

Free Will and Determinism



Crowds at Squires, Library of Congress

Ideas of Interest from “Free Will and Determinism”

1. Explain the difference between scientific and “soft” determinism.
2. What is the one miracle that would happen in a predeterministic universe?
3. Explain the difference between predestination and fatalism. How does the short characterization of the doctrine of fatalism in this chapter differ from the lexical definition of “fatalism”?
4. If our choices are not due to chance, reason, or causes, what is the nature of a free decision? If someone freely chooses, then would it fol-

low there could be *no* basis for the decision because any basis would limit the freedom of the choice?

5. Are probabilistic or “chance” predictions simply approximations of deterministic predictions? *I.e.*, are chance outcomes a result of our inability to accurately observe and measure the initial conditions of an event?

Philosophical Ethics

Historically, the ethics of peoples has been based on religion. Not surprisingly, ethics differ among persons and places, in part, because different cultures have different religions.

If there were to be a philosophical basis for how we ought to lead our lives and seek a good life, then this basis probably cannot be founded on religious tenets of God’s existence. As we have seen, both *à priori* and *à posteriori* proofs for God’s existence are not philosophically well developed enough to be reliable as a foundation for further inferences.

Thus, our task in this part of our study is to see to what extent we can base ethical principles on reason alone. Toward this end, it is important to mention that if scientific determinism were true and psychology were a science with the potential of accurate prediction, it’s quite possible the whole enterprise of ethics would be moot, since with no free will, we could not recommend or freely decide upon alternative courses of decision or action.

What follows is a very brief summary of some of the philosophical positions in the free will-determinism controversy. These doctrines are introduced here as points of reference for insight into the variety of ethical perspectives expressed in this part of the text.

Short Glossary of Terms

determinism (hard or scientific) is the philosophical view that all events (including mental events) have a cause. In other words, all states of affairs, both physical and mental, are conditioned by their causes and are describable by scientific law.

Implications: In a deterministic universe, there are no free will, no miracles, and no chance events. Sometimes mental events or "choices" are considered epiphenomena. Some determinists argue that a special sense of "free choice" is compatible with causal determinism (*qv.*, "soft" determinism below). The classic view of determinism was expressed by Laplace. Given sufficient knowledge of every particle in the universe, he believed any future event or past event could be exactly calculated.

If we imagine an intellect which at any given moment knew all the forces that animate Nature and the mutual positions of the beings that comprise it—if this intellect were vast enough to submit its data to analysis—could condense into a single formula the movement of the greatest bodies of the universe and that of the lightest atom. For such an intellect nothing could be uncertain and the future just like the past would be present before its eyes.¹

Compatibilism or *soft determinism* is the philosophical view that all physical events are caused, but some mental processes might not be caused. On this view, choices only involve mental processes and have no actual effect in the external world—a doctrine often espoused by Stoics.

Implications: Consider why one sees a movie twice or watches an instant replay on TV. We do not do so in the hope for a different outcome, but we do so as a result of interest in the event and the active perception of it. Consider also the Stoic doctrine that we should distinguish those things in our control from those outside of our control and be concerned only with those things in our control. On this view, what we can control is not what happens in the external world but how we think about what happens in the external world. Our "choices" are often restricted to "willing the next moment in spite of its inevitability" or simply willing to "let it be."

Predeterminism is the philosophical and theological view that combines God with determinism. On this doctrine events throughout eternity have been foreordained by some supernatural power in a causal sequence.

Implications: If world-events are predetermined, there are no free will, no miracles, and no chance events. The metaphor of God constructing and winding up a clock (the universe) and letting it run until the end of time is often used. Presumably, on some accounts, God could step in and adjust the clock and so a miracle (a violation of natural law) would occur. However, strictly speaking, the admission of the occurrence of miracles in a predeterministic universe would be inconsistent belief.

1. Pierre-Simon Laplace. *Philosophical Essays on Probability*. New York: Springer Verlag, 1995.

Fatalism is the philosophical and sometimes theological doctrine that specific events are fixed in advance (either by God or by some unknown means) although there might be some free play in minor events.

Implications: Fatalism does not presuppose causality, but it is compatible with choice with respect to some events and is compatible with the existence of miracles. The idea is that major events such as birth, death, significant feats, and so forth will happen regardless of causes or chance. Some philosophical fatalists believe all events are fated—such a view is consistent with predestination without God’s foreknowledge. Hence, on this view, “what will be, will be, and there is nothing we can do about it.”

Assume, for example, by means of some kind of revelation I were to learn that I will die from burns at 10:02 AM in the local Mercy Hospital on Saturday morning. On the one hand, suppose as soon as I learn this, I get in my car to get to the airport to get as far away as possible, but on the way to the airport, my car is hit by a tanker and I suffer intense heat. After being transported to the hospital, I linger on until Saturday and then die at the appointed time. On the other hand, suppose I did not take the risk of traveling to the airport and instead go home and intend to stay under the bed until Sunday. Unknown to me, however, there is a wiring fault in the house, and the house catches fire and so on. I would have choices in such a situation, but the fated event is going to occur anyway. So-called “self-fulfilling prophecies” might be incompatible with fatalism the final outcomes are not necessarily inconsistent.

Predestination is the theological doctrine that all events are made to happen by God and not by causality in nature. In a sense, the world is being continuously created, and each moment is a miracle and only coincidentally compatible with what would be the “laws of nature.”

Implications: Many persons who hold this doctrine believe that predestination is compatible with free will in the sense that God knows in advance what will happen, but we freely choose and, from our point of view, just happen to choose in accordance with God’s plan. Consider, for example, the fact that our best friend often seems to know how we will decide a difficult issue before we ourselves actually make the choice. Although it is sometimes said that under predestination all events are “caused” to happen by God, this sense of “cause” is not the normal sense of an “efficient cause.” Instead, God foreordains or preordains the occurrence of events.

Søren Kierkegaard, Journals, 1837

“ It is so impossible for the world to exist without God that if God could *forget it* it would instantly cease to be. ”

Indeterminism is the philosophical doctrine that denies determinism is true. More specifically, not all events (either mental or physical) are determined by past events. There is a certain amount of free play between events, possibly due to chance, free choice, or chaos. Usually, the indeterminist believes some events are caused and some events are not caused, but only the latter belief is essential to indeterminism.

Implications: Hence, indeterminism allows for such events as free will, miracles, laws of nature, causality, chance, and chaos.

Chance (à priori) is the philosophical view that the probability of a future occurrence can be calculated from the principles of mathematics. For example a coin toss results in an equal chance of resulting in a heads or tails. Obviously, such a toss could be made only by an ideal or imaginary coin having no width (so that it would be impossible to land on its side) and having no distinguishing head or tail which might alter the center of gravity of the coin.

Chance (à posteriori) is the philosophical view that the probability of a future occurrence can be calculated from past observations of previous similar occurrences. The *à posteriori* view of chance is wrapped up the intractable problem of induction. For example, we would base the prediction of a coin toss on data derived from past coin tosses of the same coin and coin-tossing mechanism.

Implications: The notion of chance is not necessarily incompatible with determinism since it might be that the lack of the knowledge of the exact initial conditions results in an inexact and unpredictable consequence. In this sense, the outcome can not be known because of our ignorance either of the exact causes of a phenomenon or of the exact measurements of the event. For example, if one *did* know the exact shape, mass, geometry, center of gravity of a coin, and the exact amount and direction of force applied, the relative humidity, wind velocity, and so forth, according to the determinist, an exact prediction of heads or tails could be made.

Free will is the philosophical and theological doctrine that some of our choices are uncaused and effective. Free will results from the absence of

causes, conditions, or other necessary determinations of choice or behavior. The usual definition of this term in philosophy is not affirmative but negative.

Implications: Note that so-called spontaneous people are persons who do not necessarily exercise free will. Their behavior is often seen to be prompted by proximate causes. In the view of most philosophers, moral responsibility does seem to require some sort of practical freedom of the will. Often, “free will” is translated to mean “could have done otherwise,” but the word “free” is notoriously difficult to define.

Topics Worth Investigating

1. What are the implications of the unification of the sciences for the possibility of a theory of ethics? Is political science reducible to psychology, psychology reducible to biology, biology reducible to biochemistry, and chemistry reducible to physics? If so, then would all human achievements ultimately be just patterns of matter and motion?
2. Carefully clarify the differences between the doctrine of fatalism and the doctrine of determinism. Show which view admits of the most ambiguity.
3. If psychology were to be an exact science and specific human acts could be accurately predicted, could a prediction be accurate if the person about to act were to become aware of the prediction prior to the act itself? Does the fact that a prediction can be known in advance disprove the possibility of predicting accurately or is that fact just one more antecedent condition? Thoroughly explain your view.

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