

Question and answer from Ask A Philosopher website (Sheffield University, UK)

<http://www.shef.ac.uk/~ptpdlp/questions/feedback/feedback.html>

Curtis asked:

How is your life shaped? Is it destiny, laid out for you? Does it come from within (what you make of it)? Or is it shaped by your surroundings?

You ask a very interesting question. The question is known in philosophy as the debate between free will and determinism. I will now attempt to answer your question by explaining these terms and looking at the ideas of some philosophers and psychologists who have voiced their views on this issue.

Free will

This is the belief that human beings are free to determine their actions. The future is not pre-determined. Human beings (well, at least some of them) have the capacity to consciously control their actions. As such, they are responsible for the choices they make and they perform. An extreme view would be one that stated that human beings have an absolute freedom to make choices and act on them. The French philosopher Jean Paul Sartre held a similar position to this. He maintained that humans are "condemned" to be free. In other words, humans have an absolute freedom to determine their actions (or at least their attitudes) regardless of the situation they find themselves in.

Other 20th Century existentialist thinkers have held similar attitudes (notably Victor Frankl — a survivor of the Nazi Holocaust). An example might illustrate these ideas more clearly. Even in the middle of immense suffering and cruelty, such as that experienced in a Nazi concentration camp, the individual is still free, if not to physically escape from their environment, but to at least change her attitude towards her predicament. *She is still capable of making a choice.*

It should be clear from this example why people who subscribe to this position often view freedom as a burden. If we are totally free in the way they suggest, then it follows that we are ultimately responsible for the situations we find ourselves in. To blame others for our situation is "bad faith" — it is a denial of our true, free, human nature.

Determinism

The view that opposes free will is known as determinism. In its extreme form it claims that free will is impossible. When we humans feel that we are acting freely, it is merely an illusion. Everything that has happened in the past, everything that is happening now, and everything that will happen in the future was/is always destined to happen in the way it did/will. You were always going to send your question to this website. I was always going to answer it in the way I am and, hopefully, you were always going to read and understand the answer.

The arguments for determinism are plentiful and I will concentrate on a few of the major ones here.

One very influential form of determinism, at least until the early 20th Century, finds its origins in the science of Isaac Newton and is known as causal or physical determinism. The argument is based on the view of the world presented by science. The scientific worldview is one based on causal relationships governed by universal (i.e. applicable to all things) laws. That is, science views the world in terms of cause, effect and laws.

For example, I drop my dinner plate on the kitchen floor. The force with which the plate hits the ground *causes* the plate to break into 3 pieces. In addition to causing the plate to break, the contact between the plate and the floor causes a vibration of air particles that *causes* a crashing sound to be registered on some form of detector. Because these causes are governed by universal laws (in this case, Newton's laws of motion and the law of conservation of energy), the consequences are predictable. If I knew the height from which the plate was dropped, the material from which the plate and floor were made, the precise angle of the plate as it was dropped etc, I should, in theory, be able to predict how many pieces the plate would break into and the precise character of the sound produced.

Using this view of causation, one version of causal determinism argues that if we knew every physical fact about one particular moment in time, we should be able to predict the future. We could calculate the effects of this moment on the next, and of that next moment on the one after and so on to infinity. Such a view was proposed by the French thinker Pierre Simon Laplace (1749-1827) in 1814. And because human beings are part of the physical world (we are made ultimately of particles which obey certain laws), then our actions are entirely determined in advance.

This view was challenged, though not entirely refuted, by the discoveries of quantum physics in the early 20th Century that suggested that events at the microscopic level are not governed by the same laws as those that apply to larger objects.

Psychology has also made its contribution to this debate. Sigmund Freud argued for a belief described now as *psychic determinism*. At the risk of oversimplification, he claimed that human actions were determined by an unconscious drive for sex and an unconscious drive for aggression, themselves determined, via evolutionary processes, by basic life and death instincts. Humans cannot freely control their actions as their drives influence and, in some cases, override their conscious wishes.

The famous psychologist, B F Skinner, writing in the 20th Century, subscribed to what is known as *environmental determinism*. All human actions are determined by the particular features of the environment in which the human operates. Again, at the risk of oversimplification, Skinner demonstrated through extensive research (mainly on non-human animals) that if the environment rewards an organism for performing a particular action, then that organism is more likely to perform that action again in the future — regardless of any conscious thought processes which the organism experiences.

Determinism raises many interesting issues. One that I find particularly intriguing is its impact on moral philosophy. If all a person's actions are determined in advance then that person is surely not responsible for any action she performs. Why punish a wrongdoer if she is not responsible? Or was it always pre-determined that she would be punished? And so on...