

Are we free or are our actions determined by forces over which we have no control?

The notion of free will and its implications are of primary importance to the function of society. Whether actions are considered free or determined by external forces has consequences on the notion of moral responsibility and self-governance. The concept of a deed being 'free' will be defined as the doer being able to choose between different courses of action. This is known as the principle of alternative possibilities, which states that "when I am said to have done something of my own free will, it is implied that I could have acted otherwise; and it is only when it is believed that I could have acted otherwise that I am held to be morally responsible for what I have done" (Ayer, 1954). By contrast, the forces over which we have no control will be defined as anything outside of the conscious self which influences a decision, encompassing not only notions of predeterminism and coercion, but also internal and involuntary psychological processes, such as strong emotion. This definition of the forces over which we have no control necessitates a second condition for an act being free – that the conscious self is the ultimate origin of an action, the '*causa sui*' (the cause of itself). This is known as the principle of ultimate responsibility. In the modern discussion of free will, the perspectives that have achieved pre-eminence are those of monotheistic religions such as Christianity, and of secular philosophers. In this essay, however, in order to assess and contrast these views with a more instinctive and unconditioned perspective on free will, they will be compared to the views of the Ancient Greeks – an early civilisation whose philosophical and religious views are still known to us and maintain their relevance today. This comparison allows us to reevaluate accepted norms on the subject, and reframe ideas about free will and its implications.

A reanalysis of the question of free will from a Greek perspective fundamentally undermines many accepted beliefs. A modern argument for the existence of free will "is the unmistakable intuition of virtually every human being that he is free to make the choices he does and that the deliberations leading to those choices are also free flowing." (Lamont, 1990). Were this claim to be true, Lamont's belief in the inherent intuition of free will would surely be evidenced by early societies, which existed prior to any systematic cultural conditioning. A study of these societies, however, seems to negate this claim. The creation of the gods in the ancient world is often interpreted as an attempt to explain and justify elements of life and human behaviour that people did not feel in control of. The common explanation for love in the ancient world being a result of the gods of desire, Aphrodite and Eros, is just one example of ancient people using gods as a way to personify the forces outside of their control that they instinctively felt were deciding their actions. The unwanted feeling of rage that led to murder, or the feeling of lust that led to rape were surely not the product of a rational decision, and needed to be consigned to the gods. Freud references this when he says that "one gains the impression from the development of the ancient religions that much of what men had renounced as 'wantonness' had been surrendered to god and was still permitted in god's name; in other words, ceding them to the deity was how men and women freed themselves from the tyranny of wickedly antisocial drives" (Freud, 2004). In order

to justify the emotions and actions that they felt were out of their control, they allocated the origin of these emotions to the gods. Looking at stories that the Greeks told, we can see how the belief in intervention through external, divine forces is projected onto the characters. In Greek Mythology, Dionysis is the god of wine and revelry, and had followers called Maenads, who were driven into a ‘divinely inspired’ drunken frenzy. In Euripides’ *Bacchae*, this overwhelming and maddening passion drives Agave to murder her own son Pentheus (Euripides and Poochigian, n.d.). This is just one example of the gods manifesting a negative emotion in a character thereby altering their decision-making.

Discoveries about the way that the brain works have seemingly confirmed that emotions may arise from a part of the brain that acts as a result of external forces – “when a neuron fires an electric charge, this may either be a deterministic reaction to external stimuli, or it might be the outcome of a random event such as the spontaneous decay of a radioactive atom. Neither option leaves any room for free will.” (Harari, 2016). This expresses the notion that the neurological processes that inform decision-making either work deterministically or randomly – that is to say based either on causal inevitability or pure chance. Modern science reveals what the ancients felt but could not explain, that there are some feelings and behaviours that may be controlled by something external to what we would consider the ‘soul’ or the ‘psyche’.

However, the Greek’s belief in determinism went further than merely a need to justify and explain irrepressible drives and impulses. The Fates in mythology were figures who assigned every mortal’s destiny upon their birth, suggesting that the events and outcomes of every life were predetermined. This impression that the future was decided is compounded by the presence in mythology of oracles – figures who were able to reveal this future to mortals. Fate was also considered to be unavoidable. In the Sophocles play *Oedipus Rex*, Oedipus’ parents attempt in vain to withhold him from his prophesied fate of killing his father and marrying his mother (Sophocles and Wilson, n.d.). No matter how desperately they attempt to avoid this outcome – exposing Oedipus as a baby – his fate is nonetheless fulfilled. The story denies the idea of future contingents since this outcome is one that the characters were aware of, and actively trying to avoid. Therefore, if our fates are unavoidable, Aristotle’s fatalist claim prevails: that there is no need "to deliberate or to take trouble on the supposition that if we should adopt a certain course, a certain result would follow, while, if we did not, the result would not follow", since all human attempts to evade fate will ultimately prove futile (Aristotle. and Edghill, 2015). This concept of a world in which all events can be foretold, is also found in other religions such as Christianity. In Boethius’ *Consolation of Philosophy*, Boethius asks the figure of Philosophy, “what place can be left for random action, when God constraineth all things to order?” (Boethius and James, 1897). He questions the role of free will in a world governed by determinism and predestination, where human outcomes are decided by God. Calvinists take this to imply the concept of double predestination – the idea that not only does God create men to be saved, but that he creates men who will be damned (Farrelly, 1964). This idea is damaging to our notion of free will. Since the

fate of all humans is predestined, both those who gain a place in heaven, and those who are damned to hell, seem equally undeserving of their fates.

In the modern day, the belief that determinism is incompatible with free will overwhelmingly prevails. A study revealed that the majority of people believe that determinism and moral responsibility are incompatible (Cokely and Feltz, 2009). This study conveys the modern discomfort with the idea that moral responsibility may be allocated, even if an event is predetermined, since determinism denies that person's freedom to choose whether or not to commit the action. This discomfort is evident in the modern justice system, where the presupposition of free will "seems to lie at the heart of many foundational doctrines of criminal law, including the voluntary act requirement, the insanity defence and the general theory of excuse defences." (Chiesa, 2011) Since we feel that a person can only be punished to the extent that they knowingly and willingly executed a crime, the justice system is reluctant to punish those who are viewed as less responsible for the origin of an action. Incompatibilism is also key to many religious doctrines. Open theism is a branch of Christianity that states that in order for people to have free will, God must not know the future definitively (Hasker, 1973). They argue that God's knowledge is not fixed, but rather is dynamic, in accordance with the freedom of man. Open theism is an attempt to reconcile Christianity with the notion of free will, suggesting that it is difficult for many theists today to believe that free will and a predetermined future can coexist.

Nevertheless, through examining ancient views on free will, it becomes evident that our modern belief in incompatibilism is a historical aberration. Despite the belief in both a predetermined future and irrepressible drives, with origins external to themselves, the Greeks still believed that people should face divine retribution. This existed in the form of the Elysian Fields and the Pits of Tartarus – two concepts which have modern parallels in heaven and hell. The concept of people receiving divine judgement despite the presence of forces outside of their control is evident in the *Iliad*. One quality that was seen as worthy of divine reward was heroism, and this quality was epitomised in epic texts during a character's *aristeia*. The *aristeia* was the period where a hero had his finest moments in battle, and was characterised by the ruthless slaughtering of enemies – the ultimate demonstration of a warrior's worthiness. However, in the *Iliad*, the *aristeia* of characters such as Diomedes and Hector are induced and bolstered by divine intervention (Homer and Hammond, 1987). This does not reduce the perceived greatness of these characters, and both are said to merit a place in the Elysian Fields. Perhaps this reveals a difference in the way that the Greeks saw the 'self' and viewed the way that we as beings exercise our will. The reconciliation between determinism and free will/moral responsibility also reveals that discomfort with compatibilism is not inherent. Rather, classical mythology provokes the view that it is impossible for one's will to be an 'absolute contingent'. Decision-making cannot be completely independent of external factors, since any rational decision cannot have been the result of an uninformed will. All of the causes which have moulded our psyche are inseparable from the psyche itself. Rather, any action that is taken can be considered our own and is something we can be held responsible for. The only way in which we can have a cohesive

sense of self and rationality in our decisions is if our mind is dependent and influenced by these forces over which we have no control. The concept of free will is vacuous because ultimately all that matters is the way that we feel and the way that we think. The causes behind this are of limited consequence, nor do they influence whether we can be held responsible – something the Greeks knew better than anyone.

Freedom from a modern, libertarian perspective is elusive – no decision that is made is completely without external influence. Perhaps the question thus presents a false dichotomy. Rather than a decision either being made ‘freely’ or as a result of ‘forces outside of one’s control’, we can regard any action which was performed with intent as free. Examining the Greek views on free will conveys most clearly what human intuition is in regards to free will, and offers a framework through which determinism can be reconciled with moral responsibility.

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