

Free Will and Morality

*Can we people morally accountable
for their actions?*

Do we really have a free will?

Is Racism Morally Wrong?

- Is racism (as we saw in *Eyes on the Prize*) morally wrong?
 - If not, why did people oppose it?
- If racism *is* morally wrong, what can we say about the people who engaged in it?
 - Were *they* morally wrong for acting this way?
 - Can we hold them morally responsible for their actions?
 - Were they merely the products of their environments?

Moral Responsibility

- If our car breaks down, we might blame the manufacturer, but we don't blame the car.
 - We hold *people* morally accountable for their actions, not *cars*.
- We hold people morally accountable because we believe they had a *choice* in how they acted—unlike our car.
- We believe that to be morally responsible, you need to have a “*free will*.”
 - Which, we believe, we have and cars lack.

Free Will

- We make moral judgments about others, and ourselves ...
 - We say we/they are “good” or “bad,” or say “I shouldn’t have lied,” or “she should have kept her promise,” etc., ...
- ... only because we believe people have a free will.
- It seems obvious to each of us, much of the time, that we could have made other choices, that we could have acted in different ways.

Free Will vs. “Determinism”

- But *are* we really “free,” or is our behavior determined by factors outside our control?
- We tend to believe we have free will, yet, we tend to believe other things that seem incompatible with our having a free will.
- There are *many* arguments against free will.

So ...

- Do *you* have a free will?
- Are your actions under your control?
- You are all here, in class. *Could you* have not shown up here this morning (stayed in bed, or whatever)? Was this within your “power?”
- What do *you* think?

Arguments Against Free Will:
Causality

Causality

- We believe that every physical event is caused by previous physical event, according to the laws of nature.
 - We believe that nothing “just happens” without a cause.
- We believe that causes *necessitate* their effects.
 - If the cause happens, the effect cannot *not* happen.

Free Will?

- But our bodies are composed of the same physical particles as rocks and trees, and are bound by the same causal laws.
- So it seems that all our bodily activity must be necessitated by previous physical events, according to the laws of nature.
- That is, given what we believe about causality, we believe we could never have done anything other than what we did.

Physiological Argument for Determinism

- 1) Every physical event is caused by a previous physical event.
- 2) Causes necessitate their effects.
 - Given the occurrence of the cause, the effect couldn't *not* happen.
- 3) So, every physical event is necessitated by a prior physical event.
 - Including everything we do or say, which are all physical events.

Causal Determinism

- ***If nothing “just happens,”***
 - i.e., if all physical events are caused by previous physical events.
- ***And if causes “necessitate” their effects,***
 - i.e., given that the cause happens, the effect cannot *not* happen.
- ***Then all our behavior was necessitated by prior events,*** which were in turn necessitated by prior events, etc.
 - i.e., our behavior is determined by factors outside our control, and we could *never* have acted any other way.

Arguments Against Free Will:
An Objection

D' Holbach

- “... it will perhaps be insisted ... that if it be proposed to any one, to move or not to move his hand, ... he evidently appears to be the master of choosing; from which it is concluded that evidence has been offered of free agency.”
- That is, I can prove my free will simply by moving my hand, or my lifting my little finger!

“Proof”



“Choice does not prove freedom.”

- *“ ...man in performing some action which he is resolved on doing, does not by any means prove his free agency; the very desire ... becomes a necessary motive, which decided his will either for the one or for the other of these actions.” [D’ Holbach]*
- That is, my act might have been caused by my “motives” or “desires,” but these were themselves caused by factors outside my control.

Acts Done “On Purpose”

- D’ Holbach recognize that sometime our actions are done because of our “choices,”
 - i.e., sometimes we do things because we want or *desire* to do them, rather than do them *accidentally*.
- But he argues that these desires are *themselves* caused by factors beyond our control.
- So, even things we do “because we wanted to” are not examples of true free will.

Arguments Against Free Will:
Deliberation

Deliberate Choices

- If any action is free, it is when we carefully deliberate what to do.
 - When we deliberate, we weigh the “pros” and “cons” of various options.
 - And then we “choose” the option that has the most “pros.”
 - So acting deliberately or “on purpose” is acting in a way (we believe) will best achieve what we “really want.”

Understanding Deliberation

- Our choices are determined by our values, i.e., by our *desires, wants, motivations*, etc.
- Some of our values may be determined by “deeper” values, ones that we already have.
 - i.e., I may “choose” to value one thing because I already value something else.
- But, it seems, our deepest or “ultimate” values are not freely chosen, but rather simply discovered.

Chosen or Discovered?

Can we *choose* our “wants?”

- Deliberate choice (choosing something on the basis of deliberation) *presupposes* that you already have wants and desires.
- This means that in order to *choose* your “wants,” you must do so on the basis of “wants” you already have.
- Unless this goes on *to infinity*, your “deepest” wants must be *discovered*, not chosen.
- But if so, then all of our choices are the result of (our deepest) “wants,” which we didn’t chose.

“Choice does not prove freedom.”

- If “choosing” to do something (doing it “on purpose”) presupposes that you already have “wants” or “values,” ...
- Then our “deepest” wants cannot be *chosen*, because “choosing” them would imply the existence of still “deeper” wants or values.
- So, even when we do something because “we choose to,” our choices are determined by (deep) values that we did not choose.

Psychological Argument for Determinism

- 1) In every voluntary act, we always act in accordance with our deepest values, as we understand those values at the time of acting.
- 2) We have no control over our deepest values; i.e., they are caused by factors beyond our control.
- 3) So, even our voluntary acts are caused by factors that are beyond our control.

Free?

- *Our beliefs about causality* seem inconsistent with our belief that we could have chosen otherwise.
- *Our understanding of choice* (of deliberation) suggests that we have no control over our deepest desires or motivations.
- In both cases, things we already believe seem inconsistent with a belief in free will.

But ...

- Can I actually *believe* that I have no free will?
 - I can perhaps believe that *you* have no free will, but can I believe that *I* have no free will?
 - Isn't belief itself a kind of choice?
- If I believed I had no free will, how would that affect how I might act?
- Can I even understand what it would mean to *be* without choosing?

Existentialism

Jean-Paul Sartre

“You are free.

Choose.

That is to say, invent.”

According to Sartre...

- We don't literally "have" a free will.
 - Better to say: what we *are* is pure freedom.
- For Sartre, there is no (substantial) "you" to have any properties.
 - Rather, your freedom consists in your nothingness.
- See "Existentialism is a Humanism" for next time.