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Do Humans Have Free Will?

Can we truly choose any course of action? Or are we limited in our choice, consciously or not? In this essay, I will attempt to answer the question, 'Do humans have unlimited free will?' by examining the impact of biology, past events, and social constraints on decision-making and the compatibility of free will and determinism.

First, let us define what free will is. In this paper, I will use the term 'free will' to refer to the ability of individuals to choose their course of action without obstructions (Omoregie 11). Unlimited free will, in its turn, will signify the ability to choose any course of action from possible ones.

Our choices are influenced by irrational feelings and impulses and by our biology, which we rarely, if ever, have complete control over. Some may use sexual orientation as an example: as it is determined by genetics, a gay man can not decide to become heterosexual (Balthazart 56). Our complex neurochemistry can also put us in a depressed state, taking away the desire to make any choices at all.

The question is, to what degree are our choices impacted by our biology? The proponents of biological determinism would say biology defines our decisions (Nietzsche 19). On the other hand, those supporting the compatibilist view of free will would argue that while biology impacts our choices, it does not predetermine them fully (McKenna 93). At the same time, biology does



impact what choices we are more likely to make. However, no psychological experiment would end with a homogenous result from 100% of its participants. And where there is variation, there are choices, and there is free will – to a certain extent, at least.

Now, let us examine the impact of past events on present-day choices. On a society-wide scale, past events – centuries of discriminatory policies, wars, etc. – can determine the range of choices available to an individual. However, that does not negate their ability to select from that range of options – i.e., exercise their free will.

What is more interesting is the impact of the individual's history on their choices in the future. For example, consider a person who experienced a traumatic event in their childhood. This event may determine how they react to certain stimuli or cause them to avoid certain places or people, consciously or not. Past events can also serve as a lesson consciously learned by the individual. Then, those lessons can be used for making their future actions.

But is his personal history a determinant in decision-making? And does it make free will impossible? Let us examine this in reverse. If past events play absolutely no role in an individual's choices, those choices would be random, without any reasoning behind them. This is not the case: we make choices (at least some of them) because of X, Y, or Z. We buy a certain brand of cookies because they remind us of home. In this case, the past events are the parents buying that brand for us when we were kids. So, past events do impact our choices. The question is, to what degree do past events influence our decision-making? Do they determine our choices to the extent that renders free will impossible?

In my opinion, the answer is no. That is because if past events determined humans' choices, every choice would be predictable. Yes, due to the number of past events, more and less



significant, predicting it would be extremely challenging. However, it would not be impossible. Then, social norms – i.e., what behavior and views are deemed acceptable or not by our peers – impact our lives. But to what degree do they impact our free will? If a woman showing her hair in public is deemed immoral, would this convention determine that all women will hide their hair under a headscarf? While some women will follow the convention, others will refuse to do so – and, perhaps, find a social group where it is not expected of them.

So, while social norms are, by definition, shared by most social group members, they're not shared by all. Murder is a highly ostracized behavior almost anywhere on Earth, but there are still people convicted for premeditated murder. This means that while social norms are a factor in decision-making, they do not determine a person's choice. Finally, there is the question of whether free will and determinism coexist. In other words, are they compatible or not?

The supporters of the incompatibility would argue that if an action is predetermined by any factor, it can not be considered an exercise of free will (Kane 219). Compatibilists would, in turn, argue that it is a false dilemma and that determinism does not matter in defining whether humans are capable of free will (McKenna 102). Some believe that you exercise your free will as long as another individual does not coerce you into making a certain choice (Meyer 36). Others have argued that an individual can choose what constraints to allow, which also constitutes free will (Dennett 206). I would argue that choices can be heavily influenced by factors out of our control (biology, history, social norms) and remain unpredictable. Therefore, a compatibilist view of free will is a more suitable one for discussing the concept of free will.

In conclusion, while biology, past events, and social norms can limit the range of choices available and make some choices more likely than others, they do not predetermine the outcome.



Ergo, humans are capable of free will; however, their choices can be influenced by external and internal factors.

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