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Are We the Masters of Our Fate?

As human beings, we are confronted with good and evil actions on a daily basis. We find firefighters risking their lives to save innocents, peaceful protests turn bloody, people donating their hard-earned income to charity, etc. In each of these actions, an obvious question to ask is what leads people to act in the way they do. The answers to that question are, however, complex when carefully analyzed and may depend on our deeply held beliefs about the very nature of ourselves. In the paper, I will argue that human beings commit these evil or good actions out of a free will, hence inclining towards the idea of libertarianism being more plausible than determinism and compatibilism. The capacity of human beings to engage rationally between choices after deliberation and the moral responsibility that comes with it offer strong grounds to hold on to the libertarian view. For this purpose, various associated theories will be examined to argue for the plausibility of my view supported by scholarly arguments and information, as evidence to reinforce my claim.

Investigating moral responsibility for actions require an exploration of the main theories and arguments associated with determinism and free will. A key theory in this regard is that of libertarianism, which holds that all human beings have the capacity for free will and therefore free action by exercising that will. It opposes determinism which denies free will and holds that every action or event is determined by prior conditions or causes, as a result of which the outcome cannot be changed. It is easy to observe the conflict between the two theories, as the former sees not all events to be forcibly occurring due to causative conditions while the latter holds that actions cannot be free. The libertarian view revolves around the ability of the agent to decide or make a choice to do something other than what they did, thus, a free action. The existence of the capacity to reason and rationalize by a rational agent point towards the existence of something we call free will, which can only necessarily be exercised if we have the capability to reason. This occurs at two levels; the practical and the theoretical level. Theoretical reasoning occurs within our intellects and forms our will, whereas our practical reasoning determines what action we chose to do based on that will.

A ‘will’ refers to an individual's capacity or power to practically reason, deliberate, form practical judgments, decide or chose, create purpose or intentions, or to assess actions critically. Will itself is born out of our reason and rationality (Kane). As rational beings, our ability to reason (or will) has enabled us to freely perform our actions, allowing us to use our reason to determine the best course of action in any particular situation. A universe working on pre-determined events would thus render our capacity to reason as pointless.

On the other hand, the theory of determinism holds that there is no room for choice and decisions, as our lives' choices have been determined for us. Free will is incompatible with this idea and is only an illusion. The idea of determinism stems from causality holding that each event or action is the outcome of a cause, which is necessarily caused by another cause, eventually leading to the ‘prime mover' or the first cause. These causes have to be in accordance with natural laws. The laws of nature cannot be changed and thus the fate of mankind, as their past, is fixed and beyond control. This implies that if someone were to claim that if he had done such and such in the past, the outcome would have been different; implies that the laws of nature or the prevailing conditions would have been different, to allow the alternative event to happen.

Nevertheless, determinism has had various variations in the form of soft determinism and compatibilism. This view holds that free will and determinism can be understood to be compatible while remaining logically consistent. The argument is that freedom can either be absent or present in situations, and one’s determined motives can indicate whether one is acting free. David Hume was of the view that free will and determinism are compatible because the actions of the people are determined by their contemporary motives and personal histories, and not solely by an autonomous ‘will’ that could have been anything. These motives could be a result of our strongest desires and lead us to make seemingly free choices. According to d’Holbach, the process of making a choice, in this case, is rather a complex illusion which hides a pre-determined causative process (4.3 Compatibilism). However, it can be inferred from the d’Holbach and Hume’s theories that they suggest only a restricted aspect of the real meaning behind a free choice and what it means to people. Both the soft and hard determinism is rejected by the libertarian or indeterminist view, since the latter strongly holds that some human actions exist in which freedom of choice and autonomy are possible. When human beings make a choice, they conventionally think of a process of examining multiple possibilities and then exercising deliberation that actively helps them will a choice. The action is much more than following our strongest desires. Thus, if an individual finds himself in the exact same situation, he or she may choose to act differently.

The case of the individual that finds himself in the exact same situation as before presents a good illustration to demonstrate the meaning, purpose and existence of free will. The libertarian view holds that if the same situation were to repeat for an individual, he would still be at autonomy to make a different choice even if he makes the same choice. Yet, it is possible for him to make the same choice because of prior experience of obtaining a desirable result out of making that choice. The determinist usually responds to this example by recounting how the individual’s cognition, emotions and perceptions work together with his past experiences leads him to project a certain goal and then strive towards it out of the necessity to achieve that goal. Moreover, these goals can be changed if other forces at play push us towards evaluating another outcome to be favorable and acting upon it. However, freedom of action is not necessarily the same as having a free will, rather, it has to do with the realization or prevention of a willed action. Therefore, for a prisoner who is restrained from visiting his home or a patient restrained from movement, not being able to act freely does not mean that the prisoner cannot be free to intend or try escaping or that the patient cannot try to move. Similarly, doing something morally irresponsible or illegal such as selling drugs will bring about consequences but does not mean that the drug dealer is not free to try and do so. Actions bring about reactions and consequences, yet these consequences do not restrict one from being able to try or intend that action. Therefore, a strong component of free will is intention. When individuals are faced with a choice, the various emotional and mental processes at play lead to the formation of an intent to either engage in an action or a non-action. Though past actions would encourage the individual to make a choice, they still cannot force him to make the same choice even if a severe punishment for making that choice were to exist, since consequences of a choice may interfere with an action but not the will behind an action.

The concept of ordained morality as held in determinism is incoherent. Firstly, because free will and moral responsibility are logically associated with each other. Denying any link between free will and moral responsibility would lead one to incoherence. There lies a clear distinction between causal responsibility and moral responsibility and free will has to do with the latter, while determinist arguments usually focus on the former. It is possible for someone to be held morally responsible for something despite not being responsible in the causal sense. It is possible for someone to be held morally responsible for a crime despite not being morally blamed for it as a consequence, and likewise being morally responsible for a good act despite not receiving acclaim for it. If this is true, then that also necessitates the existence of a free will, since no one can be hold morally responsible for their actions, good or evil, if they did not have free will. As an example, if Jack is forced to steal a car, the act of stealing makes Jack causally responsible for creating an adverse outcome for himself by landing into prison but that does not mean that Jack if morally responsible for committing the crime, since he did not do so out of his free will. Thus, moral responsibility and free-will are invariably connected. Secondly, the deterministic view refutes itself, because if everything is determined before-hand and free will is nothing more than an illusion, it also logically necessitates that the ones who make such a claim are already pre-determined to say so. Moreover, no belief could be held to be false or true, simply because of being a predetermined event.

In this regard, William James was of the view that indeterminism is a more rational view, which is based on the notion that a certain degree of freedom of choice exists. The argument against determinism was that no judgments of regret and approval could be possible since it does not fully capture the complete lived experience. Sartre further argues in this regard is that human beings, in fact, are condemned to be free that existence precedes essence, and ourselves, choices and actions also exist in a predetermined cosmic realm before birth. However, as we orient ourselves for the future, we carefully consider our choices, weight our options and apply our ability of rational deliberation in making a choice, which makes us free (4.4 Indeterminism and Libertarianism). It, therefore, alludes to our view that we are completely and uniquely responsible for the choices we make regarding our actions.

In conclusion, my personal experiences also incline me towards the existence of free will and supplement my philosophical leanings towards libertarianism. In my view, we tend to believe people through their actions more than their sayings. We often tend to believe in something that we actually do not, such as a husband who thinks he treats his wife well yet cheats on her. It is impossible to make deliberations on actions without an inborn conviction that our choices are up to us to make, in order to resolve our issues. Therefore, a deep-rooted conviction regarding free will exist owing to our capacities to rationally deliberate, even if we subscribe to the determinist view. Thus, anyone who may think free will is an illusion still acts in a way which indicates that making an alternate choice out of a set of choices was a real possibility.

# Works Cited

*4.3 Compatibilism*. [online source], n.d.

*4.4 Indeterminism and Libertarianism*. (Online Source), n.d.

Kane, Robert. *The Significance of Free Will*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1998.