

Free will and Determinism

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Upon completing this chapter, students will be able to meet the following Learning Outcomes:

- 5.1** Articulate the problem of free will within determinism or indeterminism.
- 5.2** Compare and contrast the ideas of Spinoza and Hume on determinism.
- 5.3** Explain how determinism can be said to be statistically true.
- 5.4** Articulate the dilemma of determinism and its relation to human freedom as proposed by existentialists from Dostoyevsky to Sartre.

Although many of us believe we can do and act how we want, whenever we want to, philosophers have argued that this is not the case. There are various views on the notion of human freedom. **Free will** is the notion that people make choices and have the capacity to do otherwise than they choose. **Determinism** is the idea that all actions and events are determined or happen necessarily and that human actions are no different. Humanity is as free as a weather vane—a weather vane moves with the direction of the wind, and humans do too. Or to put it more precisely, humans move and act in accordance with desires, impulses, and causes that

are beyond our control. For the determinist, there is no freedom of the will. **Indeterminism**, on the other hand, claims that not all actions are determined and that humans have some amount of freedom. In other words, people have some amount of free will.



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Our perception of reality seems to indicate to each of us that we are free and have free will; upon closer examination, it is not so obvious. Many philosophers argue that there is no way that humans can have such a thing as free will at all. They call this the dilemma of determinism, as the British philosopher, Colin McGinn (b. 1950), states in his *Problems in Philosophy: The Limits of Inquiry* (1993), that “Either determinism is true or it is not. If it is true, then all our chosen actions are uniquely necessitated by prior states of the world, just like every other event. But then it cannot be the case that we could have acted otherwise, since this would require a possibility determinism rules out. Once the initial conditions are set and the laws fixed, causality excludes genuine freedom.”

“On the other hand, if indeterminism is true,” McGinn continues, “then, though things could have happened otherwise, it is not the case that we could have chosen otherwise, since a merely random event is no kind of free choice. That some events occur causelessly, or are not subject to law, or only to probabilistic law, is not sufficient for those events to be free choices.”

“Man’s life is a line that nature commands him to describe upon the surface of the earth, without his ever being able to swerve from it, even for an instant. He is born without his own consent; his organization does in no way depend upon himself; his ideas come to him involuntarily; his habits are in the power of those who cause him to contract them; he is unceasingly modified by causes, whether visible or concealed, over which he has no control, which necessarily regulate his mode of existence, give the hue to his way of thinking, and determine his manner

of acting. He is good or bad, happy or miserable, wise or foolish, reasonable or irrational, without his will being for anything in these various states”

—Paul-Henri Thiry, *Baron d’Holbach*

POWERFUL ANALYSIS: FREE OR DETERMINED?

Did you choose to get out of bed this morning, or were you “determined” to do so? Could you have done something else entirely with your day?



POWERFUL IDEAS: VIEWS ON HUMAN META-PHYSICAL FREEDOM

Free Will—The notion that people make choices and have the capacity to do otherwise than they choose. In other words, not all actions are predetermined.

Determinism—All actions and events are determined or happen necessarily. There is no free will. Freedom of the will is an illusion.

Indeterminism—Not all actions are determined. People have freedom of the will.

Soft Determinism or **Compatibilism**—All actions are determined, and yet humanity has free will. David Hume (1711–1776) argues for this view. Hume seems to redefine what it means to be “free.” “Free” for Hume is doing whatever you are determined to do. This does not sound very “free.”

Fatalism—The view that if something is fated to happen, it will happen no matter what; it doesn’t even need to be a logical sequence of events that makes it happen.

Baruch Spinoza

Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677) argues that all actions unfold according to the necessary laws that govern the universe. If there was no antecedent cause, there could be no effect. He thinks that there is only one substance and that all things are part of it. He holds that this single substance is God, and that all of creation (including people) are part of God as a single unified whole. In regards to determinism, it is his view that all actions and events are unfolding in a necessary and determined way. There is

no choice and there is no freedom. He argues that once we realize we are not free, we should “free” ourselves from regret and remorse for past actions or events as all of those actions and events were determined to happen.



POWERFUL IDEAS: SPINOZA THE HINDU?

Similarities between Spinoza’s philosophy and Eastern philosophy are very interesting. The nineteenth-century German philosopher Theodore Goldstücker was one of the first academics to notice the similarities between Spinoza’s religious conceptions and Hindu traditions of India. Goldstücker said “. . . a western system of philosophy which occupies a foremost rank amongst the philosophies of all nations and ages, and which is so exact a representation of the ideas of the Vedanta, that we might have suspected its founder to have borrowed the fundamental principles of his system from the Hindus. . . . We mean the philosophy of Spinoza, a man whose very life is a picture of that moral purity and intellectual indifference to the transitory charms of this world, which is the constant longing of the true Vedanta philosopher. . . . comparing the fundamental ideas of both we should have no difficulty in proving that, had Spinoza been a Hindu, his system would in all probability mark a last phase of the Vedanta philosophy.”—W. H. Allen, 1879, *Literary Remains of the Late Professor Theodore Goldstücker*

Jean Buridan and His Donkey

Jean Buridan (1300–1358) used a hypothetical example of a donkey to argue that humanity is not free. The example commonly known as “Buridan’s ass (donkey)” is a paradox. According to Buridan (with whom Spinoza agrees), an entirely rational donkey, placed between two stacks of hay of equal size and quality, would starve to death since it cannot make any rational decision to start eating one bale of hay rather than the other.

Spinoza says we are just like the donkey; without some internal or external influence upon us, we would be unable to act. We, like a donkey, would starve to death since our free will is not sufficient for us to produce an action. According to Spinoza without an antecedent cause, there could be no effect. There is no free will. Our desire is not sufficient to produce action.

This example is obviously hypothetical and in principle un-testable. It is not testable because (1) there are no rational donkeys and (2) you cannot remove a person, animal, or object from the causal chain of events in order to place them in perfect “equilibrium” as the example requires.

“I shall consider human actions and desires in exactly the same manner, as though I were concerned with lines, planes and solids”

—Spinoza, *The Ethics*

As we have noted, Spinoza says that once we understand the nature of the world, we can free ourselves from regret or remorse. Everything that happens in life, all of our choices, and the events that unfold as a result of them, happen necessarily. Events could not unfold differently—things could not have been otherwise. As such, feel happy, feel free and be at peace, free from regret and remorse. This, of course, is easy to say and hard to do.

Compatibilism

Soft determinism, which is also known as Compatibilism, is a theory that states all actions are determined, and yet humanity has free will. David Hume (1711–1776) argues for this view. Hume seems to redefine what it means to be “free.” “Free” for Hume is doing whatever you are determined to do. Whereas when most people discuss freedom, they have the idea that they are free to have done otherwise. In other words, you could keep reading this fascinating discussion on free will, or put down the book and have a snack. After the fact, in hindsight, whatever choice you made, you feel was not determined but rather you were open to have make a different decision. Hume’s notion of being free as so long as we do what we are determined to do does not sound very “free.”

“Man can do what he wills but he cannot will what he wills”

—Arthur Schopenhauer, 1788–1860

Indeterminism

Indeterminism maintains that not all actions are determined. The view holds that people have some measure of freedom of the will. How much freedom we have is highly contested. Some argue we may have just enough to lift our pinky finger, while others think that we are free to perform any action within our abilities or capacities. In other words, we are not free to fly, as we cannot physically do so, but we are free to run, jump, or skip as those are things humans can do. William James (1842–1910) argues that consciousness makes humanity different from material objects, which are governed or determined by the laws of nature and physics. He feels that humans are free, and given his notion of truth, we are free to believe in determinism or indeterminism as it suits us.

“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”

—William James, *The Dilemma of Determinism*

Confronting Freedom: From Dostoyevsky to Sartre

Deep in the heart of *The Brothers Karamazov* by Fyodor Dostoyevsky (1821–1881) is a story that always rings true. It is about faith and doubt, but it is most of all about freedom. Alexei Fyodorovich Karamazov—Alyosha to his family and friends—is 19 years old at the start of the novel and the youngest of the brothers. He is a deeply religious young man studying to be a priest at a Russian Orthodox Christian monastery. As unassuming and quiet as he is sensitive and loving, Alyosha is different from his brothers and radically different from his brother Ivan, an atheist intellectual and budding writer.

Alyosha reads Ivan’s essay “The Grand Inquisitor,” a literary conceit on Dostoyevsky’s part that succeeds in sounding very much like some else’s writing, where Ivan Karamazov famously tells of a silent Christ who is followed by all because it is easier to follow than to choose to take action on your own. There is, Ivan notes, much to be said for knowing clearly what is right and what is wrong, what is allowed and what is not. There is comfort in living under a dictatorship, whether that of religion or that of a czar. “Nothing has ever been more frightening for a human being and for a human society,” Ivan Karamazov writes in this book-within-a-book, “than freedom.” This insight goes a long way to explain the regime’s from those of the Christian Church to those of Czar Nicholas, Lenin, Stalin, and Putin—just to stay within Russia for the moment.

Like the Christ in Ivan’s story, Alyosha remains silent; but his brother’s arguments reverberate in his consciousness. Alyosha continues his religious studies with father Zosima, who sends him out into the world to practice the love and kindness he preaches. Then something happens, not unexpected but nevertheless shocking: the aged Father Zosima dies, as old people tend to do. The whole monastery expects a sign from God, some sort of indication that this was no ordinary mortal but in fact a saint. They expected at least for there to be the sweet smell of roses around Zosima’s body at the funeral—not an unusual belief about Christian saints. But this was summer, and the old man’s body not only did not give off a floral scent—it rotted fast and it stank, and the burial had to be rushed.

How could God let this happen?

This question has been asked and still is asked by anyone with religious faith. Why is there cancer? Why are there wars? Or why do you have a bad hair day when you also have a hot date tonight? Looking for reasons can throw you into an anguished fit of doubt, and Alyosha’s asking how God could let this happen to the saintly Zosima tested the limits of his faith. Within that suffering and doubt, he

realized that he was free, free to believe or not to believe, that the decision was entirely his.

In Richard Brooks’ Hollywood epic of *The Brothers Karamazov* (1958), this first of several movie adaptations to date of Dostoyevsky’s novel, a young William Shatner—before his Captain Kirk Star Trek days—plays Alyosha. Yul Brynner plays the nasty brother Dmitri, with Richard Basehart as Ivan. Spoiler alert: Lee J. Cobb in fine form plays the nasty father who gets murdered. That murder, too, was a personal choice.

“What is strange, what would really be marvelous, is not that God should really exist,” Dostoyevsky writes, “the marvel is that such an idea, the idea of the necessity of God could enter the head of such a savage, vicious beast as man.”

Dostoyevsky calls Alyosha a lover of mankind, and the decision to believe in fact does lead the young man to a life of kindness and even of hope. But what is crucial here is that the choice Alyosha made was and could not be a unique event. Choosing to face freedom, rather than blindly accepting rules, is a lifelong project. To be human is to choose, and in this, Dostoyevsky anticipates twentieth-century existentialism and particularly Jean-Paul Sartre’s definition of the human being as freedom itself. The physical is determined by physical laws in nature, but human beings are not just physical things, so they are outside determinism. Alyosha Karamazov, like Sartre’s For-Itself in *Being and Nothingness*, is not determined by his past, nor is he bound to a single course of action according to his situation. He is free.

“In phenomenology it is the self which analyzes phenomena, i.e., human consciousness which analyzes that which appears in its sphere. . . . No one motive can influence or determine human consciousness for the simple reason that consciousness carries within itself ‘nothing,’ is determined in no way, and lies completely outside world determinism. Nothing can determine me because there is ‘nothing’ in me which can be determined. The relation between my past and my present is such, according to Sartre, that what I am is not the foundation of what I shall be”

—Wilfrid Desan, *The For-Itself*, 1954, *The Tragic Finale*

We are in fact condemned to be free, as Sartre points out. Within brutal physical limits—we are all going to die, for instance; and we do not choose where or when



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we are born—and within the limits of brute facticity or what Karl Marx called material conditions, we are in fact totally free. That is of course a difficult paradox to face. But it is refreshing to remember that the fact that a question is difficult does not mean that it does not have an answer. It just means that the question is difficult.

A Brief History of the Universe (and Why Determinism Is, Statistically True)

As contrary to our supposed perception of freedom and choice as determinism is, it is not as outrageous a claim as one might at first think. Most objects in this universe are governed by laws of nature, and the behavior of those objects is “determined.”

“[Determinism] professes that those parts of the universe already laid down absolutely appoint and decree what the other parts shall be. The future has no ambiguous possibilities bidden in its womb; the part we call the present is compatible with only one totality. Any other future complement than the one fixed from eternity is impossible. The whole is in each and every part, and welds it with the rest into an absolute unity, an iron block, in which there can be no equivocation or shadow of turning”

—William James, *The Dilemma of Determinism*

J. J. C. Smart (1920–2012) states two definitions regarding this issue, one for determinism and other for randomness. He thinks that between the two that they are exhaustive of all possibilities for how events unfold in this reality. He argues that given the available options, we cannot be free. Smart defines the two possibilities as follows:

D1: I shall state the view that there is “unbroken causal continuity” in the universe as follows. It is in principle possible to make a sufficiently precise determination of the state of a sufficiently wide region of the universe at time t , and sufficient laws of nature are in principle ascertainable to enable a superhuman calculator to be able to predict any event occurring within that region at an already given time t' .

D2: I shall define the view that “pure chance” reigns to some extent within the universe as follows. There are some events that even a superhuman calculator could not predict, however precise his knowledge of however wide a region of the universe at some previous time (J. J. C. Smart, July 1961, “Free-Will, Praise and Blame,” *Mind*)

Smart goes on to say that, “For the believer in free will holds that no theory of a deterministic sort or of a pure chance sort will apply to everything in the universe; he must therefore envisage a theory of a type which is neither deterministic nor indeterministic in the senses of these words which I have specified by the two definitions D1 and D2; and I shall argue that no such theory is possible.”

Let us consider an example and see how humanity is somehow different from the objects considered. When a pen rolls off your desk and falls to the floor, did it

“choose” to fall? When I am teaching this topic in class, I have a habit of dropping markers on purpose to demonstrate that markers always “choose” to fall down. I also drop books, keys, or anything I have around that is handy for the demonstration—frustratingly, each and every time (and it has been about 10,000 times at this point) the objects I drop fall down. I secretly hope they will fall up, or maybe even levitate but they never do.

Now we all know objects do not “choose” to fall down. Objects are, in fact, *determined* to fall down as a result of the laws of nature and physics—specifically gravity, which govern their behavior. They have no free will, nor are the events that follow (once I drop an object) free to unfold any differently than the laws of nature dictate.

From the moment the universe popped into existence some 14 billion years ago with an event known as the big bang, events were determined by the laws of nature. For millions of years after that big bang astrophysicists maintain that it was so hot that no physical matter could form, but when the universe cooled, hydrogen atoms began to form (they did not choose to form, they had to form based on the laws of physics). Eventually, gravity made (or determined) the hydrogen coalesce into stars. As those stars ignited (which, again, was determined, by the laws of physics), nuclear fusion began (again determined by the laws of physics and nuclear chemistry) to create helium, and eventually heavier elements. When those stars burned out, most went supernova and created even more heavy elements (any and all of the naturally found elements in our periodic table—of which there are 92).

Eventually, about five billion years ago or so, our solar system formed. The Earth was formed, collided with some other proto-planet, and created the moon, and over billions of years slowly but surely life evolved within its biosphere. The point of this very brief history of the universe is this: each and every event described above had to happen—it was determined to happen, by the initial state of the universe after the big bang and the laws of physics that govern material objects in this realm.

So approximately 100,000 to 200,000 years ago, *Homo sapiens* show up on planet Earth, and we have the audacity to believe that although determinism reigned for approximately 14 billion years, now we are somehow free or beyond the laws of nature that govern reality. This is statistically very improbable (given 14 billion years of determinism) and also very arrogant on the part of mankind.

Clearly, the laws of nature that govern our behavior are more complicated than the laws of gravity. The laws that govern human behavior are some sort of psychological/biological laws, many of which remain unknown to us today, but that does not mean we are free of them. It is hard to accept, and perhaps just as hard to understand, but the preponderance of evidence is on the side of determinism, although many of us, like a good pragmatist, choose to believe otherwise.