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Freewill vs Determinism

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By Saul McLeod, updated 2019

The free will vs determinism debate revolves around the extent to which our behavior is the result of forces over which we have no control or whether people are able to decide for themselves whether to act or behave in a certain way.

Determinism

The determinist approach proposes that all behavior has a cause and is thus predictable. Free will is an illusion, and our behaviour is governed by internal or external forces over which we have no control.

External Determinism

External (environmental) determinism see the cause of behavior as being outside the individual, such as parental influence, the media, or school. Approaches which adopt this position include behaviorism and social learning theory.

For example, Bandura (1961) showed that children become aggressive through observation and imitation of their violent parents.

Internal Determinism

The other main supporters of determinism are those who adopt a biological perspective. However for them it is internal, not external, forces that are the determining factor. According to sociobiology evolution governs the behavior of a species and genetic inheritance that of each individual within it. For example Bowlby (1969) states a child has an innate (i.e. inborn) need to attach to one main attachment figure (i.e. monotropy).

Personality traits like extraversion or neuroticism, and the behavior associated with them, are triggered by neurological and hormonal processes within the body. There is no need for the concept of an autonomous human being. Ultimately this view sees us as no more than biological machines and even consciousness itself is interpreted as a level of arousal in the nervous system.

Freud also viewed behavior being controlled from inside the individual, in the form of

unconscious motivation or childhood events, known as psychic determinism.

There are different levels of determinism

Hard determinism sees free will as an illusion and believes that every event and action has a cause.

Behaviorists are strong believers in hard determinism. Their most forthright and articulate spokesman has been B. F. Skinner. Concepts like “free will” and “motivation” are dismissed as illusions that disguise the real causes of human behavior.

In Skinner’s scheme of things the person who commits a crime has no real choice. (S)he is propelled in this direction by environmental circumstances and a personal history, which makes breaking the law natural and inevitable.

For the law-abiding, an accumulation of reinforcers has the opposite effect. Having been rewarded for following rules in the past the individual does so in the future. There is no moral evaluation or even mental calculation involved. All behavior is under stimulus control.

Soft determinism represents a middle ground, people do have a choice, but that choice is constrained by external or internal factors.

For example, being poor doesn’t make you steal, but it may make you more likely to take that route through desperation.

Soft determinism suggests that some behaviours are more constrained than others and that there is an element of free will in all behavior.

However, a problem with determinism is that it is inconsistent with society's ideas of responsibility and self control that form the basis of our moral and legal obligations.

An additional limitation concerns the facts that psychologists cannot predict a person's behavior with 100% accuracy due to the complex interaction of variables which can influence behavior.

Freewill

Free will is the idea that we are able to have some choice in how we act and assumes that we are free to choose our behavior, in other words we are self determined.

For example, people can make a free choice as to whether to commit a crime or not (unless they are a child or they are insane). This does not mean that behavior is random, but we are free from the causal influences of past events. According to freewill a person is responsible for their own actions.

One of the main assumptions of the humanistic approach is that humans have free will; not all behavior is determined. Personal agency is the humanistic term for the exercise of free will. Personal agency refers to the choices we make in life, the paths we go down and their consequences.

For humanistic psychologists such as Maslow (1943) and Rogers (1951) freedom is not only possible but also necessary if we are to become fully functional human beings. Both see self-actualisation as a unique human need and form of motivation setting us apart from all other species. There is thus a line to be drawn between the natural and the social sciences.

To take a simple example, when two chemicals react there is no sense in imagining that they could behave in any other way than the way they do. However when two people come together they could agree, fall out, come to a compromise, start a fight and so on. The permutations are endless and in order to understand their behavior we would need to understand what each party to the relationship chooses to do.

Ranged against the deterministic psychologies of those who believe that what "is" is inevitable are therefore those who believe that human beings have the ability to control their own destinies. However there is also an intermediate position that goes back to the psychoanalytic psychology of Sigmund Freud.

At first sight Freud seems to be a supporter of determinism in that he argued that our actions and our thoughts are controlled by the unconscious. However the very goal of therapy was to help the patient overcome that force. Indeed without the belief that people can change therapy itself makes no sense.

This insight has been taken up by several neo-Freudians. One of the most influential has been Erich Fromm (1941). In "Fear of Freedom" he argues that all of us have the potential to control our own lives but that many of us are too afraid to do so.

As a result we give up our freedom and allow our lives to be governed by circumstance, other people, political ideology or irrational feelings. However determinism is not inevitable and in the very choice we all have to do good or evil Fromm sees the essence of human freedom.

Critical Evaluation

Psychologists who take the free will view suggest that determinism removes freedom and dignity, and devalues human behavior. By creating general laws of behavior, deterministic psychology underestimates the uniqueness of human beings and their freedom to choose their

own destiny.

There are important implications for taking either side in this debate. Deterministic explanations for behavior reduce individual responsibility. A person arrested for a violent attack for example might plead that they were not responsible for their behavior – it was due to their upbringing, a bang on the head they received earlier in life, recent relationship stresses, or a psychiatric problem. In other words, their behavior was determined.

The deterministic approach also has important implications for psychology as a science. Scientists are interested in discovering laws which can then be used to predict events. This is very easy to see in physics, chemistry and biology. As a science, psychology attempts the same thing – to develop laws, but this time to predict behavior. If we argue against determinism, we are in effect rejecting the scientific approach to explaining behavior

Mental illnesses appear to undermine the concept of freewill. For example, individuals with OCD lose control of their thoughts and actions and people with depression lose control over their emotions.

Clearly, a pure deterministic or free will approach does not seem appropriate when studying human behavior. Most psychologists use the concept of free will to express the idea that behavior is not a passive reaction to forces, but that individuals actively respond to internal and external forces.

The term *soft determinism* is often used to describe this position, whereby people do have a choice, but their behavior is always subject to some form of biological or environmental pressure.

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