

Is Human Freedom Conditional?

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The philosophical concept of human freedom is a discussion mired in controversy and mystery, viewed as it is from both religious and scientific perspectives.

Genetic and neurobiological research has shown our nature and behaviour to be governed by our brain processes and genetics. Psychologists and sociologists view our actions as somewhat mechanical, although done for real reasons of which we are unaware and which go beyond our conscious control.^[1] The lack of scientific consensus as to whether human freedom results from nature or nurture encapsulates the philosophical concept of determinism, which reveals that both determine human behaviour.^[2]

To this end, many philosophers contend that freedom only exists in our minds;^[3] similarly, behaviourists argue, our actions are not free, but are rather guided by free will.^[4] This argument holds that our actions are influenced by the exposure of our reasoning and decision-making abilities to antecedent events and natural laws involving our desires, intentions, choices, emotions, past experiences, etc. (^{[5];[6]}) Frederick (2013) questioned the notion of determinism in the sense that, in an unfamiliar situation, a person's actions are less likely to stem from their inability to learn from past events and habits (ibid). The undetermined or unconscious actions in this instance result from matters of pure chance, yet cannot be considered free as they are beyond the person's direct control.^[7] The same holds true for sanity, which is a necessary condition for a controlled, free action, the lack of which deprives a person of any personal competence to question their ability to be responsible to society for their actions (ibid). Even so, free will can still be threatened by ourselves, e.g., our free choice-making or freedom to change a course of action, or by others which might involve brainwashing, hypnosis, or other manipulation.^[8]

The religious grounding is more compelling if humans are viewed as God's creatures which makes them dependent on God, thus precluding the possibility of freedom. To illustrate, the belief in God and an afterlife holds the human morally responsible to Him for their actions, forbidding them from any wrongdoing, whereas a lack of belief in God and ignorance of

moral responsibility allows for absolute human freedom.^[9] Yet the theistic viewpoint might also acknowledge the existence of absolute freedom if God is seen as humankind's servant when He answers human prayers. There is also evidence that God might control our decision- and choice-making if natural laws are conceived of as God's interference.^[10]

This leads us to conclude that freedom exists yet to a varying extent. However, the existence of freedom has been negated in so many ways that it leaves the human freedom debate open. While we lean towards the belief that there is an internal source of decision-making that guides our behaviour and tend to ignore the influence of external (in a political and social sense) and internal (in a psychological sense) forces^[11], no matter how attractive such a belief might be, it remains an illusion. Or is it our ignorance of the Divine will that makes us feel free?

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