

## GENERAL ARTICLE

## The problem of free-will *versus* determinism

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*But how can I, an amateur, be expected to settle a question which the philosophers have not yet ceased to argue?*

W. Somerset Maugham. *The Summing up*.

The word versus is used here in contrasting Free-will with Determinism because they appear, at first sight, to be incompatible or contradictory; philosopher Gilbert Ryle termed it a 'dilemma', a description which I agree with and which inevitably prompts me to avoid an affirmative conclusion for the reality of Free-Will or of Determinism. In this discussion, I merely present the arguments on both sides of the divide. It is not a technical discussion of the psychological processes of Free-Will or Determinism; nor am I competent to discuss the Buddha's views on this debate.

This has been a perennial debate and views from many disciplines have been brought to bear upon it: Moral philosophy in its consideration of ethics and ethical responsibility, psychology in its concern with the structure and functioning of the mind, religions in their influence on human behaviour and, in a special sense that is related to this topic, the determinant effect of one's *karma*, and finally the biological sciences with recent discoveries on the physical basis of mind.

Historically, there has been a progressive demolition of Man's anthropocentricity and egocentricity through which he has regarded himself as '*The Lord of all He surveys*'. Copernicus showed us that we were not at the centre of the universe but a mere speck of dust in outer space; Charles Darwin then gave us evidence that Man was merely the latest product of millions of years of evolutionary events that operated through Natural Selection, that resulted in diverse species he bears kinship with, sometimes very closely, such as apes; Sigmund Freud then discovered that we, who think that we are in

possession of a conscious mind and an autonomous "I", are not even in total control of ourselves. Karl Marx then argued that we are the mere victims of economic forces. We next had Richard Dawkins telling us that all living things, including humans, are just tools for the ulterior purpose of their genes to use them as replicator-vehicles for themselves. By implication, all those sublime human emotions of love, then of marriage and begetting lovable offspring are not primarily from the exercise of our free-will but through the inexorable strategy of *The Selfish Gene* (Dawkins, 1976) to take us, their carriers, on a grand ride, solely for their propagation; so he means that we have been tricked. And the final *coup de grace* was the work of Andrew Newberg *et al.* (2001) that showed that what we consider as "I", the inner fibre of our being, doesn't really exist and that it is an artifact created by our normal brain. In the Sri Lankan *Physiological Society's* 2006 *A. C. E. Koch Memorial Lecture* it was pointed out (Arseculeratne, 2006) that the construction of the delusion of "I" by our normal brain as discovered by Newberg *et al.* (2001), is a pre-requisite, a necessary cause, for the propagation of *The Selfish Gene* of Richard Dawkins.

Before we proceed to discuss this problem, some definitions are necessary to establish our base lines for this debate.

*Free-will* is the state of mind which enables us to choose a particular course of action while other courses of action are available to us; we claim to be 'free' to choose whatever course of action we follow. *Determinism* claims, on the other hand, that we have no *free-will* of this sort and that our actions have been 'determined' by a variety of causes. Some classical European scholars regarded Determinism as relevant to two situations; Roy Bhaskar (1983) recorded that Thomas Hobbes (1588 – 1679)

“*vigorously espoused a materialistic form...*”. Laplace considered it in relation to the materialistic universe of Newton, while David Hume, the Scottish philosopher, considered causality of events, and Immanuel Kant considered it “*a necessary truth*”. Incidentally, it is interesting that the materialistic viewpoint was prevalent at the time when modern science itself was growing, and in a materialistic phase that invoked deterministic causality in the behaviour of material things. The later arrival of Quantum Theory changed that, as mentioned again later. John Stuart Mill (1806 – 1873) regarded *Determinism* as the “*...most comprehensive Law of Nature*”. On the other hand the term ‘*indeterminism*’ has been used (see Healey 1983) in contrast to *Determinism*: “Epicurus (341 – 270 BC)... believed that indeterminism helps to explain how men have free will, and the relation between free will and indeterminism has continued controversial ever since...Renouvier (1815 – 1903) and Peirce (1839 – 1914) presented arguments for indeterminism, on psychological and methodological grounds respectively, and William James (1842 – 1910) thought it remained plausible”.

The discussion of Free-Will versus Determinism is important for at least two reasons. It is a central concern of philosophy, psychology, biology and religion as explained earlier, but its immediate and over-riding importance is that it poses the fundamental question of ethical responsibility in our social interactions. If we have Free-Will in our actions, then we bear total responsibility for them and their consequences. If our actions are pre-determined, how can we as individuals be held responsible for the consequences of our actions when some other agency determined that we acted as we did? Nazis have argued that they murdered six million Jews because their actions were so determined or that they were compelled to do so through the malignant force of Hitler, of course ignoring their own psychopathological tendencies to succumb to Hitler; and it can then be argued that their psychopathology was genetically determined, or as the title of the book by Avrum Stroll worded it *Did my genes make me do it? and other philosophical dilemmas*. The enormity of the consideration of ethical responsibility is obvious. As Arthur Koestler in *Janus* (1979) put it, it involves:

“*...the legal concept of diminished responsibility, and in the subjective feeling of compulsion...*” or as Ayer (1965) wrote: “*It seems that if we are to retain this idea of moral responsibility, we must either show that men can be held responsible for actions which they do not do freely, or else find some way of reconciling determinism with the freedom of the will*”.

The arguments on both sides can now be considered. For the case of Free-Will, Searle (1984) has discussed some hypothetical situations which, with our own experiences of deciding to do this or that, suggest that we have some degree of autonomy through which the decision to do this or that originated entirely from our Free-Will. On the other hand, take the instance that was discussed in our first paper on the Indian palm leaf horoscopes in *The Sri Lanka Journal of the Humanities* (Arseculeratne, 1998/1999) – that of an individual who decided that he would study medicine. He had exposure to other disciplines in school, such as the other biological sciences, the hard sciences such as physics, chemistry or even engineering or something else such as art. Was his choice of medicine determined amongst those many alternatives, through his own Free-Will? But it was argued that it was not. Was he, on the other hand, stimulated and conditioned by the examples of his relatives and friends who were successful doctors? Had he a fondness for biological experimentation or for science in the first place, meaning that he had some flair or talent for it, originating in some genetic cause? Was he thereby genetically conditioned in his choice of medicine? If so, that is Determinism. This argument is not mere semantics but it should be seriously considered because this person’s ancient Indian palm leaf horoscope stated clearly, but centuries earlier, that he would do medicine and earn two higher degrees that he did subsequently acquire. In the ultimate sense, what is thought of as our Free-Will, could therefore be subject to a very fundamental consideration – the principle of causality. This is indeed a fundamental philosophical debate; are mental states, like physical states, subject to the laws of Causality? I do not believe that modern science, modern and traditional philosophy or even psychology could yet resolve the enigma of these palm leaf horoscopes.

Conditioning is a basic biological fact of life. Pavlov easily conditioned his famous dog to salivate at the sight of food. J. B. Watson, the Behaviourist guru of Johns Hopkins, is quoted to have said:

“*Give me a dozen healthy infants and I’ll guarantee to take any one at random and train him to become any type of specialist I might select – doctor, lawyer, or even beggarman and thief, regardless of his talents, penchants, tendencies and abilities*”.

B. F. Skinner (1972) even argued that Man’s future has to be based on more than his sense of mythical dignity and that his behaviour has to be conditioned if he is to have his planet and himself upon it, survive. This means that Skinner had some justification for titling his book

*Beyond Freedom and Dignity*. What Skinner meant was that our apparent freedom and our mythical dignity as humans are too untrustworthy for our survival. What we need if we are to survive is, he proposed, a re-designing of our behaviour through conditioning. The *TIME* (1971, Sept. 20) review of his book was titled: Skinner's *Utopia: Panacea or Path to Hell?*

To digress briefly, in my teaching of immunology to medical students, I, unconventionally, draw some parallels between mind and the immune system. Basically, there is of course memory. Both show the capacity to be conditioned. Both can acquire Tolerance, the immune system to foreign agents and the mind to crazy ideas, to accept them and not to react to them. Conditioning and Tolerance operate not only in our immune responses but they are also the bases of our behaviour in politics, and in organized religion. Tolerance can break down in both the immune system and in the mind, resulting in disease and in internecine, interpersonal and international strife, respectively.

Some illustrations of events, at least the major ones in our lives, might have some determinant cause, can be considered.

There are the amazing ancient Indian palm leaf horoscopes that are claimed to have been written hundreds or even a thousand years ago, by sages in ancient India. These have been discussed in two research papers (Arseculeratne, 1998/1999 and Arseculeratne & Sambandan, 2001/2002). The written statements in these documents are amazingly accurate in describing the events in the lives of contemporary people. It is immaterial to the purpose of this discussion whether these writings demonstrated precognition by the sages who wrote them or some other mechanism through which the future events were accurately foretold. It seems, however, that Determinism in the unfolding of events in the subject's life was operating. More examples of the possible operation of deterministic causality, from well-documented researches on the paranormal, have been documented in *The encyclopedia of the world's greatest unsolved mysteries*, by John & Anne Spencer (1995); for example, the 'automatic' performances of classical piano music by Rosemary Brown. According to parapsychologists, she was coerced to play the music of Beethoven, Chopin and Mozart, by these composers who died so long ago. She did not play that remarkable music through her own Free-Will; she had not learnt to play classical music on the piano. Then there is the case of a bus-traveller who related his story to me; he avoided a bus that he could have entered and crashed with, but

stayed to take the next bus home, safely. Brian Inglis termed such instances, interventions of *The Unknown Guest*; did these interventions determine my friend's avoiding of the first bus, that seemed to him and to me, to have occurred through his own Free-Will? There are so many documentations of psychic interactions between, for example, psychic sensitives and experimenters, who influenced each other's minds.

This view that we have no Free-Will must be revolting. Gilbert Ryle's term '*Fatalism*' would provoke some to rebel against the notion of *Determinism*. Are we just Creatures of Circumstance? Aren't we more than mere programmed robots? Or are we as much as the fundamental particles of matter that we are composed of, that we do not behave arbitrarily or autonomously but have deterministic behaviour as implied in Einstein's famous statement, *God does not play dice with the universe?* The deterministic world of atoms and fundamental particles in classical physics was upset by the arrival of Quantum Theory and it is said that Einstein was disturbed by this development. However, we like to believe that we can act through our own Free-Will; so did the late Professor Ian Stevenson with whom I corresponded on the ancient Indian palm leaf horoscopes. At first, after reading our first paper (Arseculeratne, 1998/1999) on these documents, he suggested a confirmatory test of their authenticity, that we did subsequently as reported in Arseculeratne & Sambandan (2001/2002). Stevenson had told me earlier that he will be disappointed if the test proved positive, that these documents were authentic and valid, because, he said, he was a firm believer in Free-Will. The palm documents however clearly indicated Determinism. When I informed him that the documents were found to be authentic and valid, he replied that he is now old, and requested that I do not write to him again about these horoscopes, lest, I believe, he would have been disillusioned in his firm belief in the reality of Free-Will.

This controversy on Free-Will and Determinism has led to what Searle (1984) termed a compromise between them, *Compatibilism*; this view emphasises the comment I made in the introductory paragraph that this is a veritable dilemma that does not allow me, for one, to take a dogmatic stand on the validity of either *Free-Will* or *Determinism*. The term '*compatibilism*' suggests that within the larger framework of Determinism, there exists an area where Free-Will can operate; i.e. both states are compatible in co-existing. An illustrative example of Compatibilism, with Free-Will operating *within* Determinism, is the instance of a pack of playing cards, which Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan, the Indian

philosopher provided. The type and number of the cards are determined by the maker of the cards and the design of the game; that is Determinism. Yet the hand of cards distributed to the player can be played by him as he chooses; that is he has the Free-Will to play as he does - or so it would seem. However, in his play that he thinks is according to his Free-Will, he might be determined by his prior experience, the games of Bridge that he has read of in books, or even by the characteristics of his personality such as intelligence, aggressiveness or passivity that might be genetically determined; that is conditioning and Determinism. Arthur Koestler gave another example:

*“The rules of chess define the permissible moves, strategy determines the choice of the actual move. The problem of free will then boils down to the question of how such choices are made. The chess player’s choice may be called ‘free’ in the sense that it is not determined by the rules. But though his choice is free in the above sense, it is certainly not at random”.*

Searle’s question (1984) is topical:

*“Is it ever true to say of a human being that he could have done otherwise?..... Is all behaviour determined by such psychological compulsions?”*

Searle answers the second question negatively. If this debate is intractable to resolution, could at least the compromise of Compatibilism give us an intellectually satisfying solution, though Searle himself thought it was an inadequate solution to the problem. It would appear that the antagonism to the idea of Determinism arises, partly, from the confusion between the kinds of events that we are dealing with. Behind some major events of our lives, eg. marriage, profession, and offspring, some people might agree that there is perhaps some deterministic cause, whatever one calls it.

Alvin Toffler’s comment in his foreword to Prigogine & Stenger’s *Order out of Chaos*, provided another example of the co-existence of Free-Will and Determinism:

*“No end of interpreters attempted to reconcile determinism with free will. One ingenious view held that God indeed did determine the affairs of the universe, but with respect to the free-will of the individual, He never demanded a specific action. He merely preset the range of options available to the human decision-maker. Free will downstairs operated only within the limits of the menu determined upstairs”.*

There is a pitfall in arguments on causality:

*“It is maintained that everything we see in this world has a cause, and as you go back in the chain of causes further and further you must come to a first cause, and to that first cause you give the name of God... I may say that when I was a young man and was debating these questions very seriously in my mind, I for a long time accepted the argument of the First Cause, until one day, at the age of eighteen, I read John Stuart Mill’s autobiography, and I there found this sentence: ‘My father taught me that the question, “who made me?” cannot be answered, since it immediately suggests the further question, “Who made God?”’. That very simple sentence showed me, as I still think, the fallacy in the argument of the First cause”*, (Russell, 1985).

On the other hand, there may be scope for Free-Will as well in our interactions in society, if one considers the success of hypnosis, counseling, cognitive psychotherapy, courses in anger-management, and above all, of meditation, in the deconditioning of individuals.

Readers may be excused for concluding that while sitting on the fence separating *Free-Will* from *Determinism*, I have my feet dangling on the side of *Determinism*.

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