

## **Determinism**

### ***Does our behaviour result from forces over which we have no control or do we have free choice to behave as we wish?***

Have you ever wondered why we do the things we do? Why might we get physical when we are angry? Why might we cry when we're in pain? Why? What motivates us to behave the way we do in the numerous different situations we get ourselves into? Although there are many different answers that people could give us, there are two theories in particular that are highly debated with each other. One argument is that behaviour is determined through free will, known as libertarianism. Free will, by definition, is the notion that we are free to make our own decisions and are thus in control of our behaviour. By this, however, it is not meant that you can behave in a way completely out of your ability (like lay an egg or fly) just because you are in control; it means free will in the sense of rational behaviour within your capacity. The other argument is based on determinism, which indicates that all our actions are the effects of external or internal forces over which we have no control (i.e. no free will). This is more specifically known as hard determinism. The key difference between determinists and libertarians is that while the former believe that our behaviour is fundamentally the result of drives, the latter believe that we behave the way we do without there being any compulsion to do so<sup>1</sup>. These opposing theories have been the subject of much psychological controversy. Both theories have valid points of view, both make sense;

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<sup>1</sup> Richards, Steven. Determinism and Freewill. [Online] Available: <http://www.faithnet.org.uk/AS%20Subjects/Ethics/determinismandfreewill.htm>, 5/12/04.

hence, *does our behaviour result from forces over which we have no control or do we have free choice to behave as we wish?* I.e. Libertarianism or Determinism?

Libertarianism, the belief that our behaviour is defined through free choice is generally quite a vague theory. Philosopher Immanuel Kant believes that the concept of libertarianism mainly focuses on free will in terms of morality. Kant argues that if there is no freewill, there cannot be morality. In other words, you can only be penalized for your actions if you are doing them out of your own free will and thus can be held responsible for them. So if someone kills someone else with a motive, that person is undoubtedly punished because of their having a choice to do otherwise. If someone with a mental illness kills someone else however, they may have not been able to do otherwise and therefore may not be held responsible for their actions<sup>2</sup>. For Kant, it is moral freewill that is the most applicable in our lives today. On some level, the idea that everything we do is being controlled by forces is quite a depressing picture to accept, which is why the Humanistic approach in psychology has rejected this theory and instead also opts for the concept of libertarianism. Humanists such as Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow believe that choice is implemented in people's behaviour, and the notion that we have no free will in our behaviour is said to be 'de-humanizing'. This is because humanists tend to look at it from the perspective of 'Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs', which centralizes around 'self-actualization'. Overall, psychologists believing in libertarianism see behaviour as an act based on our character and personality along with our morals and expected roles. However one matter to consider when defending freewill as one's source of behaviour is that this theory contradicts science. Unfortunately for

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<sup>2</sup> Peel, Howard. Freewill and Determinism. [Online] Available: <http://www.thebikezone.org.uk/themindzone/freewill.html>, 5/12/04.

libertarians, this fact tends to support the argument against libertarianism. Another negative is that there is no empirical evidence to actually *prove* the existence of free will. What about subconscious and spontaneous behaviour?<sup>3</sup> How does libertarianism explain that? Regrettably, this theory has a considerable amount of limitations.

While libertarianism is indistinct, determinism, the assumption that all behaviour has specific causes, can be much too specific and systematic. The interrelation between science and determinism is very close, since the basis of all science is on the fact that determinism is true<sup>2</sup>. The theory was invented varyingly by Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), David Hume (1711-1776) and John Stuart Mill (1806-1873). To determinists, the human behaviour is perceived as orderly and predictable, as well as parallel to scientific methods. The determinist theory of controlling behaviour can even be compared to the controlling of variables in scientific experiments. There are several psychological approaches supporting the determinist theory. One of these is the behaviourist approach, which argues that environmental stimuli are a determining factor of our behaviour, “writing upon our mind as a blank slate (*tabularasa*) right from birth”. The developer of this theory, John B. Watson, believed that through the deterministic laws of learning he could take any child and raise them to be however he wanted<sup>4</sup>. F.B Skinner, a strong believer of the environmental determinist theory, declares that in reality we are at the mercy of our environment and thus dismisses the notion of freewill as “merely an illusion”. Another strong supporter of determinism was psychological genius Sigmund

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<sup>3</sup> Machan, Tibor. A Brief Defence of Free Will. [Online] Available: <http://rous.redbarn.org/objectivism/Writing/TiborMachan/DefenseOfFreeWill.html>, 6/12/04.

<sup>4</sup> Watson, J.B. (1930) *Behaviourism*. New York: W.W Norton (reprinted 1970).

Freud, who perceived the psychoanalytic approach<sup>5</sup>. He believed that we are all at the mercy of uncontrollable unconscious forces, which are rationalized by our conscious minds. Lastly is the biological approach on looking at determinism. The biological approach is quite simply perceived physiologically, claiming that our behaviour is all caused through biological factors. This is not surprising, however, since biology is based on science which, previously mentioned, is closely linked with determinism. Because the concept of human conduct is very complex, the determinist theory overlooks society's ideas of responsibility and self-control. It also doesn't consider moral and legal obligations either, which significantly helps form civilization.

The debate of free will against determinism is one of oldest and most litigious issues of psychological and philosophical nature. If behaviour was purely a source of freewill, then there would be no need to categorize psychology as a science; researchers would not need to conduct studies or provide empirical evidence since it would be all theoretical. On the other hand, if behaviour was a result of deterministic behaviour, then crime would be able to be justified and left unpunished since no one would be able to take responsibility for their actions which would therefore facilitate the deterioration of society. In addition, we would have no control over our lives since we would end up at the mercy of our environment. Unfortunately it is not possible to design an experiment to discover the more influential factor on human behaviour, libertarianism or determinism, which makes the debate more philosophical than scientific. So in conclusion, is our behaviour a result of uncontrollable forces or it is a result of our own free will? Because these two theories are at extremes, psychologists have concluded that it is not solely free

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<sup>5</sup> Freud, S. (1904) *Psychopathology in Everyday Life*. Reprinted in Freud, S., *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis*, New York: Washington Square Press (reprinted 1952).

will or uncontrollable forces; it is a mixture of both, establishing a theory of behaviour known as Soft determinism. Established by William James, this notion is a compromise between the Libertarian perspective as well the Deterministic perspective. Soft determinism is a potential settlement of the controversy between two completely different theories of behaviour.

## **Bibliography**

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<sup>1</sup> Machan, Tibor. A Brief Defence of Free Will. [Online] Available: <http://rous.redbarn.org/objectivism/Writing/TiborMachan/DefenseOfFreeWill.html>, 6/12/04.

<sup>1</sup> Watson, J.B. (1930) *Behaviourism*. New York: W.W Norton (reprinted 1970).

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