

DISCUSS THE FREEWILL VERSUS DETERMINISM DEBATE AS IT APPLIES TO
PSYCHOLOGY

Do we choose to act as we do or are our actions a result of influences beyond our control? This question has preoccupied philosophers for centuries, thus giving rise to the 'Freewill versus Determinism' debate. By definition, freewill is the notion that we are free to make decisions and thus control all of our actions however determinism takes the opposing view suggesting that all of our actions are totally determined by the external and internal forces operating on them. It is now widely recognised by most psychologists that it is a combination of both freewill and determinism that determine our behaviour however this leads to another question, 'to what extent is our behaviour determined and to what extent are we free to choose?'

The idea that our behaviour is controlled by external factors paints a rather depressing picture of life in which we have no control over any of our actions. As a result, the humanistic approach in psychology completely rejected this idea and instead opted for the idea of freewill. Humanists such as Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow strongly believe that people exercise choice in their behaviour and that the idea that we are not in control of our behaviour is 'de-humanising.' Freewill essentially means that we have a choice over what we do and that our behaviour is voluntary and not coerced or constrained in any form. Those supporting freewill argue that we are responsible for our own actions and are free to choose how we want to behave. However, if we have complete freewill then we will have no reason to behave in any way resulting in entirely random behaviour. Since this is obviously not the case, and human behaviour is orderly to a certain extent, psychologists supporting freewill see it as an act resulting from our character or personality as well as morals and expected roles. Humanists support the concept of freewill since the central idea of the humanist approach is self-actualisation which is undoubtedly based on freewill.

Those in favour of determinism believe that behaviour results from internal or external forces over which we have no control. As a result, human behaviour is orderly and therefore determined, parallel to scientific methods. The ability to manipulate variables in scientific experiments brings to light the possibility of controlling human behaviour as according to determinists all behaviour is causal.

The biological approach supports determinism in the form of physiological determinism. In other words, according to the biological approach, our behaviour is solely determined by our biological systems. This is not at all surprising as the biological approach is based on science which is governed by determinism.

Another strong supporter of determinism is Freud, the founder of the psychodynamic approach. Psychic determinism stresses that we are at the mercy of unconscious forces over which we have no control. Trivial things such as forgetting a dentist's appointment could be due to an unconscious fear of going to the

dentist's. Freud believed that freewill was simply an illusion; however he did believe that people may have the potential for freewill as it forms the basis of psychoanalysis.

Similarly, the evolutionary approach is also very deterministic arguing that our genes have control over our behaviour as well physiological processes since they have been naturally selected over the generations. However it is not wholly deterministic as it recognizes cultural evolution in humans.

The behaviourist approach is also in favour of determinism arguing that human behaviour is determined by learning from the environment and its causes can be explained in terms of environmental stimuli. Skinner, a strong believer in environmental determinism, asserted that in actual fact freewill in human behaviour was merely an illusion because in reality we are all at the mercy of our environment. He also proposed that we repeat behaviour that is rewarded and do not repeat behaviour which is not rewarded hence all our behaviour can actually be predicted and is therefore not a result of freewill.

The neo-behaviourist approach founded by Bandura takes a similar stance but is less deterministic. It supports the belief that whilst the environment is an important determinant of behaviour, in turn, behaviour is also a determinant of the environment hence the name, reciprocal determinism. This neo-behaviourist approach acknowledges the fact that humans tend to seek out certain behaviours which they find stimulating rather than just responding to environmental stimuli and as a result accounts for a certain degree of freewill. As human beings, we have hopes and ambitions and strive to fulfil them and this aspect of our lives has an element of freewill which is taken into account by the social learning theory. The neo-behaviourist viewpoint is that we do not have complete control over all aspects of our life nor is it entirely under the control of external factors over which we have no power; it supports neither determinism nor freewill but instead combines the two.

Soft determinism is very closely related to neo-behaviourism. Soft determinism, established by William James, is the notion that we should distinguish between behaviour that is very constrained by the situation (determined) and behaviour that is only modestly constrained (less determined). Both behaviours are essentially determined but one to a lesser extent since the underlying causes are more obvious when a behaviour is highly constrained. This view seeks to reveal that determinism doesn't always have to be an extremity; rather it should be related to the circumstances in which a behaviour has occurred.

The freewill versus determinism debate is one of the oldest and most vexed of psychological and philosophical problems and has many serious implications. If indeed humans had freewill over their actions, then psychology would not be a science as behaviour would not be causal and therefore there would be no need for researchers to ascertain the causes of behaviour by measuring the influence of variables. If, on the other hand, behaviour was purely deterministic, then crime

would be left unpunished since we would not be held responsible for our actions consequently leading to the deterioration of society. Furthermore, we would feel very helpless as we would be entirely at the mercy of our environments and have no control over our lives and thus question the purpose of creation. It is important to note the fact that it is impossible to design an experiment to find out which is the greater influence in human behaviour, freewill or determinism, and therefore this debate may be more philosophical than it is scientific. In conclusion, many psychologists have realised that it is neither extreme that influences our behaviour; rather it is a combination of the two that governs human behaviour. As a result, they have opted for the position of soft determinism to describe human behaviour most accurately.