

Freedom and determinism

The complex philosophical and ethical issues arising from freedom and determinism are not easy to grapple with at A-level. **John Frye** throws some light on ways of understanding them.

Friedrich Nietzsche's relationships with women do not seem to have afforded him much satisfaction. The love of his life appears to have been a Russian woman called Lou Andreas-Salomé. Lou eventually ran off with one of Nietzsche's friends, although her fascination with Nietzsche's mental qualities led her to write a book about him in which she described him as effeminate, solitary, quietly spoken and intensely religious.

What, I hear you ask, does this have to do with freedom and determinism? Well, quite a lot, actually. If you read Nietzsche, then Lou's description of him is in stark contrast to the philosopher whose ideal of the Noble Man was a being of cruelty and passion, a being who would be completely justified in killing a few millions of the 'botched and bungled' (most of humanity) while exercising his will to power. The man Nietzsche wanted

questions about freedom and determinism are incredibly complex

to be was in some respects a complete contrast to the man he was. Almost his last sentient act was to rush over to embrace a horse that had collapsed in the street — an act of pity from the advocate of the Noble Man who could eradicate most of humanity without pity. The point is that perhaps Nietzsche's real character was pre-determined by his upbringing, by his genetic structure and by the physical processes through which matter operates. Wherein lies the true Nietzsche?

Why is freedom/determinism important?

Questions about freedom and determinism are not just abstract issues: they are personal and crucial, and incredibly complex. The issue of whether or not we are free to make decisions is important for at least two reasons:

- * All human endeavour depends to some extent on the idea that what we achieve is done by our own free decisions and choices. The joys of scientific discovery, or of artistic composition, poetry, music and literature, would lose their meaning for most of us if it could be shown that all such endeavour follows mechanistically and irrevocably from the first fact of the universe.

- * Unless we are *morally* free, most of our principles of justice, morality, reward and punishment go out of the window, and along with them any concept of a religious morality in which a God demands morally good behaviour from humans.

Put simply, there are two possible views:

- * **Determinism** — the idea that matter alone acts. On this view, the universe is composed of nothing other than ordinary physical processes that are in principle completely determined by the nature of matter itself.

- * **Libertarianism** (in some form or other) — the idea that mind can also act on matter to make it act. On this view, the world is composed of mental processes as well as physical processes.

The concept of a 'self'

The idea of an 'I', or a 'self', belongs to the language of mental processes. Most people believe that the self is a real concept, and that they are free to make personal and moral choices. Many philosophers, biologists, neuroscientists and others, however, believe that the self is an illusion

— a kind of software package thrown up by the hardware of brain cells and electrochemical processes within the brain.

For ethics to exist, the concept of a self has to pass at least three tests, as there are at least three major constraints on the freedom (and the existence) of the self:

- * constraints caused by the operation of the laws of the universe
- * constraints caused by our view of the nature of a person
- * constraints caused by God's nature

Constraints caused by the operation of the laws of the universe

The universe seems to operate according to strict deterministic laws, which we refer to as chemistry, biology, physics and so on. Philosophical determinism holds that for every event there is an antecedent sufficient cause — all events are predictable in principle. In simpler language, given a knowledge of the initial state of the universe, all future states of it would be predictable by an omniscient mind. Human brains are physical. Therefore, it is argued that they are determined by the same deterministic laws and so freedom of the will does not exist. Broadly speaking, this is the issue the textbooks are talking about when they refer to **compatibilism** and **incompatibilism** as contrasting positions to take on this issue.

Incompatibilism

Incompatibilism argues that if determinism is true, then no human actions can be free. This can lead to two different interpretations:

- * **Hard determinism**

P1 Determinism is true.

C Therefore no human actions are free.

- * **Libertarianism**

P1 Some human actions are free.

C Therefore determinism is false.

According to hard determinism I can have no free will and no moral freedom. In fact 'I' am not an 'I' at all — 'I' only think I am. Libertarians admit the influence of genetics, environment and other factors, but generally claim that the brain functions on quantum-mechanical principles which somehow allows it sufficient freedom to make independent personal/moral choices. Given our

current state of knowledge (or lack of it), it is difficult to decide whether determinists are right or not.

Compatibilism

Compatibilism argues that determinism is true, but it is also compatible with freedom. Compatibilists are sometimes called **soft determinists**. Compatibilism follows Hume's view that there are no uncaused events: a free choice does not mean an uncaused choice, but one which is free within the constraints of your nature. Your acts are free if they are caused by a decision which is caused by your own beliefs and desires.

Thomas Aquinas held that we cannot have uncaused thoughts: he saw God as the causal agent who sustains the universe and allows us to have free, caused thoughts. In modern philosophy, compatibilism comes in some very sophisticated forms, nevertheless, some thinkers see it as a contradiction in terms.

Part of the problem lies in the question of how our thoughts are caused. Hume considered two obvious examples, namely sense impressions and contiguity. If my senses present me with a barrage of data, then it seems likely that one or more sense impressions will become translated into a thought: if I see a camel walking around Trafalgar Square, I am likely to think about camels. Contiguity is the process by which a thought is dragged into existence by a previous thought: if I think about camels, that might next make me think about crossing a desert, which in turn might lead me to recall a succession of appropriate memories.

The problem is that, if my thoughts always have to be triggered in some such fashion, under what circumstances could I actually sit down and contemplate something that has not arrived in my brain through sense impressions or contiguity? Can I think an original thought, or are my thoughts determined by the response of my brain to a variety of stimuli?

Summary

* In order for humans to have some degree of freedom, moral and otherwise, some form of compatibilist or libertarian explanation has to be true.

* It is not self-evident that either compatibilism or libertarianism is true.

In which case, can freedom be rescued in some other way?

* Determinism does not always lead to predictability. The brain and the nervous system are so complex that their function is frequently described as chaotic non-algorithmic. This means that although they may be deterministic in principle, in practice what brains do is not generally computable: no computing system, however sophisticated, could do the calculations.

* Chaotic and non-algorithmic here do not mean random, since randomly-operating brains could not produce worthwhile free choices.

* Rather, they mean chaotic in the sense of non-

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concept for humans. In broad terms, determinism denies freedom in favour of a universe which operates through predetermined material processes. Libertarianism defends freedom by defending the existence of selves with free mental processes. But for ethical freedom to happen, the concept of a self has to overcome at least three constraints (see Box 1).

As a final comment, it seems to me that the dogma that selves are illusory is itself an illusion thrown up by the attempt to locate personal identity in something unchanging. Bodies change drastically between conception and death, and a damaged or diseased brain can lose both memory and personality. The self therefore can hardly be a permanent entity, even if it turns out to have permanent characteristics. Since the body is extended in time as well as space, the most obvious form of identity is that of spatio-temporal continuity: whether we take a snapshot of a person at any one moment, or a perspective over a longer period of time, any temporal state of the self is linked to all other states, however radically different these might be. The notion that spatio-temporally continuous selves are to some extent free is, as Kant said, a useful postulate. It may not be untrue just because it is useful.

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