

Are We Free Beings?

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What free will is, and whether or not we have it, are two of the most interesting and enduring problems in philosophical and theological thought. This article discusses some of the key questions and ideas regarding free will, including the nature-nurture debate, predestination, and causal determinism.

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Free will and free action

'They may take our lives, but they'll never take our freedom!' This is the rallying cry of William Wallace in the 1995 film *Braveheart*. Is he right? In one sense it looks like Wallace is obviously wrong. There are several ways for the English army to deprive him of his freedom. They could conquer his homeland; lock him up; or simply kill him. In another sense, though, he seems to be correct. No matter what they do, his enemies cannot make him want the same things they want or think the way they do. In this way, he will always be free.

These two senses of freedom illustrate the difference between freedom of will and freedom of action. Freedom of the will has to do with the ability to make choices, to have one particular motive rather than another. Freedom of action has to do with the ability to put those

choices into effect, actually to do whatever it is that we are motivated to do (Albritton, 2003, pp. 408-423).

Although free action and free will are not exactly the same, they are still closely related and whether we act freely is an important question in determining whether we have free will. This is because our free will is needed to have free action. In order to put our choices into effect (free action) we must be able to make choices in the first place (free will). It seems clear that our freedom of action is partial at best. There are sometimes things beyond our control that prevent us from acting exactly how we choose. However, if we can *never* act freely, then that suggests that we do not have free will. This is why questions about free will are often put in terms of whether or not we can act freely.

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Restrictions on free will: Nature and nurture

I have said that our freedom of action is partial: there are certain things that prevent us from acting the way we choose. There are also things which seem to restrict our free will in a similar manner. The nature-nurture debate is focused on the way our genes and our experiences affect our behaviour. Our genes can make us more likely to behave in certain ways or have particular behavioural characteristics. Similarly, our environment – our upbringing, society, country, etc. – can impact on the way we think and behave. *Hereditarians* tend to emphasise the role that our biological make-up has in affecting our behaviour. *Environmentalists* focus on the effects of our surroundings. Each side accepts that both play an important role, but disagree over the extent to which they matter (Paul, 1998, pp. 81-91). Whatever the exact relationship between heredity and environment, it seems clear that together they have a significant effect on the way we think and act. Even if we have free will, these two factors may predispose us towards making particular choices, making it harder to choose to act differently.

Theological restrictions on free will: Sin and predestination

Sometimes we do something we know we ought not to, or even that we would rather not do. We can feel so overwhelmed by weakness of will or temptation that we give in. Often this forms bad habits, and the force of habit makes it easier and easier to keep doing the things we wish we did not. In his *Confessions*, Saint Augustine talks about this self-made restriction on our will: 'I sighed after such freedom, but was bound not by an iron [that is, fetters]

imposed by anyone else, but by the iron of my own choice. The enemy had a grip on my will and so made a chain for me to hold me prisoner' (Augustine, 1992, 8.5.10). Augustine sees sin as imprisoning his will, so that by himself he is unable to choose to act in the right way. He is clear that we have free will, but he thinks that it has been warped and restricted by our sinful behaviour until we can no longer make certain choices.

If our will is so bound up by sin that we cannot choose the right thing, Augustine needs to explain what is happening when people come to belief in God. How is it that they are able to make this good choice? Augustine's answer is that humanity is saved from sin by grace. This means that it is God's free gift alone, and not human effort, that releases someone from the bondage of sin. The doctrine of predestination holds that since it is entirely down to God which people are saved, then it seems that those who are saved are *predestined* by God to be so; God decides beforehand who will be saved. Another theologian, Pelagius, disagreed with Augustine. He thought that humans were free to choose the good by themselves, without God's help. Sin is not something that totally restricts us, and those who are saved are not predestined to be so (McGrath, 1994, pp. 21-23). The debate has been characterised in the following way: Pelagius leaves more room for free will, but reduces the role of God in salvation; Augustine gives God a more central role, but restricts free will. This way of looking at their positions is too simplistic. Augustine would insist that we still have free will, and Pelagius thinks that although he sees God's role in salvation as different from Augustine, it is not diminished.

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Determinism

So far, I have looked at ways in which our free will might be affected or restricted to a greater or lesser degree. Now we turn to a position that some people think rules out any possibility of free will at all. This is *determinism*: the view that, given certain preconditions, all events are inevitable. The way that things happened is the only way they could have happened, and future events – including human thoughts and actions – are similarly determined.

Causal determinism holds that the course of events is wholly determined by natural laws. Everything that happens is preceded by a cause. That cause itself must have a cause, which also has a cause, and so on. Physical laws determine that the same cause will always produce the same effect. This means that the chain of causation is set in stone. Everything that has happened and will happen is an inevitable consequence of the events which came before causing the events that follow.

It often seems that determinism rules out the possibility of free will. If everything is decided in advance, then we are doing none of the deciding. Some thinkers, though, have argued that it is possible to have free will even if determinism is true.

Incompatibilism and libertarianism

Incompatibilism is the view that if determinism is true, free will cannot exist. This is because, according to incompatibilists, to have free will we have to be able to do something different from what we actually do; we have to have choices. Imagine I am faced with a dilemma at a restaurant: do I eat the cake or the ice cream? If I have free will,

it seems that I must be able to choose one or the other. It is possible that the future involves my eating cake; it is just as possible that it involves my eating ice cream. What will decide the matter is my free choice.

If determinism is true, then this scenario is not possible. I may deliberate between the two options, but the outcome of my deliberation is already settled. Because of the way the universe began billions of years ago, it was always the case that I would sit here, deliberate and finally choose the cake. There was never any possibility of my choosing the ice cream. What decided the matter was a causal chain stretching back to long before I existed.

According to determinism, the future – including our choices – is already set. Incompatibilists think that the possibility of a different future is needed for free will. They can therefore take one of two different positions. The first is that determinism is true and we have no free will. The second is that determinism is false, and so we do have free will. The first view is sometimes called '*hard*' *determinism*, and is quite an unusual position to take. The second is called *libertarianism*, and is much more common.

Different libertarian positions focus on explaining how our will and action work, if they are not part of a deterministic system. Some libertarians try to explain how the will could be uncaused without being random; these are called non-causal theories. Other libertarians argue that we do cause our willing and action, but that this is a special kind of cause which is not itself caused or part of a deterministic system. These are called agent-causal theories (O'Connor, 2013).

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Compatibilism

Compatibilism is the view that free will and determinism do not rule each other out. Because compatibilists are determinist while still believing in free will, they are sometimes called 'soft' determinists.

How is it possible that I can have free will if all my future motives and actions are already decided? Compatibilists have a different idea about what exactly free will is. They think that as long as my choices are causing my actions, then I am free – even if my choices are already set. Return to the restaurant. The compatibilist accepts that I was always going to choose the cake, but points out that the eating of the cake is still down to me. I still consider the two options and choose to eat the cake. It is my choice, and nothing else, which affects the future. It is because of me that the cake is eaten.

On this understanding of free will, it does not matter that I can never do anything other than what I actually do. What matters is that what I do is down to me. My actions are still part of the causal chain, but that chain runs through my will. Even if determinism is true, it is my will that causes me to act, and therefore I am free.

Free will and moral responsibility

Part of the reason that questions about free will are so important is that they have a big impact on moral responsibility. This relationship between freedom and moral responsibility was of great importance in the disagreement between Pelagius and Augustine. Pelagius did not

see how humanity could be held responsible for sin if we are unable to do good without God's help. Augustine thought that we are still responsible for our deeds even though without grace we cannot avoid sinning.

It is usually thought that if we are going to be held morally responsible for something, we must have had free will and free action in doing it (Clarke, 1992, pp. 53-72). This is because if something is our free choice, it seems to indicate that we had control over it. If I have control over an event it marks it out as 'mine' and it can be attributed to me: this is sufficient to make us responsible for it (Duff, 1998, para. 4). For good or ill, the event in question is down to me.

If an action is not down to my free will, then I cannot be responsible for it. This point forms the basis for a general criticism of the compatibilist position. A lot of thinkers argue that the compatibilist account of free will is not sufficient for moral responsibility: that is, it does not allow us control over our actions. If I could never have done anything other than what I actually did, then I do not have control over it and hence am not morally responsible.

One response to the claim that compatibilist free will does not allow moral responsibility is to say that what matters for responsibility is voluntariness, not the ability to do otherwise (Pink, 2004, 74-79). If my act is voluntary, it means that it was caused by my choice – even if I could not have chosen anything else. This seems enough to be able to call the action mine, and make me responsible for it.

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Link

<http://www.iep.utm.edu/freewill/>
(‘Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy’: article on free will, including arguments for and

against incompatibilism and compatibilism [you will want to pass over the formal logic passages!]).

Discussion points

1. Is it fair to hold someone responsible for doing something their genes and environment make them more likely to do?
2. Does Augustine’s idea of grace affect free will?
3. If the way I act is down to my decision, does it matter whether or not I could have done something else?

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