:

- Phenomena (things as we experience them) and
- Noumena (things as they are in themselves)

He argued that the mind imposes the concepts of space, time and causality on experience.

Therefore we can say that **everything** has a cause, because our minds are so organised that they **impose** the idea of causality.

For Kant, choices come from our desires, beliefs and motives. Once made, they have inevitable consequences.

Thus from the standpoint of the choosing subject, there is freedom, but from the standpoint of an observer, everything fits into a pattern of causal determination.

By the 19th century, however, Determinism became the term used for the belief that **everything that happens was absolutely** determined by a chain of causes, **and that the mind, whatever role that played in action was itself determined.**

Free Will?

This strong form of determinism creates problems in terms of the relationship between mind and body. What is the human mind?

Can it make a difference? If my mind is related to my brain, and the electrical impulses in my brain are part of a closed mechanical system, then my freedom is an illusion.

It is clear that **nobody is totally free:**

1. Physical limitations. There are some things that I am physically incapable of doing.
2. Psychological limitations. If psychology can predict choices, then I am determined by my background and psychological make-up.
3. Social limitations. We may be limited by the financial, social and political structures under which we live.

In considering the moral significance of an action, we need to assess the degree of freedom available to the agent.

Another crucial question concerns **the nature of the mind:**

Is my mind such that I can experience the various things that influence me, recognise that I have scope to choose how to act, and then act accordingly?

If I stand back and see my mind as **part of a deterministic universe**, it is difficult to see what sense can be made of the idea of 'Free Will'.

On the other hand, **I experience freedom to choose, and also experience the result of having chosen a course of action.**

How then can I accept a view of the world that does not take such a basic human experience into account?

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