

How Free are we?

There is a basic problem which any philosophy that advocates freedom of thought needs to address. How free are we anyway? If everything is determined by a cause – the theory or principle of universal causation (PUC) or axiom of causality – then this must be true of human behaviour as much as anything else. If so, Humanists cannot be freethinkers, any more than anyone else.

Determinism is very old. The early Greek atomists such as Democritus and Leucippus, both of whom died in 370 BCE, saw the universe as being purely mechanistic. Democritus maintained that causal deterministic laws control the motion of atoms, and that everything - including human minds - consists merely of atoms in a void. Leucippus declared that “nothing occurs at random, but everything for a reason and by necessity”. In the Christian era theologians such as Augustine, Luther and Calvin stressed the notion of predestination. Calvin was quite blunt: “eternal life is foreordained for some, eternal damnation for others”. Newton’s physical laws were founded on determinism, and philosophers such as Spinoza and Leibniz rejected free will. The latter coined the term ‘principle of sufficient reason’ to describe the view that everything must have a cause or reason.

Natural scientists in modern times have also tended to deny the existence of free will. Darwin thought that “everything in nature is the result of fixed laws”. Einstein put it bluntly: “in human freedom in the philosophical sense I am definitely a disbeliever” (*The World as I See It*, Filiquarian Publishing, 2006, p12). In *The Selfish Gene* Richard Dawkins describes us as ‘survival machines’. Some atheist philosophers agree. Sam Harris believes that free will is an illusion: “thoughts and actions emerge from logical causes of which we are unaware and over which we exert no conscious control” (*Free Will*, Free Press, 2012, p5).

Advances in neurological science would seem to support a deterministic view. In the 1980s the physiologist Benjamin Libet used EEG to show that unconscious electrical processes in the brain's motor cortex precede conscious decisions to perform volitional acts by between 300 and 500 milliseconds – the so-called half-second delay. This process appears to confirm the causal closure principle, namely that physical acts have only physical causes and therefore no physical event has a cause outside the physical domain. If our actions are caused by physical processes, then we cannot act otherwise than we do. The full implication would seem to be that all those inner states which cause our body to act must arise from circumstances that existed even before we were born. Our actions are predestined and since we cannot initiate or control them we cannot be held in any way morally responsible for them.

This seems to be a bizarre conclusion. After all, the last 200 years have witnessed the struggle of many groups to be free. Unenfranchised citizens, women, blacks, gays and so on have acquired legal rights that they did not previously possess and we would therefore suggest that their freedom has been greatly enhanced, at least formally. If by freedom we mean “the ability to achieve what is of value in a range of circumstances” (Nicholas Maxwell: *From Knowledge to Wisdom*, 1984), then these groups have achieved at least some degree of freedom. To be told that this ‘freedom’ is really an illusion and that the fight for it was futile because we are not really ‘free’ at all appears to make no sense whatsoever. Surely the human condition and human interaction cannot be explained merely by reference to physical behaviour?

One possible route out of this intellectual cul-de-sac is to make a distinction between causes and reasons and to say that events have causes while conscious

human behaviour has reasons. Thus if I hit my knee with a small hammer, the action will cause my leg to move because of a physical reflex. But if you ask me to raise my leg and I do it, the reason is that I am willing as well as able to comply with your request. At a macro level, the physical cause of thousands of deaths at Hiroshima on 6th August 1945 was the explosion of an atomic bomb, but the reason the bomb was dropped is less clear cut. Was it to end the war more quickly and save lives? Or was it a display of American power aimed at restricting Soviet influence after the war? Perhaps both motivations were relevant and no doubt we could add more theories. But we would hardly argue that it was a purely mechanistic decision to choose that place and that time for the dropping of an atomic bomb. By examining the various reasons for human behaviour, we break free from the straitjacket of a purely mechanistic and deterministic explanation of behaviour.

Most philosophers, including both Hume and Kant, were and are essentially compatibilists or soft determinists, arguing that free will can live with determinism. Incompatibilists, on the other hand, are of two kinds: hard determinists who reject free will altogether, and libertarians who think we have free will and therefore determinism is false. To take a simple example of compatibilism, the neural changes that Libet and others detect in our brains milliseconds before we act may be a necessary but not a sufficient condition for conscious decisions. Consider that Libet's experiments involved asking people to flex their wrists whenever they felt like it. But this is a spur-of-the-moment activity in an experimental set up, whereas many of our decisions involve deliberations over time when we weigh up the possible consequences of our actions before acting. In any case, the fact that a choice only registers in consciousness after it is made does not prove that it is not free. Many of our actions are automatic: we do not consciously think of what we are doing at all. We just do them – like riding a bike or making a cup of tea.

Many events are determined: gravity, sunlight, our biology. Determinism is simply the ultimate rules of the game of life, but those rules don't fix every aspect. Does a bird seek food at this tree or that one? Does my dog run after a ball or go after the woman with the treats? Do I go to the cinema or read a book? The more complex creatures become, the wider is the range of activities open to them. And with that increase goes a steadily increasing degree of freedom. The development of culture and language have led to a greater consciousness and understanding of ourselves and the world around us and therefore enabled us humans to overcome many of the determinist barriers to freedom. Human effort can really make a difference. In *Freedom Evolves*, Daniel Dennett suggests that we have evolved as beings that can feel and think in a way that makes us able to direct our actions. The self is therefore a much larger and more complex whole than the detached 'ghost in the machine' that Descartes thought was the essence of our being.

Dennett ends by saying: "Recognizing our uniqueness as reflective, communicating animals does not require any human 'exceptionalism' that must shake a defiant fist at Darwin and shun the insights to be harvested from that beautifully articulated and empirically anchored system of thought. We can understand how our freedom is greater than that of other creatures, and see how this heightened capacity carries moral implications: noblesse oblige. We are in the best position to decide what to do next, because we have the broadest knowledge and hence the best perspective on the future. What that future holds in store for our planet is up to all of us, reasoning together" *Freedom Evolves*, Allen Lane, 2003 p.308).